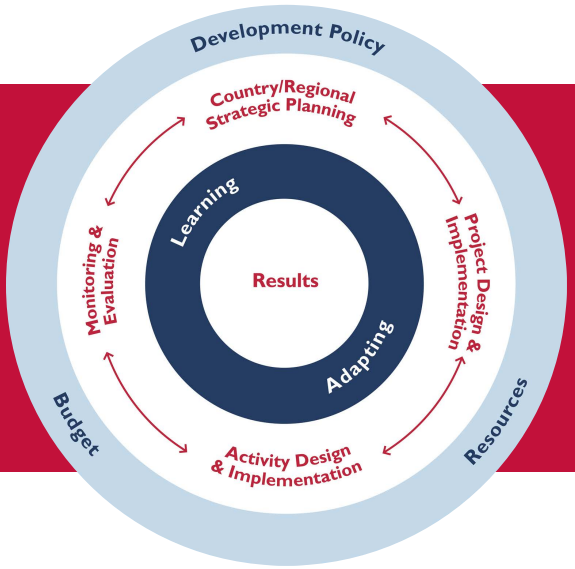
USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

PROGRAM CYCLE

TECHNICAL NOTE

THE 5RS FRAMEWORK IN THE PROGRAM CYCLE



This Note describes the 5Rs Framework and demonstrates how it can be applied to strengthen local systems and promote sustainability.

Technical Notes provide key concepts and approaches to USAID staff and partners related to the Program Cycle. These documents are published as a suite of Additional Help documents to supplement ADS 201 produced by the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning.

INTRODUCTION

USAID's Program Cycle Operational Policy (ADS 201) provides guidance to missions and other operating units on how to implement the Program Cycle. A key principle of the Program Cycle is to "Promote Sustainability through Local Ownership." The purpose of this Technical Note is to describe the "5Rs Framework", a practical methodology for supporting sustainability and local ownership in projects and activities through ongoing attention to local actors and local systems.

This Note is rooted in USAID's 2014 Local Systems Framework paper, which establishes that achieving sustained improvement in development results depends on the contributions of multiple and interconnected local actors. That document also states that USAID needs to improve its systems practice if it is to engage local actors and strengthen local systems more effectively and thus realize sustained results more consistently. The 5Rs Framework, also introduced in the Local Systems Framework, is intended as a simple and practical tool to promote good systems practice. The 5Rs Framework highlights five key dimensions of systems: **Results, Roles, Relationships, Rules and Resources**. Collectively these 5Rs can serve as a lens for assessing local systems and a guide for identifying and monitoring interventions designed to strengthen them.

This Technical Note is divided in two parts. The first part provides an introduction to the 5Rs Framework and the systems practice from which it emerges. The second part demonstrates how **systems practice can be embedded in the Program Cycle** by continuously applying the 5Rs, especially to the design, implementation, and monitoring of USAID projects and their accompanying activities.

This Note is also intended to be practical, tailored to the processes laid out in ADS 201, especially those associated with project design and management. However, the Agency's experience in applying systems practice to development problems is limited at this point and has focused more on up-front assessment of systems than it has on engaging systems through projects and activities. This reality is reflected in Part 2 of this Note. Guidance related to the earlier stages of project design is more detailed. Guidance dealing with implementation and monitoring is lighter and more speculative. Yet, with greater emphasis on local systems in ADS 201, the hope is that more and more projects and activities will be designed and monitored with local systems in mind. As experience engaging systems increases, this Note will be updated accordingly.

Finally, in addition to this Note, ProgramNet hosts a Local Systems Toolkit, a collection of resources designed to provide support to USAID staff interested in learning more about systems tools and concepts and their application.

