



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

PRACTICES OF SUCCESSFUL LEARNING NETWORKS

DOCUMENTING LEARNING FROM THE GROOVE LEARNING NETWORK

AUGUST 2013

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The Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project

The KDMD project improves the reach and effectiveness of USAID’s development investments by designing and implementing state-of-the-art approaches and tools for knowledge management, learning and sharing, and collaboration among practitioners to speed innovation and adoption. These tools include online and in-person learning events, blended learning/interactive training, communications strategy, website development and assessing and learning techniques, among many others. The KDMD project is implemented by the QED Group, LLC with Engility Corp, Training Resources Group (TRG), and Global Learning Systems (GLS).

The Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) Learning Network

USAID awarded the New Partners in Value Chain Development grant (later renamed to the GROOVE Learning Network) in June 2009 to support partners dedicated to improving their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the field of value chain development in collaboration with USAID and other major donors. Through a competitive selection process, four grantee organizations (CARE, CHF International, Conservation International, and Practical Action) were selected on the strength of their proposals, specifically the unique perspectives they brought towards integrating the value chain development approach into their programming.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Importance of a Systematic Learning Approach to Achieve Development Results

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has undertaken significant reforms in how Agency-wide policy and Mission-level strategies are developed, and in how projects are designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Central to these reforms is the premise that an intentional and collaborative strategy for continuous learning—and program and operational adaptation based on that learning—is essential for achieving development results.

USAID Missions are being encouraged¹ to develop Mission Learning Plans, incorporating a variety of learning approaches applied throughout the [Program Cycle](#). These approaches include:

- facilitating coordination, collaboration, and exchange of experiential knowledge internally and with external stakeholders;
- filling critical knowledge gaps, testing development hypotheses, and addressing any uncertainties with new studies or syntheses of existing research; and
- ensuring that new learning, innovations, and performance analysis gained through monitoring and evaluation will inform policy creation, strategy development, and program implementation.

Missions and offices throughout the Agency, including the Policy, Planning, and Learning Bureau's Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research (PPL/LER), are creating and refining an array of methods and tools which build on past practice and improve the ways that USAID learns at all the stages of the Program Cycle. Many of the approaches and tools, including

the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approach, are documented in the [USAID Program Cycle Learning Guide](#).² CLA is a conceptual framework for principles and operational processes to ensure that progress toward development objectives is guided by continuous learning through analysis of a wide variety of information sources and knowledge. Integrating CLA into programs enables USAID to become a more effective learning organization and thereby a more effective development organization by facilitating local participation and capacity and promoting country-led development. The CLA approach was initially developed with USAID/Uganda as a component of its Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) as a way to ensure that the strategy could continue to evolve as additional learning was generated. To date, the CLA approach has been adopted by over 20 USAID Missions worldwide.

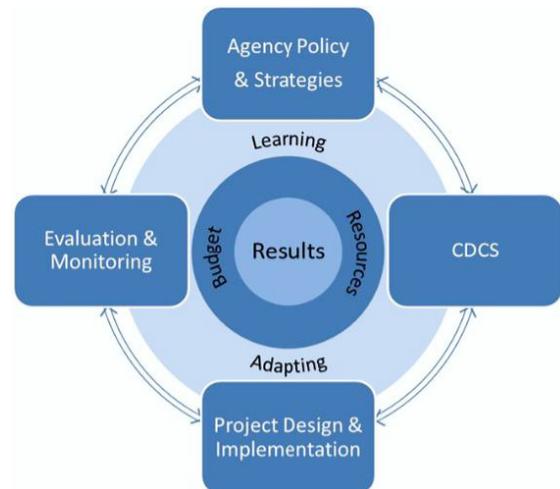


Figure 1: USAID Program Cycle

One promising tool cited in the Learning Guide is the Learning Network approach, which is particularly useful in building intention into the learning process. The Guide notes that “using a learning network model

² Currently in draft and available in the [USAID Learning Lab](#). The Learning Lab website is USAID's external website for exchanging lessons learned and examples among USAID, implementing partners, and other stakeholders.

¹ ADS Chapter 201 Partially Revised 3/23/2012

with selected implementers can leverage collaboration to generate knowledge and innovation that targets particularly difficult technical problems, and to capture and share that innovation broadly, for scaled impact on a sector/industry level.”

This resource is for USAID staff in Missions and Washington-based bureaus who may be interested in designing and implementing learning networks in order to more effectively inspire and bring about collaboration and learning within the Agency or with implementing partners. It may also be useful to USAID partner organizations and other donors seeking to implement learning networks, and for participants in learning networks. The purpose of this report is to:

- Characterize elements of a learning network, drawing on USAID experiences with learning networks supported through the Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project, and provide the rationale for why USAID or other donor institutions should invest in creating a learning network
- Provide a description of practices that contribute to the success of a learning network, and share practical lessons and examples from the Growing Organizational Value Chain Excellence (GROOVE) Learning Network that can be used by those who are considering whether to implement a learning network approach or who are currently participating in a learning network.
- Set the stage for continued exploration and learning about learning networks as this approach is used by others and adapted to different settings

This document is one component of a broader set of resources that also includes an online [Learning Networks Resource Center](#) that provides additional information about the six phases of a learning network

supplemented with practical resources from the GROOVE Learning Network.

Defining the Learning Network Approach

The learning network approach was initiated by USAID’s Microenterprise Development office (now the Office of Microenterprise and Private Enterprise Promotion) in partnership with the Small Enterprise Education and Promotion (SEEP) Network in 2001 through the development of the Implementation Grant Programs (IGPs) and, later, Practitioner Learning Programs (PLP). These early learning networks were developed to engage practitioners in a collaborative learning process to document, share findings, and help identify effective and replicable practices and innovations in the enterprise development and microfinance fields. Since 2001, USAID has supported 14 learning networks³ on a variety of topics in collaboration with a variety of partners including private sector organizations, universities, foundations, microfinance institutions, banks, and non-governmental organizations.

USAID’s experience in collaborative learning has most recently culminated in a series of learning networks implemented by USAID’s Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project. The perspectives in this document reflect the lessons learned from USAID’s and KDMD’s various implementations of the learning network approach. The approach, as described in this paper, has a number of specific characteristics:

- The learning network is composed of a finite number of organizations represented by a defined group of individuals whose common interest is the development and pursuit of a shared learning agenda to be explored over a pre-determined period of time with a known end-date.

³ For a complete list of all USAID-funded learning networks, please visit “Learning Networks Catalogue” in the [USAID Learning Lab Learning Network Resource Center](#).



A Deeper Look...

[Communities of Practice and Networks: Reviewing Two Perspectives on Social Learning](#)

- The learning network’s learning agenda⁴ focuses on learning at three distinct levels: the organization, network, and industry. The learning process is facilitated and the pursuit of that learning agenda takes an integrated approach to the knowledge cycle, incorporating knowledge generation, capture, dissemination, and application.
- The organizations represented in the learning network have been provided resources (often through a competitive process), and they are obligated to complete deliverables associated with the three levels of learning.

Characteristics of USAID-Sponsored Learning Networks

- ✓ Defined and finite group
- ✓ Shared learning agenda
- ✓ Specified timeframe
- ✓ Three levels of focus
- ✓ Integrated approach to knowledge cycle
- ✓ Dedicated resources
- ✓ Deliverable commitments

Although USAID defines a learning network in this way, there are other ways of organizing and managing collaborative learning groups based on the size, organizational composition, management structures, work processes, and learning goals of the group. Rather than being prescriptive, these characteristics are specified in order to be clear about the context relevant for the lessons and practices presented here. They may also spark thinking about how this approach may be adapted to better support learning and collaboration in other settings.

⁴ A learning agenda includes the questions and topics that a learning network decides as a group to explore. Network-level learning agendas are agreed upon by the learning network and feed into the production of jointly created knowledge products.

What differentiates the approach, as defined here, from communities of practice is the degree of formality and structure that is built into the learning network, including the intentional development of a learning agenda; the establishment of clear expectations for outputs related to learning at the organization, network, and industry levels; the finite period of performance; and the consensus on required deliverables that are in line with the shared learning agenda. Finally, appropriate facilitation is an essential component of the structure of a learning network.

Why Use a Learning Network Approach?

Learning networks can function as a combination of think tank, training ground, and support network to the practitioners and organizations who take part in them. But specifically, why should USAID or any other donor institution invest in creating a learning network? Experience with the GROOVE and other learning networks have demonstrated many benefits to the approach.

+ **Learning networks can make a significant contribution to development impact.** By putting individual organization and learning network attention on the development of nascent innovations targeted to particularly thorny challenges, solutions can be adapted and scaled by a wide range of institutions for broad impact. A few of many examples from the GROOVE Learning Network include developing systematic ways to integrate gender issues into value chain analysis and program development, facilitating project activities which reduce market system impacts on ecosystem services to enable sustainable economic growth, and carrying out an intentional change process to support the incorporation of value chain analysis into an entire organization’s programming processes.

GROOVE has proven to be highly effective at improving institutional awareness of value chain development approaches, gaining greater buy-in to and inclusiveness of value chain development approaches at management and field levels, demonstrating proof of concept and impact, and refining tools and guidance, particularly for staff working at the community level. While GROOVE was particularly focused on technical issues related to value chains, learning networks have shown similar impacts on development results in other sectors. This happens when network learning improves the quality of programs carried out by an individual organization and catalyzes similar improvement among other organizations, both within the learning network and industry-wide.

“All of the knowledge that we have introduced and shared with staff around the world I think is just phenomenal. We would not have had a fraction of that opportunity were it not for this program.”

- GROOVE member

✦ Learning networks enable USAID to discover what implementing partners are learning.

Learning networks give USAID staff the opportunity to engage deeply with what some of USAID’s most innovative implementing partners are learning in the course of the design and implementation of their activities. This exchange of knowledge enables USAID to learn not only about the technical advances, but also to discover how to shape future funding support so that implementing partners can become more effective doing direct work with beneficiaries.

“The value chain work that USAID does happens in the field. Those of us in Washington don’t really do value chain development work, but we fund a lot of it

and . . . the only way that USAID can ever learn to do it better is in partnership with our implementing partners. The learning network gives us a great opportunity to be able to go on this journey with our partners to explore how we can do value chain development better.”

- USAID staff member

✦ Learning networks can make a significant contribution to building a culture of collaboration.

The abilities to bring development partners to the table and sustain open and honest dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge sharing are key components of enhancing USAID’s program implementation for improved impact. USAID believes that creating the conditions for more effective collaboration among partners is a tool for change, and is an important element of the ongoing effort to incorporate learning throughout the Program Cycle.

The learning network approach is well suited for supporting this kind of cultural change, and the idea of a learning network fundamentally challenges the notion that USAID’s implementing partners are all just “competitors.” This mindset was continually confronted in as GROOVE worked together.

“This idea of a donor creating a space, incentives, and routines for us to come together to learn from one another and to build economies of scale was revolutionary.”

“All of us had way more to gain by collaborating and being transparent. The opportunity to benefit was so much greater than any institutional protection or competition.”

- GROOVE members

✦ **Learning networks inherently have a multiplier effect.** Grants given to a single organization can have an effect at every level in the organization, and potentially across the industry. The multiplier effect is not only about the number of people who can be affected by the work of the learning network. It can also raise the profile of a topic or approach on which a small group of people might be focused.

Finally, this multiplier effect should be considered in terms of the resources that learning networks are able to leverage with an investment of scarce USAID resources. GROOVE members were required to commit to considerable cost-sharing, but the actual contributions by the individual organizations, in terms of the costs of the learning network's activities, far outstripped official requirements. In financial terms, one grantee estimated that USAID leveraged a 10:1 counterpart contribution from their organization. In addition to leveraging significant additional time and resources from grantees, learning networks also leverage the voluntary contribution of numerous hours of expert technical support from internationally renowned academics and practitioners who serve as resources.

“GROOVE is a small amount of money squared. Every dollar invested in the individuals sitting around the table gets multiplied across their organization and the industry.”

“A modest level of funding from a respectable donor gave legitimacy to the discussions of organizational change and promoted the creation of internal learning systems and agendas.”

- GROOVE members

✦ **Learning networks provide donors and implementing partners a prototype for a different way of working together in support of development objectives.** Donor-enabled learning networks provide an unusual opportunity for USAID and other donors to collaborate with implementing partners around learning, knowledge production, and knowledge sharing. By investing in the learning network approach, USAID is modeling a role that other donors can play in promoting collective learning as one of the most cost effective development strategies.

“The early role of USAID as somebody that wasn't there to monitor us but was there to help us in our learning was a really important distinction with this learning network.”