SYSTEMS PRACTICE AND THE 5RS FRAMEWORK

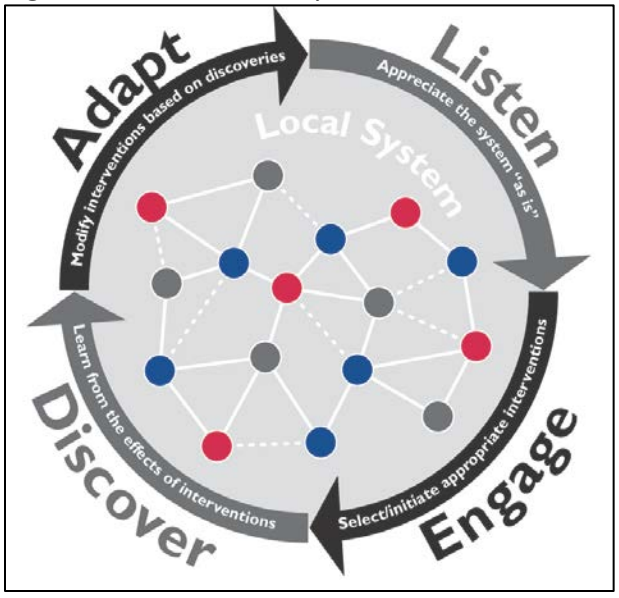
Systems Practice. As laid out in the *Local Systems Framework*, achieving and sustaining development results depends on strengthening the local systems that produce those results. Strengthening local systems depends, in turn, on being able to work with those systems effectively. And working effectively with systems requires both a willingness to embrace the concepts and tools that comprise systems thinking and a set of commitments and values that guide the way of working with systems. Systems thinking and systems working come together in a **systems practice**: a way of seeing, analyzing, and acting through systems.

Systems practice is an ongoing process, but can be usefully divided into four phases or tasks:

- **Listening** to the system to appreciate how it currently operates;
- **Engaging** the system to prompt change, primarily through selected interventions designed to modify interactions in ways that produce desired results;
- **Discovering** the actual effects of those interventions on the system; and
- **Adapting** interventions in response to discoveries to promote interactions that yield improved results.

These four phases of systems practice are depicted in Figure 1 (at right).

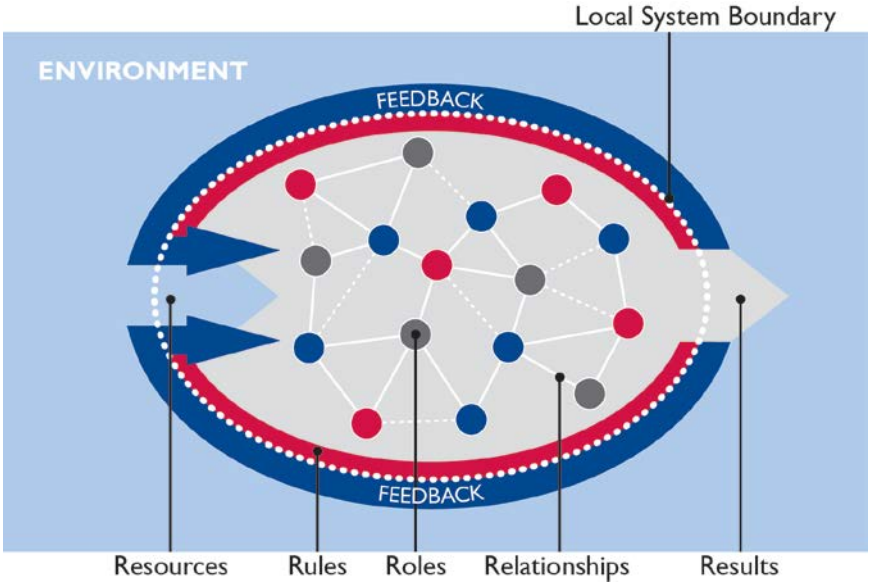
Figure 1. The Four Phases of Systems Practice.



The 5Rs Framework. The 5Rs Framework provides focus to each of the four phases of systems practice. The Framework identifies key aspects of a system that are important for understanding how the system functions and important as leverage points for introducing change. Thus the five "Rs" that make up the framework—**Results, Roles, Relationships, Rules and Resources**—help to identify what we should listen for, where we should engage, what we should discover, and what interventions we may need to adapt.

Together the 5Rs capture the basic dynamics of a system. Figure 2 provides a stylized depiction of a system. At the center of the figure—and at the center of any system—are interactions. In the development space those interactions occur between human actors, both organizations and individuals. Those actors assume certain **roles** (identified by different colored circles) within a network of various types of **relationships** (the lines connecting the circles). Those interactions depend on certain inputs or **resources** (the incoming light blue arrow) and produce certain outcomes or **results** (the outgoing gray arrow). And the whole process of transforming resources into results through the interactions of system actors is governed by a set of **rules** (the red band).

Figure 2. The 5Rs: Key Elements of a Local System.