- GROOVE member

Adapting and Applying the Learning Network Approach: USAID Examples

Learning networks can have many practical applications. Here are just a few examples of how they might be used:

- Address learning questions in the context of carrying out technical projects (e.g., elements of the Feed the Future Learning Agenda)
- Implement a Mission Learning Plan utilizing higher-level learning drawn from ongoing implementation, monitoring, and evaluation efforts (e.g. USAID/Ethiopia's recent Ethiopia Agricultural Knowledge, Learning, Documentation and Policy Project procurement)
- Support Bureau-wide knowledge management initiatives (e.g., the recent Knowledge-Driven Agriculture Development procurement in the Bureau for Food Security)
- Focus on what is being learned over time about best practices in addressing critical elements that cut across sectors within a mission's portfolio (e.g., local capacity development, devolution, integrating gender considerations)

PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL LEARNING NETWORKS

What is a Successful Learning Network?

In order to be successful, a learning network will achieve its intended learning goals **and** will also develop and maintain a way of working together that enables it to reach toward its greatest potential. In this sense, the criteria for a successful learning network include both a capacity to achieve defined outcomes as well as an ability to expand and enrich its own working/learning processes over time. With these two elements in mind, a learning network could be considered to be successful if it:

- creates a platform for members and the organizations they represent to expansively explore learning questions they bring to the network;
- leverages the interests and curiosity of its individual members, and the aspirations for learning and growth of member organizations to address those questions in a significantly deeper way than they might have been able to if they were not a part of a learning network;
- produces knowledge products that are timely and tailored to the needs of specific audiences;
- opens communication channels and engenders mutual support and encouragement among peers of different organizations (both within and beyond the learning network) for continued learning, knowledge exchange, and application; and
- positively influences broader industry practice through a targeted strategy for capturing and sharing the learning it has generated around key challenges or promising innovations that can be adapted and scaled widely.

What enables a learning network to achieve this kind of success? The GROOVE Learning Network offers a particularly good example of a successful learning network, and this resource and the accompanying descriptions of the six phases in a learning network life cycle⁵ draws heavily on its experience. Stepping back and looking at USAID and KDMD experience with GROOVE and other similar learning networks, it is clear that there are a number of practices and approaches that, if carried out effectively, contribute to learning network success.

Some of these practices are rooted in tried and true ways of working effectively in small groups, especially groups that form voluntarily and work informally. Other practices evolved directly from the experience of different kinds of learning groups, including communities of practice and learning networks. By their very nature, learning groups stimulate discussion about learning on a number of different planes, and it should be no surprise that learning networks sometimes find their attention drawn to questions like, “What are we learning about working together to learn?” This was certainly the case with GROOVE, which at various points in time looked at its own experience working together and reflected on what was happening in the learning process that was contributing to its success.

Eight Practices of Successful Learning Networks

This section of the paper outlines eight practices that contribute to the success of learning networks drawn from the experience of GROOVE and other similar learning networks.

⁵ The companion Learning Networks Resource Center can be found on Learning Lab at usaidlearninglab.org/learning-networks.

Eight Practices of Successful Learning Networks

1. Take advantage of opportunities for strategic learning at organization, network, and industry levels
2. Focus intentionally on specifying desired outcomes
3. Be attentive to the evolution of the network over time
4. Make conscious choices about use of collective time
5. Recognize that members of the group will play different roles over time
6. Support and enable optimal group functioning through facilitation
7. Build a high level of trust among the members
8. Influence industry-level adaptation and practice

1. Take advantage of the opportunities for learning at three interconnected levels—organization, network, and industry—and be strategic about when and how to engage at each of these levels.

Learning networks have the potential to focus on three levels of learning: the particular interests of the *organizations* represented in the learning network, the collective learning that comes from the interaction of the members in the learning *network*, and the needs of the *industry* or larger community of development actors who can adopt and scale up practices developed and refined by the network.

At the organization level—Organizations come to the learning network with their own needs, learning questions, and projects. When working at the organization level, each member organization has the

flexibility to operate autonomously, but at the same time benefit from the discussions and other activities in the network. Members develop their own workplans for moving forward in their organizations, and take advantage of “peer coaching” on their own issues by other members of the network. Often, organization-level learning is documented in an organization’s “learning journal,” which provides an additional resource for exploring an individual organization’s learning experience.

A Deeper Look...

[GROOVE Quarterly Learning Journal Template](#)



At the network level—At the network level, individual teams or organizations collaborate to use their combined expertise and resources to supplement each other’s individual projects, and contribute to the success of organization level efforts. “If it’s working for your organization, maybe it will work for our organization too.” Over time, the network is able to identify commonalities and important differences among the organizations, both in the types of learning questions and in the ways that they are being addressed. This analysis contributes to the development and achievement of a collective learning agenda, and generates deeper learning than looking at a single organization would allow. Usually learning networks put a majority of their collective time into the organization and network levels during the early and middle stages of the learning network.

“[What I’m learning about working in a learning network is] the importance of balancing the need for individual organizations to pursue their own work and innovations with the need to have a common, coherent learning agenda with clear expectations and outcomes.”

- GROOVE member

At the industry level—Finally, a focus on the industry level contribution allows a donor to scale the investment in the learning network by sharing the cumulative learning of the network members to fill gaps that exist in the larger professional community. Generally, this level of attention comes later in the life of a learning network and requires the network to “turn the corner” to reorient its attention to the audiences outside the learning network, their needs, and the best ways to interact with them as the learning network develops collective knowledge products. Industry level learning involves leveraging existing relationships with individuals and networks outside the learning network to bring additional perspectives into the network, and sharing what has been learned in larger forums such as workshops, conferences, and online communities.

A Deeper Look...



Visit the [Learning Networks Resource Center](#) for more information on organizational learning (Phase 3), network learning (Phase 5), and industry engagement (Phase 6).

It is helpful to set clear expectations within the network about how its work will engage with each of these levels, explaining that explicit attention will be paid to each level even though the priority focus will change and evolve over time.

“Developing a tool appropriate for our organization is relatively simple, but GROOVE enabled us to realize that the problems we are facing are the same as other people are facing and our tools can be rolled out to others who can start using them. This way, we can influence others in the field. GROOVE enabled us to move beyond our organization and become more influential.”

- GROOVE member

LEARNING NETWORKS THE THREE LEVELS OF LEARNING

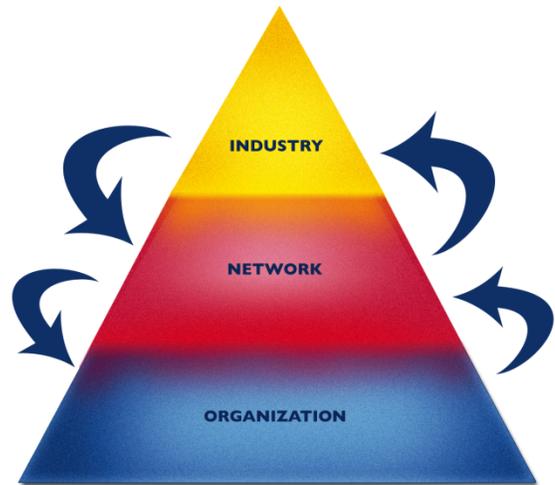


Figure 2: Learning networks engage in learning at three interconnected levels

2. Focus intentionally on specifying desired outcomes.

The members of newly formed learning networks may have a range of expectations about what they want to get out of (and contribute to) the network, and different assumptions about how the learning network will go about doing its work. As the learning network begins, it is important to:

- help members understand what a learning network is, and how its goals and way of working are different from other teams or working groups
- collectively inventory the learning issues and questions that the individual organizations are curious about and want to work on, and look at possibilities for what those questions might suggest about the network learning agenda
- encourage members to share their previous experiences with learning networks, and to create working norms for the new network
- draft workplans based on exploratory approaches to broaden understanding of learning issues

A Deeper Look...



Here are some helpful examples from the GROOVE Learning Network:

- [Draft Learning Agenda](#)
- [Example of an organization workplan](#)
- [Learning network Year 1 workplan](#)
- [Learning network Framework](#)

Generally speaking, it is not a good idea to try to “finalize” a learning agenda, workplan, or specific outputs of the network too early in the process; much of the richness of the group’s collective outputs will come from being open to exploring others’ issues and preliminary learning, trying new approaches in home settings, synthesizing experiences across organizations, and capturing the unanticipated learning that takes place over the life of the network.

Being “intentional” about desired outcomes means that the learning network will set aside time periodically to review its progress and ways of working, and to iteratively develop and continually modify network level learning agendas and workplans.

3. Be attentive to the evolution of the network—its focus and way of working, its membership, and its level of energy and momentum.

Learning networks are dynamic groups that change and evolve over time. Attending to this dynamism requires the network to be flexible and adaptive, but also to actively take necessary steps to support the positive evolution of the group.

For example, learning networks tend to initially put focus on individual organizations’ needs, but experience has shown that the network’s attention shifts over time from the organization to the network, and then more broadly to the industry. Sometimes these shifts come easily, such as when members realize that exploring common issues or experiences as a

network can bring about significant learning that is relevant to their own organizations. In other cases, the shift can be more difficult. For instance, it may be more of a struggle to broaden network attention to the industry level learning when, in the middle to late stages, members face growing pressure to finalize work in their own organization. Shifts in focus also happen throughout the life of the learning network as the group reexamines what is being learned from organization level experience before returning to a deeper discussion at the network level.

Managing these shifts in focus involves keeping track of where the group’s focus is and where it should be. Being mindful of the following questions can help the group to avoid getting stuck and to take advantage of learning opportunities at another level:

- Where are we putting our attention?
- Have we structured the agenda appropriately to deal with this level of learning?
- Should we be doing anything differently?
- Would we benefit from shifting to another level?
- What do we need to do to move in that direction?

As the network shifts its focus, it may also need to change its way of working and how it uses collective time. At times it may make sense to create sub-groups that operate more independently on specific tasks and periodically check in with the larger group.

A Deeper Look...



Visit Phases 4 and 5 in the [Learning Networks Resource Center](#) for more information on network evolution.

A second element of a network’s evolution which needs to be considered is the growth and/or change in the network’s membership. Inevitably, a learning network that exists for any significant period of time will see its membership change. Participants may leave the network when they move to another job or

organization or representation from a particular organization may grow as interest in the organization is broadened or responsibilities change. The network needs to see this as natural and take conscious advantage of the new perspectives and energy that new members bring. The network can incorporate new members by “telling the story” of what has happened so far, and finding ways to value the new perspectives of those who were not there “at the beginning.” In some cases, the network may want to find ways to maintain connections with those who have left the network.

Finally, it is important to recognize that a learning network’s energy and momentum will have ups and downs over time, and meeting agendas should anticipate and take this into account. As a part of periodic reviews of how the work is progressing, it is often useful to check how the group sees its own energy level and how best to sustain it.

”Be realistic. We all see immense potential in this learning network and we are energetic people. The potential to push harder than we should or shoot higher than we should is ever present and we need continually be clear on what we can truly accomplish in order to be sure we deliver.”
~GROOVE member

4. Make conscious choices about effective and efficient use of collective time.

Learning networks typically pursue a number of different goals that require the group to spend time working collectively, including:

- doing what might be seen as the “real” work of the network—learning by sharing experiences from their own organizations, exploring challenges that other organizations are facing, offering peer

coaching, or drawing on the contribution of guest “experts”

- reviewing and modifying learning agendas and workplans and planning how to go about pursuing them
- having discussions about how the group wants to work together and how that work is progressing and addressing problems as they come up

In most learning networks, the time available to work together as a group to achieve these goals is an extremely scarce resource. Many networks are geographically dispersed and only gather collectively in a few face-to-face meetings and periodic conference calls. Even those learning networks that are physically proximate need to decide carefully how to invest their collective meeting time in a way that takes other work demands into account.

Given that a learning network, by definition, is carrying out a time-limited initiative, it is critical to make conscious choices about the use of collective time. Key decisions that need to be addressed include the following:

How often should we meet? Most learning networks will carry out their work through a mix of face-to-face and online “meetings.” As a general rule, learning networks benefit from regularly scheduled meetings with established agendas. Learning networks that are actively pursuing a learning agenda usually meet monthly in a variety of settings ranging from 2-day face-to-face meetings to hour-long conference calls.

A Deeper Look...

Here are more GROOVE resources to help you get started:

- [How do we want to work together?](#)
- Meeting agendas: [Kick-off meeting](#) and [mid-term workshop](#)



How will meeting agendas be developed? Each meeting should have a clearly articulated agenda tied to the focus of the network at any given point in time and to the group’s workplan. Even an hour-long phone call benefits from having a realistic agenda with specific items and allocated time. Network members should have an opportunity to provide input on the agenda, to prepare ahead of time, and to “buy-in” to the agenda.

When is it best to have face-to-face meetings? Scheduling face-to-face meetings depends on a number of factors, including the period of time that the learning network will be in existence and the availability of funding. Generally speaking, face-to-face meetings can be used more effectively than online meetings to build trust, to maintain or regain momentum, and to provide the substantial, focused time needed to crystallize ideas.