Further, any system exists in a broader **environment** (itself comprised of systems) and there are interactions between the two. The environment influences the system and the system can influence its broader environment. This interaction between system and environment is captured in several ways in Figure 2: via the light blue arrow that draws resources from the environment into the system, the gray arrow that injects system results into the environment, and the dark blue arrows that capture the dynamic when results influence the subsequent availability of resources. These feedback loops are essential for ensuring the sustainability of the local system, as described in Box 1 (see page 4).

Results (and Systems Boundaries). Development efforts are usually organized around achieving a specific result, such as reducing infant death, increasing early-grade reading proficiency, or increasing access to potable water. Systems practice can also be organized around these types of results by focusing attention on the system responsible for producing them. Approached this way, some key result becomes the organizing principle for defining, investigating and engaging the associated system. Thus if the desired result is increased reading proficiency by third graders in a particular country, the systems

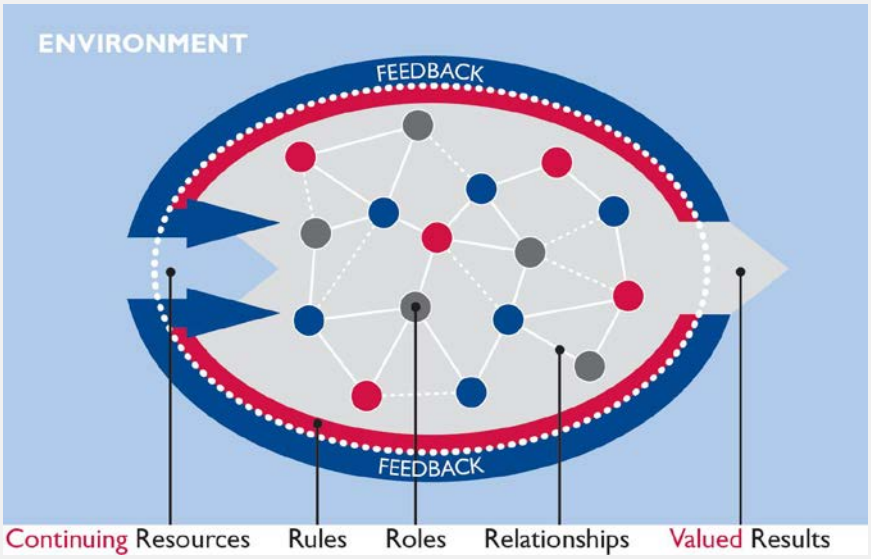
BOX 1. SUSTAINABILITY IN A LOCAL SYSTEM

If an inflow of resources serves as "fuel" to keep the system functioning, the sustainability of the system depends on keeping those resources flowing. Usually the continuing inflow of resources is contingent on realizing some result, as when a wholesaler continues financing grain purchases because there are profits (results) to be made or when a government continues providing budgetary resources for primary education because it engenders political support (results) from parents who are seeking a better future for their children. This important connection between realizing results and the continuing inflow of resources is depicted by the dark blue arrows in Figure 3 (below).

One implication of this understanding of sustainability is that sustainability depends on realizing results that systems-actors truly value. If the results are not valued—or fail to materialize—then systems actors will reduce resource inflows, which may undermine the viability of that system. And as systems are likely to include actors playing different roles and holding different perspectives, there will also be differences over which results really matter. Assuring valued results to a diverse set of systems actors is a central concern in designing interventions that will actually promote sustainability.

Sustainability, then, depends upon the ability of the system to produce valued results over time. Applying the 5Rs Framework to the program design process can help develop interventions that are informed by local context and more likely influence the system to produce valued results that are sustained over time.

Figure 3. Sustainability in a Local System.



focus is on the interactions between actors (captured in terms of roles and relationships), the resources and the rules that together play a prominent role in producing reading proficiency.

Determining the appropriate dimensions of a system can be challenging, even when using a clearly articulated result as the focal point. It is not always easy to distinguish between the roles, relationships, resources and rules that are essential contributors to realizing a result—and thus are part of the system—from those that are somewhat less significant—and thus outside. This process becomes even more challenging if the result is not clearly framed or there are different perspectives to reconcile about

where to draw the boundary between what is part of the system and what remains outside as part of the environment.

The boundary is depicted by the dotted white band in Figure 2. It surrounds the focal result and its associated system. **The space within the boundary defines the local system.** Those system elements are local to the identified result in the sense that they are essential to achieving it. Depending on the desired result, the scope of a local system may vary from small (household or community) to large (national, regional or global).

Although a single result will serve as the organizing principle of a system, that system will produce other results, both positive and negative, in addition to the focal one. For example, in addition to low proficiency levels, the early grade reading system might also be producing teacher absenteeism, poor instruction, or civil society advocacy for education reform. These additional results certainly should be captured and may become issues to address as part of the engagement phase. However, it is important to maintain a distinction between these subsidiary results and the one around which the system is organized.

Roles and Relationships. Actors, whether organizations or individuals, and their interactions are at the heart of all human systems. However, more important than the actors are the specific functions—or roles—those actors take on within a system. Indeed, it is the importance of the role and not the stature of the actor that determines position inside or outside the system boundary.

Distinguishing roles from actors is also important because a single actor can sometimes play several roles in a system, as when an NGO is both a service provider and an advocate. The reverse can also occur. Different types of actors take on the same role as when both government and the private sector deliver health care through clinics.

Roles can be expected to vary depending on the way the system is organized. For example, a market-based system might have such roles as "retailers", "consumers", "wholesalers" and "importers", where a service delivery system is likely to have "providers", "users", or "funders." In addition to these more obvious roles, there is mounting evidence suggesting that strong and adaptive systems have actors playing roles as stewards, facilitators, brokers, knowledge hubs, networkers and advocates. More information on roles can be found on ProgramNet.

Roles and relationships are tightly linked. Indeed many roles are defined in terms of the relationships they have with others. Relationships refer to the types of interactions that occur between actors playing particular roles and can be characterized along several dimensions, including formal to informal, strong to weak, mutual to one-sided, cooperative to adversarial and productive to destructive.

Rules. Rules refer to formal laws, regulations and statutes and to less formal norms, incentives and expectations that influence the structure of the system and the way it functions. Generally the rules of interest are those that apply to the other Rs. Among these would be: rules that determine which actors can enter the system and what roles they can play, restrictions on what relationships can be formed and by whom, regulations on the distribution of resources and standards on how results will be evaluated.

Enforcement is an important consideration in examining rules. Rules on the books but not enforced are hardly rules at all. And rules that are enforced, but erratically or with bias, have a different effect on the system than rules that are enforced uniformly. Thus it is usually more efficient to focus first on the behavior of system actors and the incentives they face and then trace back to the rules and norms that may be their cause than it is to start with a list of legal provisions and try to assess their practical effects.

Resources. Resources encompass the various inputs that are transformed into results. Financial resources, whether in the form of government budget flows, private sector investments, or donor grants, are likely to be important in any system of interest. However, depending on the system, other resources may also be important. Natural resources in the form of fertile soil and adequate rainfall may be important inputs into a crop production system. Similarly, human resources in the form of a supply of trained teachers may be an important input to a reading proficiency system. Whatever their form, the focus should be on identifying those inputs that are needed as "fuel" for the interactions that then yield results.

THE 5RS: INTEGRATING SYSTEMS PRACTICE IN THE PROGRAM CYCLE

Systems practice entails both a set of concepts and a way of working intended to catalyze—and sustain—system change. **In the USAID context, systems practice is operationalized through the Program Cycle.** And by identifying sustainability and local ownership as a guiding principle, ADS 201makes clear that considering local systems and how best to engage with them should be a priority throughout the Program Cycle.

The integration of systems practice and the Program Cycle is particularly important where efforts to change system dynamics are planned and implemented. In Program Cycle terms this occurs primarily during the project design process, but also touches on management, monitoring and learning at both the project and activity levels. The 5Rs Framework was specifically developed to facilitate integration of systems practice and the Program Cycle at these key junctures. And thus these are the portions of the Program Cycle that are addressed in this Technical Note.

This section is organized according to the four phases of systems practice—listening, engaging, discovering and adapting. However, connections are made throughout the narrative to the relevant Program Cycle steps. Annex A provides a more detailed crosswalk between systems practice and the project design requirements in the Program Cycle.