“The learning network works best when everyone is face to face, with a lot of white paper, blank walls, good ideas, and energy. It works less well when everyone is sitting alone, facing a telephone, listening to someone else speak.”

~GROOVE member

It is critical to have a face-to-face meeting to launch the network, and ideally a network can also have at least two additional face-to-face meetings. Some learning networks have scheduled those meetings midway through their life cycle, and at the end of the network. Others suggest that the face-to-face meeting should coincide with shifts from one phase to another, especially when the focus of attention needs to move from the network to the industry level.

It may be helpful to be flexible, and to actively look for unplanned opportunities to meet face-to-face, such as attendance at professional conferences, as often as possible. Learning networks should also look for other opportunities to create useful collective time, for *Practices of Successful Networks*

example, by periodically scheduling longer (2- to 3-hour) conference calls if their usual practice is to hold 1-hour conference calls.



Figure 3: Various learning network meetings

How do we maximize the value of online or conference call meetings? When it is likely that a significant portion of the work of the learning network will be online, it is critical to establish an online space that will efficiently support the learning network's work, such as a platform like Adobe Connect. In these kinds of meetings, it is particularly important to seek input on the meeting agenda ahead of time and distribute the agenda well before the meeting.

Adobe Connect

[Adobe Connect](#) is a web conferencing platform that can be used for webinars, web meetings, and other eLearning activities. The GROOVE Learning Network utilized Adobe Connect for monthly check-in meetings and other online events.

5. Be open to and support members taking different roles over the life of the network.

Typically learning networks have different kinds of members, including those from individual organizations that make up the network, representatives of the funder/sponsor/convener (for example, the activity manager of the USAID project funding the learning network), and one or more facilitators of the learning network.

Each of these members will view their roles in a particular way as the network begins, and it is beneficial to nurture the evolution of the ways members contribute to the work of the network. This includes generating and supporting group norms regarding participation early on, tracking how new ideas develop in the group and who is involved, and making room for different members to take on leadership roles at various points in time.

One of the factors that drives group energy and keeps the learning process moving forward is shared leadership among members of the group. While it is often the case that members will have different

interests and expertise, it is generally not a good idea to rely on only one or two members to generate new ideas or take on the role of leading/coordinating aspects of the group's work.

For the most part, the continual shift of leadership within the network is a process that happens naturally, but it may also be necessary at various points for the facilitator or other group members to encourage the broad engagement and input from all members that is key to a successful network. Exploring ideas that come from champions in each organization and ensuring that each organization has leadership responsibilities at different times helps to get and maintain buy-in across the network, to bring in a diversity of perspectives, and to share the burden of producing outputs and coordinating efforts.

A common consideration about member responsibilities relates to the funder/sponsor/convener's activity manager and the role they play in the ongoing work of the network. In those instances when USAID is funding the learning network, questions about the USAID role that typically come up include:

- How involved should USAID staff be in the network's regular meetings? Should they be a part of all sessions or only selected sessions where they have direct interest or concern?
- In what ways should they contribute to the learning of the network—as an observer, expert resource, or participant?
- What is the most appropriate way for them to participate in decision-making related to network direction and workplanning?

It may be useful to look at these specific questions in the context of a broader reflection about the best way for USAID and a learning network to collaboratively support network success and how that might change over time.

As the network is framing its work, the USAID Contracting Officer's Representative (COR)⁶ will be expected to play a role in helping the group gain a clear understanding of what is expected in terms of creating products, meeting important timeframes, and satisfying contractual requirements. At the same time, the COR can support the learning process by allowing the network to retain some flexibility around deliverables, by supporting the establishment of an equal playing field, and by recognizing that all members have something to contribute as the learning agenda is created and collectively pursued. Balancing these two elements of the activity manager role—being clear about expectations and supportive of member initiative—sets a collaborative tone early on. As one learning network member described,

“At the beginning, USAID pushed here and there, but I didn't feel directed!”

Another participant shared his appreciation for

“the flexibility over the life of the network provided by the donor to deal with things when we're ready.”

This comment highlights the role that the COR can play at any given point in time as they simultaneously seek to define and refine what is expected by USAID and stay open to possibilities that continuously arise from new learning coming from the network's experiences.

⁶ Key technical approvals, technical input, and oversight for USAID projects are provided by a Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) or Agreement Officer's Representative (AOR). Learning networks may be a part of a larger project funded through a contract, agreement, or grant. In some cases, a USAID Activity Manager may have similar responsibilities related to a particular activity being carried out under a project. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the term “COR” for all three of these technical oversight roles.

A Deeper Look...



Visit: Phase I of the [Learning Networks Resource Center](#)

Download: [Role of USAID and Network Facilitator](#)

Watch: [Learning About Learning: Panel Discussion on Learning Networks Screencast](#)

Being a part of a learning network offers CORs the chance to examine their own values and beliefs about learning and group development among the members of the network, and then to act in ways that support these beliefs. Ideally, the COR is excited by the idea that the learning outcomes of the network are not predetermined. This perspective provides a good basis for participating as a co-learner with other network members and engaging with tough, interesting questions and “risky” conversations in open and curious ways.

In the long run, the USAID COR has a significant opportunity to influence the overall tone of the interaction in the learning network. Doing this may necessitate the COR taking off the traditional “USAID” hat and finding other ways to act on what they believe will generate learning. As one COR explained,

“It's about getting over the ‘I gave you the money, you work for me’ attitude.”

One participant described the GROOVE Learning Network experience as one that “reset” the USAID relationship with implementing partners to a level of true collaboration that he had never experienced before. This kind of collaboration relied heavily on the fact that all members, including USAID, were actively engaged in learning as part of GROOVE.

“Just being able to sit across the table and have a conversation with USAID is so

valuable. It's not "here are the objectives, go reach them," it's about having real conversations as development professionals."
~ GROOVE member

6. Support and enable optimal group functioning through the use of an effective facilitator.

A learning network facilitator focuses on helping the group attend to the process of working effectively and creatively together in pursuit of the network's learning objectives. The facilitator engages with group members to define desired ways of collaborating, and supports the group in carrying out these positive intentions. In fact, a facilitator plays a critical role supporting the group in the other seven practices critical to a learning network's success outlined in this report.

Carrying out this role requires the use of effective facilitation skills: asking the right question to focus the group's attention on critical issues, dig more deeply into an issue, or consider alternative ways of thinking; proposing approaches and testing for agreement; eliciting ideas and helping sort through alternatives; supporting group initiative and direction; listening carefully, paraphrasing, and summarizing to ensure understanding and build agreement; and offering observations on group process and interaction as needed.