LISTENING TO SYSTEMS

The first phase of a systems practice is to appreciate the local system as it currently functions: how it is organized, how well it functions and how valued are the results it is seen to produce. Listening carefully to the local system "as is" is a necessary prelude to identifying and designing interventions intended to improve system performance. **Thus listening to systems is an essential element of project design.**

The 5Rs Framework helps to structure the listening phase by focusing attention on what to listen for. However, a systems assessment is not a strictly linear process. Describing one "R" may lead to insights

about other Rs, and as you become more comfortable with the 5Rs approach, you may begin to work back and forth across the Rs rather than taking each in turn. Table 1 (see page 7) offers a set of questions to guide investigation into the contribution of each of the 5Rs to the functioning of the "as is" system.

Table 1. Guiding Questions for Listening to the "As Is" System

Element	Questions
Results	▪ What is the target result around which the local system is defined? ▪ Are there trends (increasing, decreasing) or patterns in the target result over time? ▪ How is the target result evaluated by local actors? Is it valued? ▪ How is that valuation expressed to actors inside and outside the local system? ▪ What other results (positive/negative) do actors note about the local system? ▪ How adaptive, resilient, or self-sustainable does the local system seem to be?
Roles	▪ What roles are actors currently performing? ▪ Are some actors performing multiple roles? ▪ Are some roles being played by different types of actors, such as both government and the private sector providing primary education? ▪ Are donors or other third parties playing prominent roles? ▪ How effectively are actors fulfilling the roles they have taken on? ▪ Are there issues of legitimacy or appropriateness surrounding the choice of roles that particular actors might take on? ▪ Are there any roles that seem to absent? Why?
Relationships	▪ What types of relationships exist between role-players (formal/informal, contractual/hierarchical/reciprocal)? ▪ How strong are these relationships? ▪ How valued are these relationships? Are they collaborative? Mutually beneficial? Conflictual? Predatory? ▪ Does the strength of the relationship vary depending on the actors involved? ▪ Are there relationships identified as missing, weak, unnecessary or illegitimate?
Rules	▪ What rules affect the way the local system functions? ▪ Are the relevant rules formal (laws) or informal (norms)? ▪ Are relevant rules enforced? How well? Effectively? Equitably? ▪ Are actors in the local system able to modify the rules that affect them?
Resources	▪ What resources are currently being used by the local system in producing the target result? ▪ Are there needed resource inflows that are missing or insufficient? ▪ Are there trends (increasing, decreasing) or patterns (cyclical) in resource inflows? ▪ What are the sources of those resources? Are they reliable and secure? ▪ How well are the results that the local system is producing being translated, through feedback loops, into sustained resource inflows?

Preliminaries. Before embarking on a listening exercise, bear three things in mind:

First, structure the listening in such a way as to **obtain multiple and diverse perspectives**. It is important that the team conducting the listening is diverse—because people with different backgrounds will be attuned to hearing different things—and that those the team hears from are representative of the diversity found within the local system itself. Tapping into this diversity is important to determine if there are strong differences of opinion about key dimensions of the local system: what is the focal result and how valued is it; where does the system boundary lie; how well are each of the 5Rs contributing to a functioning system? Therefore an important consideration in project design planning is how to ensure that the design team is diverse and is able to hear from multiple perspectives.

Second, **listening can be accomplished in several ways**. Certainly listening can actually be accomplished by listening to the spoken opinions of local actors. And that type of listening, whether through key informant interviews, focus groups, opinion surveys and the like, may well be necessary, especially if there are groups within the system who are marginalized and left out of the conversation. However, traditional analyses and assessments, from political economy analyses to gender analyses to technical and sectoral assessments, can provide valuable insights into the way a local system is organized and functions. In addition, employing some systems-specific tools, such as social network analysis, can be valuable in clarifying dynamics that other assessments often miss. Table 2 (see below) provides an illustrative –and partial—crosswalk between each of the 5Rs and analyses that may be helpful in better understanding them.

Table 2. Types of Analyses

Element	**Illustrative Information Sources**
Results	Technical studies Opinion surveys Customer/client satisfaction surveys
Roles	Gender analysis Social Network Analysis Organizational Performance Index PFMRAF Stage 1 and 2 Technical capacity analyses
Relationships	Social Network Analysis Value chain/market analysis Causal loop diagrams
Rules	Political Economy Analysis PFMRAF Stage 1
Resources	Political Economy Analysis Economic growth forecasts Market studies Customer/client satisfaction surveys

Finally, as important as listening is, it is also important not to fall into the **"analysis paralysis" trap**. Local systems are complex social phenomena that are hard to understand. It is important to develop a working understanding of the system before engaging it. But at the same time, it also true that engaging the system and noting the response to interventions also provides important information about the system's dynamics that can only emerge through discovery. Therefore, there is always an analytic balancing act to perform between how much effort to devote upfront before engagement and how much to rely on the insights to be gained from close monitoring of interventions intended to modify the system in some way. Thinking through this balance is another important consideration in project design planning.