Many believe that the facilitator role is best carried out by someone who does not have a particular point of view or expertise in the learning network's technical focus. A facilitator must, of course, have sufficient understanding of the network's technical issues in order to appropriately ask questions and accurately summarize conclusions or next steps. On the other hand, a facilitator who has a stake in the discussion and frequently shares their own points of view on technical issues runs the risk of sending the message that some ideas or "learning" are more "correct" than

Learning Network Facilitation

Networks should:

- Ensure good facilitation when a skilled facilitator is not available
- Develop clear terms of reference for the facilitator
- Match the style of facilitation to the varying needs of the learning network at different stages

Network members serving as facilitators should:

- Assess their facilitation skills and recognize the limits of their impartiality
- Put a feedback system in place and remain open to input
- Get facilitator training and coaching
- Understand the phases in the learning network life cycle
- Know what it means to wear the facilitator "hat"
- Signal to the group when stepping out of the facilitator role to substantively participate

others, discouraging participation and eroding their credibility as someone who fairly entertains all view points. Effectively facilitating a group while at the same time offering views related to the content is a difficult challenge; efforts to do so often result in a poor balance between the technical content and other important process issues.

While many of the principles described above are important when facilitating any work group, there are several special issues that are important to consider when facilitating a learning network. These include ensuring good facilitation when a skilled facilitator is not available, developing clear terms of reference for the facilitator, and matching the style of facilitation to the varying needs of the learning network at different stages.

✦ Ensure good facilitation when a skilled facilitator is not available—Quite often, this situation is addressed by expecting group members to take on this role. However, as noted earlier, the

“neutral” role of the facilitator is fundamentally different from the role of learning network member, and it is often difficult to take on both roles simultaneously. There are actions that a network can take if it decides to facilitate its own process:

- Rotate the role among network members. Make sure that the member who “does it the best” does not have to play the role all the time.
- Set clear expectations for what is needed from the facilitator in a particular setting. Clarify what the group wants a facilitator to do at a given point in the process. Define the “terms of reference.”
- Take advantage of an outside facilitator for key meetings and rotate the role for other meetings.
- Be disciplined about periodically discussing the network’s progress in terms of carrying out work in a way that is consistent with the principles of a successful learning network.

Take care not to assume that everyone is a “good group member” and therefore there is no need for a facilitator. Issues related to group process will arise regardless of whether there is a designated facilitator or not, and experience has shown that groups that are dedicated to effective and creative learning about technical issues find that they can be much more effective if the role for tending to process issues is clearly acknowledged and assigned.

Learning network members who take on the role of the facilitator should:

- Honestly assess their own facilitation skills and their passion for the content at a particular point in time in the work of the network and ask, “What will make it difficult for me to play the role of the facilitator, given my own interests in contributing ideas and taking positions? What will I need to pay particular attention to in my own behavior as I take on this role?”

- Signal to network members that they are open to feedback, and agree within the group how the facilitator will get feedback about their effectiveness in facilitating the group process.
- Get facilitator training and coaching, if possible, and talk with others who have facilitated a learning network about their experience.
- Familiarize themselves with the principles described in this paper and with the phases that learning networks typically move through.
- Know what it means to be wearing the facilitator “hat”: tending to group process by proposing agendas and structure, asking questions, summarizing conclusions and agreements, and encouraging participation.
- Understand the risks of trying to pay attention to this process and the content at the same time. Make it clear to the group when they find that they need to “take off the facilitator hat” and speak as a participant about the substance of the conversation.

A related question that sometimes comes up is whether the facilitator role can be combined with other roles. For example, can the facilitator also play the role of grants administrator, the monitor of work products, the COR or technical expert? Learning networks which have tried combining the facilitator role with other roles have discovered that this practice can set up situations where participants receive inconsistent or potentially conflicting messages. Much like a technical expert who potentially discourages alternative views by offering a definitive view on a learning question, a facilitator-*cum*-grants manager may have a difficult time holding group members to deadlines while simultaneously encouraging openness to new, creative, and possibly time-consuming ideas.

One approach that has been used successfully by some groups is to have two people co-facilitate the network.

This approach allows for joint planning by the two facilitators and agreement on when it may make sense for one of the facilitators to “take off the facilitator hat” and contribute to the network from the perspective of the technical expert or the administrator. This approach requires sensitivity by the co-facilitators about the difference between a facilitator’s process role and other roles, the ability of the two people to work well together, and clear and shared expectations about the facilitator role (usually spelled out in the terms of reference).

✦ **Develop clear terms of reference for the facilitator**—Most learning network members will have had experience working in groups with a facilitator, but nevertheless, it is important to ensure that the role of the learning network facilitator is articulated and understood early on in the network’s work. Expectations of the facilitator should be noted in written “terms of reference,” and there should be opportunities for the network members to offer feedback to the facilitator as appropriate. Members should also have an opportunity to periodically contribute ideas about what they want a facilitator to do at a given point in the process. Being clear about what is expected from the facilitator is particularly important, because a learning network may work with a number of different facilitators over its life cycle.

✦ **Matching the style of facilitation to the varying needs of the learning network at different stages of its work**—It is important to consider how the role of the learning network facilitator might need to change over the life of the learning network. For example, in the early stages of a learning network, the facilitator will likely play a very active role in setting meeting agendas, in specifying activities to be carried out, in describing next steps, and in setting the tone for how the group will work together. At this stage in its work, a facilitation style that includes a fair amount of “telling” or proposing—framing approaches and processes and moving forward unless the group raises

concerns or options, providing “answers” related to the learning process and what will happen next while at the same time seeking ideas, and, depending on the kind of response, supporting group initiative as they become apparent—is usually necessary and helpful.

As time goes on, the learning network will probably face a range of issues related to its process of working effectively and creatively together in pursuit of the network’s learning objectives. These issues are best dealt with through a style that largely relies on asking questions to set initial expectations, identifying individual and group perspectives and points of view, testing for agreement or differences, and, based on this discussion, charting next steps.

The GROOVE Learning Network had four different facilitators in its 3½-year lifespan. One of GROOVE’s facilitators described the importance of matching the facilitation style to the needs of the network in this way:

“Building a learning network that is simultaneously well structured, flexible, and responsive to the needs of all of the network members is significantly more difficult among diverse grantees. For example, a highly structured framework might benefit some grantees, but others do not need and would not appreciate stronger direction from the network. However, a highly flexible network structure presents its own challenges in ensuring the network stays focused and the range of activities remains germane to the network’s learning agenda. In addition, it is harder to identify activities that are equally beneficial to all the members of the network when there is diversity in their needs. For the learning network facilitator, one of the key challenges in managing this diversity is to find an

appropriate balance between a directive and collaborative management style. In reality, finding the right equilibrium is a dynamic and ongoing process that requires using different approaches with the network and its members at different times during the life of the network.”

Learning is not a controlled, linear process and the nature of the learning outcomes—what participants in the learning network will learn—is not a foregone conclusion. Experience has shown that a learning network facilitator should be prepared to use a variety of styles of facilitation to create space and help participants manage their work in that space so that their learning is surfaced and considered.

A Deeper Look...

The [Learning Networks Resource Center](#) has information about facilitation in several of the phases.

Phase 1: Learning Network Facilitators

Phase 2: [Role of USAID and Network Facilitator](#)

Phase 5: Redefining Roles



7. Build a high level of trust among the members of the learning network.

“It didn't matter that we're actually from different organizations. In my mind, we're one organization.”

~GROOVE member

Many factors work against having trustful relationships among learning group members. Member organizations may be potential competitors in future procurements, and may feel that aspects of their own internal work are proprietary. Even when individual network members may not see this

perspective as paramount, the internal voice asking, “What would my boss think if they knew I was talking about this?” can be a concern. Another factor is that for some, having the funder (not only of the learning network grant, but also of possible future procurements) sit with the group as they discuss internal organizational challenges or approaches can be intimidating. And finally, individual personalities and past history can play a part in building or diminishing the possibility of trustful relationships in the network.

And yet, when asked what contributed to their success, “trust” is often among the first factors mentioned by participants in successful learning groups. Having a high degree of trust among learning network members, both at the organizational and individual levels, is essential, especially if an element of the learning agenda is organizational change and ongoing application of learning from the network back in the home organization. Actions that can be taken to support a high level of trust include:

- Take time early in the life of the network to **create a set of norms** articulating what the group values about communication and participation. Develop agreements about what gets shared outside of the network conversations and what “stays in the network,” what level of information-sharing is expected from each member, and what the “rules” are for acknowledgement/recognition of organizational contribution to the work of the network. Sometimes it is helpful to do this after discussing in the group what worked and what did not in other learning network-type experiences.
- Intentionally **talk about the importance of trust** and what might be done to build it. Offer opportunities for members to make explicit their organization’s interests about what it expects to get from participation in the network and what risks participation in the learning network might create for their organization.

- **Recognize the major role that USAID plays** in creating a trustful environment by staying open and flexible, by not predefining deliverables, by supporting an equal playing field, and by recognizing that all members have something to contribute. At times, the USAID activity manager may need to validate that the learning network is a safe space by just being in the room, listening, and asking questions rather than issuing directives.
- Make room in the learning network agenda (particularly in **face-to-face meetings**) for **personal relationships** to develop. Encourage appreciation for each other and the talents that each brings. Make time to enjoy each other’s company. This is relatively easy when face-to-face meetings are held over meals or when there are opportunities for informal after-event conversations, but may require more imagination when most of the group’s work is carried out online. Acknowledge and take advantage of the range of forums where network members interact—online, at conferences, and through participation in professional organizations.

“Learning Networks are most effective when there is time to develop relationships between the members. We are finding that as the months go by, we are starting to become more and more familiar with our respective member organizations, and we are more successful at identifying common interests.”

~GROOVE member

- **Periodically check in** on how the group is doing with the accepted group norms. The facilitator plays a critical role in supporting a trustful environment by ensuring that agreements made in the group are explicit and broadly understood, by moderating discussions in such a way that all



Figure 4: GROOVE face-to-face meeting

members’ ideas are valued and taken seriously, and by helping the network confirm whether the group is working in a manner consistent with the members’ agreements about norms.

A Deeper Look...



Visit: Phase 4 of the [Learning Networks Resource Center](#), especially the Offline Peer Support and Organizational Buy-In sections

Download: [How do we want to work together?](#)

Watch: GROOVE member [interview](#) about network collaboration

8. Find ways to influence industry-level adaptation and practice.

Being fully successful means not only sharing what has been learned through the learning network in larger forums—such as workshops, conferences, and online—but also seeking to purposefully influence the behavior of others who were not initially a part of the learning network. This may involve strategically inventorying or mapping other networks and organizations that the learning network sees as potential allies or resources and asking what is needed, where are the gaps in knowledge, where are the leverage points, and how the network can take advantage of a particular opportunity in front of them. In order to fully scale up the dissemination of learning and increase the likelihood of adaptation, successful learning networks:

- leverage existing relationships and outside networks to bring additional perspectives into the learning network,
- “map” the audiences that they wish to influence and the messages they want to convey,
- make new industry-level connections,
- develop easy-to-use, actionable knowledge products, and
- act as advocates for the adoption of those knowledge products within the industry.

“Developing a tool appropriate for our organization is relatively simple, but what GROOVE enabled us to do is to realize problems we are facing are the same as other people are facing. Our tools can be rolled out to others and others can start using them. This way, we can influence others in the field. GROOVE enabled us to move beyond our organization and become more influential.”

~ GROOVE member

The SEEP Network

The [Small Enterprise Education and Promotion \(SEEP\) Network](#) is a global network of 130 international practitioner organizations dedicated to combating poverty through promoting inclusive markets and financial systems. SEEP represents the largest and most diverse network of its kind, comprised of international development organizations and global, regional, and country-level practitioner networks that promote market development and financial inclusion. Members are active in 170 countries and support nearly 90 million entrepreneurs and their families.

MaFI

The [Market Facilitation Initiative \(MaFI\)](#) is an international learning and action-oriented network of practitioners, researchers, donors, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers dedicated to the advancement of facilitation as an approach to inclusive market development. MaFI was created by SEEP and the Livelihoods Network in 2008.

Much of GROOVE’s strategy for positively influencing broader industry practice was built on longstanding involvement with the SEEP Network and the Market Facilitation Initiative (MaFI) Network. Several of the member organizations had made presentations for SEEP meetings in the past, but the SEEP Annual Conference served as a regular and way to engage with the larger community over the network’s three and a half years. GROOVE usually had side meetings during these events and, in part, used those meetings to draw in people from other organizations to share and contribute to GROOVE’s ongoing conversations. By the end of the grant period, GROOVE was well known in SEEP and other related networks. Presentations about the GROOVE experience at the 2012 SEEP Annual Conference represented an important opportunity to showcase the learning network’s knowledge products.