For presentation purposes, listening is broken up into a series of steps. But the actual process is likely to be more iterative; moving back and forth across these steps as understanding of the "as is" system deepens.

1. **Select the Focal Result of Interest.** The first step to listening is to identify a result that will serve as the focal point for the local system to be examined. As already noted, listening will be more targeted and effective if the focal result is clearly articulated. Getting to that point will take some effort. It will likely require sifting through various documents and their broad statements of development problems to figure out what specific outcomes need to be analyzed and understood. And then it will entail validating any framing of the focal result with systems actors. It is quite possible that taking account of alternative viewpoints may lead to reframing the focal result or redefining what the "problem" is altogether. Because we are listening to the system "as is", the focal result that is being produced by the system is likely to be negative, for example "low reading proficiency."

2. **Bound the Local System.** Care in framing the focal result makes it easier to set the boundary that defines the local system from which that result emerges. A clear boundary is essential for ensuring that listening efforts are focused on the roles, relationships, resources and rules that are most significant in producing the result of interest. At the same time, setting the boundary is a judgement call that should be reviewed with a range of system actors to get their views about who and what is important for achieving the target outcome.

   Since more expansive boundaries (such as focusing at country-level rather than at a province) usually involve more actors with more interrelationships, the listening required to gain a working understanding is more demanding. There may come a point when the requirements of a good-faith listening effort may seem overwhelming. In those circumstances it may make sense to reframe the focal result more tightly so that it defines a more compact—and more manageable—local system that is easier to listen to.

3. **Develop an Understanding of the "As Is" Local System.** Once the focal result and associated local system boundary has been defined, it is now possible to examine the internal workings more deeply through the lens of all of the 5Rs. The aim is draw on available analyses and data to build out a fuller understanding of the results, roles, relationships, rules and resources of the local system under investigation to the point that it becomes clear why the system "as is" produces the observed

results. It is likely that thinking through the 5Rs will happen more than once during the listening phase. The first time provides an opportunity to assess what is already known about the 5Rs and what holes may remain. Determining what additional analyses are necessary to fill identified information holes then becomes part of project design planning. Once those additional analyses are complete, a second application of the 5Rs should reveal a fuller understanding of the 5Rs.

Thinking through the 5Rs can proceed in any order, though many have found that it is easiest to begin by identifying actors within the system and then characterizing the roles those actors play and the relationships between them (having preceded this by determining the focal result as part of the determining the system boundary). Finally, it is important to take note of both what is working well in addition to what is identified as problematic.

Examining the local system in terms of the 5Rs can be done in a variety of ways: by individuals or by a group in a workshop format; by Mission staff reflecting on their own experience and commissioned studies or as a frame for eliciting insights from local actors. For example, Box 2 shows one possible method of using the 5Rs for an analysis of the system as it currently exists.

ENGAGING SYSTEMS

The second phase of systems practice focuses on actively engaging a system to promote positive—and sustained—change. As promoting positive and sustained changed is most effective when it is locally-owned and locally-led, it is important that all facets of engagement are undertaken in collaboration with system actors and stakeholders.

This phase begins with preparatory analytical work and then moves on to the development of the project theory of change, activity design and implementation of specific interventions intended to induce changes in the way the system functions. The 5Rs Framework provides a useful guide along the way. As a start, the 5Rs provides a way to describe the future local system that is needed to produce a desired development outcome. Second, the Framework provides a way to identify interventions by providing a common frame to compare the system as it needs "to be" in the future with the actual systems as it is in the present. Finally the 5Rs also helps to prioritize among identified interventions. This section describes how to use the Framework in these three ways.

1. **Identify the "To Be" System.** The practice for identifying the "to be" system largely mirrors the practice for identifying the "as is" system. The same analytic process applies as do the commitments to seeking out multiple perspectives and validating conclusions with local actors. Information sources that contribute to listening can also offer insights into the functioning of the future local system. Indeed the processes are so similar that they can be carried out in parallel. **The big difference is that appreciating the current system is a diagnostic exercise accomplished through listening while envisioning a "to be" system is a more challenging task of working with local actors to imagine a future state and the pathways for getting there.**

   As with listening, the first step is to articulate a result that will serve as the anchor of a local system. Here the anchor is some desired result to be realized in the future. To make comparison easier, this

future target result should be framed as some improvement on the focal result that served as the anchor for the analysis of the "as is" system. For example, the focal result would be framed in terms of current national levels of maize production where the target result might be stated as a sustained increase in maize production.

It is also very important that the target result is one that is valued by actors, since valued results are a crucial element in establishing the positive feedback loop necessary to sustain a local system (see Box 1 and Figure 2).

Having set the (valued) target result, the next step is to put a boundary around the "to be" system. The procedure is the same as the one laid out in the listening phase: examining actor roles and relationships, resources and rules to distinguish those that are vital for producing the target result—and thus make up the future local system—from those that are less important and can be treated as part of the environment.

2. **Envision the "To Be" System in Terms of the 5Rs.** Having established the broad contours of the "to be" system, the next step is flesh it out by applying the 5Rs in more detail. A set of guiding questions is provided in Table 3 (on page 12). A key consideration at this point is to maintain in the "to be" systems any of the system strengths identified in the "as is" system.

BOX 2 – SYSTEMS MAPPING APPROACH TO "AS IS" ASSESSMENT USING THE 5RS FRAMEWORK

In this method, a team uses post-it notes or sheets of paper to organize the data for each "R" of the framework. "Results" are organized on the right; "resources" are listed on the left, and the actors and roles they fill in the middle. This set-up mimics the diagram of the system in Figure 2 on page 3, where the actors are in the center with a description of their role in the system and the transformation of resources into results. Relationships can be depicted either qualitatively on a separate list, by the way in which actors are grouped (in clusters or far apart), or connected with yarn or string. Teams can be creative in how to use this approach; the goal is to think through how the information fits together and can explain why the system produces the results that it does. In the figure above, the example system is of the agriculture sector in an African country.

Table 3. Guiding Questions for Envisioning the "To Be" System

Element	Illustrative Information Sources
Results	▪ What is the target result around which the local system is defined? ▪ Is the target result valued by local actors? Which ones? ▪ How will that valuation be expressed to actors inside and outside the local system? ▪ How will resilience and adaptability be built into the system? ▪ What other positive results should the "to be" system produce?
Roles	▪ What roles will local actors need to perform? ▪ Are these existing or new roles? For new roles, who will play them? ▪ What roles will donors or other third parties play? How can those roles be phased out over time? ▪ Are there issues of legitimacy or appropriateness surrounding the choice of roles that particular actors might take on?
Relationships	▪ What types of relationships will need to exist between role-players (formal/informal, contractual/hierarchical/reciprocal)? ▪ Are these new or existing relationships? ▪ How can these relationships be constructed to be mutually beneficial?
Rules	▪ What rules will be needed to enable the local system to function well? ▪ What is needed to ensure rules are enforced efficiently and equitably? ▪ How much rule flexibility will be required to provide the local system with the flexibility to adjust to changes in its environment?
Resources	▪ What continuing inflow of resources will be needed by the local system to produce the target result? ▪ How can this flow of resources be made reliable and secure? ▪ How can improving target results be leveraged, through feedback loops, into improving the sufficient and reliability of resource inflows?

The end product of the listening phase is a description of the "as is" local system organized around the 5Rs. Producing a similar description of the "to be" system facilitates a comparison between the current local system and a desired future configuration that will produce and sustain improved results.

3. **Identify Needed Change.** Comparing the two descriptions of local systems helps identify what changes are needed to move from "as is" to "to be." Moreover, **needed changes are organized in terms of the 5Rs, which provides greater precision as to the types of changes that are required**. This is a worthwhile effort for the reasons laid out in Box 3.

BOX 3. IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?