Opportunities to collaborate and make a contribution to the work of the MaFI Network were regularly discussed during GROOVE meetings. For example, MaFI played a primary role in organizing industry-

wide engagement and input into GROOVE’s monitoring and evaluation (M&E) knowledge products. As GROOVE came to a close, discussions were held about how MaFI might serve to embody “the GROOVE spirit” by providing a venue for continuing collaboration around issues of interest to the GROOVE Learning Network.

GROOVE had a number of discussions related to identifying the audiences that it was seeking to influence. During one of its face-to-face workshops, GROOVE made plans for documenting and disseminating its knowledge products related to capacity building, value chain evaluation M&E, and “learning about learning” in a learning network. Several possible audiences were identified:

- Donor-funded **development projects** that seek to leverage learning to become more strategic with fewer resources
- **Senior leadership teams** within development organizations who recognize that a learning component is increasingly being built into development projects and need additional education about how to put learning approaches into practice in their organization
- **Institutions** seeking to create communities of practice to reduce siloing and take advantage of synergies
- **USAID staff** who are building knowledge management strategies, are seeking to influence USAID learning systems, or are considering the development of learning networks project partner teams, and local learning groups

Materials and strategies were developed to speak to these different audiences in different ways. In fact, this report and the Learning Networks Resource Center are both examples of such materials. As these and other knowledge products were developed, GROOVE decided to create an advisory board of experts who *Practices of Successful Networks*

could provide input into those products. The advisors, chosen for their thought leadership and influence as well as their technical expertise, were an important component in GROOVE’s industry engagement strategy. One GROOVE member who was involved in this process stated,

“Engaging with top-level thinkers to have them critiquing our learning products was a huge value-add to us; we learned immensely from it. It led to better products in the end and it’s one of those things that none of our institutions would have been able to accomplish on our own. We wouldn’t have been able to get the same level of input from such experienced and high-caliber experts on our own as we did as part of GROOVE.”

A Deeper Look...

Visit Phase 6 of the [Learning Networks Resource Center](#), especially the Industry Outreach section



THE SIX PHASES OF THE LEARNING NETWORK LIFE CYCLE: APPLYING THE PRACTICES OF SUCCESSFUL LEARNING NETWORKS

Phases in the Learning Network Life Cycle

1. Scoping and designing the learning network
2. Launching the learning network
3. Focusing on organizational learning
4. Engaging more broadly with group learning
5. “Turning the corner” to network-level learning
6. Connecting to and influencing the broader industry



Figure 5: More information about these phases is available on the Learning Networks Resource Center by using the table of contents in the right side-bar

While each learning network is different—in terms of length of time, nature of the learning agenda, number and quality of face-to-face meetings, personalities of member—there is a certain “life cycle” that learning networks tend to go through.

This is not to say that carrying out a learning network is a linear process. The edges of the phases are blurry and overlap with one another, and many of the elements of the early phases are present throughout the work of the network. That said, understanding these phases provides something of a roadmap and a sense of the dynamics that generally need to be tended to in different ways in each of the phases.

Phase 1: Scoping and Designing the Learning Network

This phase includes all the “dreaming” about what might be possible with a learning network, engaging with others whose support might be needed,

developing scopes of work and procurement processes, and selecting those to receive grants. Most of the activities in this phase are carried out by the funding agency, but the amount of time and attention that potential learning network members give to conceptualizing, scoping, and designing their own grant proposals should not be underestimated.

Phase 2: Launching the Learning Network

Once grants are awarded, steps can be taken to launch the work of the learning network. These steps typically include orienting members of the network to each organization’s programs; sharing issues and desired outcomes from learning network participation; planning and holding a launch meeting to share individual workplans, identify industry-level learning gaps, and develop a draft joint learning agenda; and putting procedures in place for finalizing workplans and engaging virtually with each other over the initial months of the network.

Phase 3: Focusing on Organizational Learning

After the launch phase, learning networks tend to focus on structuring and regularizing their interaction, with primary attention being given to learning activities of most interest to individuals or individual organizations represented in the network. Structured group time focuses on supporting the projects being implemented by network members in their own organizations and usually include presentations on project progress, peer assists, and technical support from network members and industry experts, and interaction and support from the group and facilitator based on issues raised in learning journals.

This phase provides important opportunities to build a sense of trust within the group that becomes increasingly important over the life of the learning network. To foster this trust, network activities should encourage collaboration, sharing, and engagement to ensure collective awareness of the interests, expertise, and progress of each member. This phase should also build upon the “Network Launch” activities to continue the development of a shared group learning agenda.

Phase 4: Engaging More Broadly With Group Learning

Typically, as members implement their own projects, the learning network surfaces new knowledge that may have applicability beyond a single organization. As this knowledge is shared, discussed, and tested in other settings, participants have the opportunity to identify effective, replicable models or approaches which provide the basis for network- and industry-level learning.

Familiarity with the work of other network members, combined with depth of engagement early in the learning network’s life cycle, makes for trustful conversations about what might be done to innovate or approach an issue differently. Generally speaking,

interaction during this phase becomes broader, both in terms of the ways that members interact and in the ways that they contribute to the projects of other members.

Recognizing and taking specific steps to accommodate this transition can help lay the foundation for further collaboration at the network level.

Phase 5: “Turning the Corner” to Network-Level Learning

Although collaborative possibilities may arise for exploration earlier in the life of the network, in earlier phases, primary attention is placed on accomplishing individual organization objectives, assisting each other in the implementation of individual projects, and developing individual knowledge products. In this phase, however, the network effectively uses what it has discovered working together to “turn the corner,” shifting focus to begin putting serious attention on knowledge products that are collaboratively developed with input, ownership, and buy-in from all learning network members.

This phase often involves a greater investment of time and energy from network members as individual organizational work continues in conjunction with a greater emphasis on network-level deliverables. This phase also typically requires an increased level of engagement among network members as they support one another around network-level initiatives.

Phase 6: Connecting to and Influencing the Broader Industry

By this phase, most learning networks have already made significant connections with others in their industry as they sought assistance from technical experts, engaged in conferences and workshops, and pursued their learning agendas. Activities in this last phase should move beyond previous forms of “connecting” towards creative documentation of results, structured dissemination of new knowledge to

the broader industry, and implementation of strategies to influence practices and behavior of targeted audiences.

During this phase, learning network members will likely be working on a number of concurrent activities

including completing their own organizational objectives, finalizing network-level knowledge products, and strategizing on how to share out network learning to the broader industry. As the learning network comes to an end, the question of “what’s next” often arises.