Envisioning the "to be" system, comparing it with the current one, and thinking through the requirements to promote change will take time and effort. Some may question whether these steps are necessary and will want to proceed directly from a listening assessment of a system to identifying interventions. But there are at least four reasons the more deliberate approach has value:

1. **Collaboration.** The documents created through this process—the description of the "to be" system and the assessment of needed change—can serve as a basis for collaboration with others interested in supporting reforms. The description of the "to be" system can serve as a common frame for collective action and the change action can potentially be divided up among interested collaborators.
2. **Unintended consequences.** Thinking through the configuration of the local system should identify dynamics that might otherwise be missed until they appear as the unfortunate unintended consequences of some intervention.
3. **Sequencing.** Taking time to consider the overall feasibility of the changes required to realize desired results can point out if a phased approach is needed; an approach that may entail (unglamorous) interventions to build the foundations of capacity and social capital needed to introduce more dramatic change later on.
4. **Common stake.** Perhaps most importantly, one of the outcomes of engaging in this analysis collaboratively is that systems actors should begin to realize that while they may have different roles in the local system and different interests, they are, in fact, part of a system and have a stake in seeing it thrive. Realizing this shared stake can have a profound and positive effect in the way actors think about their roles and relationships and their willingness to advocate for the resources needed to sustain "their" system.

4. **Assess the Feasibility of Change.** At this point attention starts to shift from identifying what change is needed to consideration of what interventions can be introduced in the local system to support needed changes in how it functions. As the shift occurs—and prior to additional investments in design processes—it makes sense to reflect on the feasibility of the identified change agenda.

   There are any number of factors to consider in weighing feasibility, ranging from the extent of change required within the local system, to the plausibility of the theory of change, to the support the change agenda enjoys from system actors and key stakeholders, to the levels of resources available to fund interventions and support system change. From a 5Rs perspective, **strengthening existing roles, changing rules and increasing levels of existing resource inflows are probably more feasible than creating new roles, changing norms, or seeking out new resource inputs**. But experience is limited.

   If the feasibility of the identified change agenda comes into question, there are two options for making engagement more manageable. One option is to reduce the extent of needed change by

shrinking the scale of the "to be" system. Doing so requires a more modest framing of the target result along with a pared down local system, but should not be too taxing given existing analysis.

There may be value in sequencing interventions, either over the life of a project or over multiple projects, tackling the change agenda in stages rather than all at once. For example, it may be necessary to modify the rules governing relationships before actually working on strengthening the relationships themselves. The Global Heath (GH) Bureau has had success using the 5Rs as a way to sequence interventions over many years and multiple projects. In a retrospective application, GH colleagues noted that early efforts to strengthen relationships paid off when it came to eliciting additional resources and shifting roles (see Box 4, below, and additional resources available on ProgramNet).

BOX 4. TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LOCAL SYSTEM: FAMILY PLANNING IN NICARAGUA

The 5Rs Framework was used by the Global Health Bureau to facilitate a retrospective documentation of how USAID's involvement in the family planning sector in Nicaragua evolved from a donor-led model in the early 1990s to the nationally-led and largely self-sustaining system Nicaragua has today. In this case, Global Health took "systems snapshots" at various points over the 20-year evolution and then used the 5Rs to describe the local systems at that point and capture any system changes. These snapshots focused on policy shifts (Rules), increasing domestic resource mobilization (Resources), and strengthening of local capacity for advocacy and service delivery (Roles and Relationships), which eventually lead to graduation from USAID support.

This review validated the 5Rs as a useful tool for tracking systems change and elicited a number of new insights:

- The retrospective exercise highlighted the importance of building relationships early in the process to catalyze development in other dimensions of the local system. For example, the initiation of Contraceptive Security Committees (CSCs) in 1999 facilitated a strengthening of relationships between multiple actors into a strong coalition for commodity procurement reform. CSCs went on to play a central role in developing formal contraceptive security plans in 2006 and 2009 and became a permanent fixture in family planning policy in Nicaragua.
- The exercise clearly demonstrated the connection between valued results and sustainability. Demand for family planning services grew over time and translated into pressure on political leaders to keep the programs going and growing. With time, support for family planning became a plank in the platforms of both political parties.
- Some interventions clearly catalyzed additional advances, but others had less clear paths of influence. This is consistent with the idea that systems are dynamic and not always predictable, and underscores the importance of investing in multiple approaches, continuing to monitor for change, and leveraging positive results to reinforce changes in the system that support the eventual achievement and sustainability of development goals.

From a Program Cycle perspective, projects and local systems should be aligned. In other words, each USAID project should be designed to promote change within a single, bounded local system. And conversely, efforts to support change within a defined local system should be organized within a single project. **With projects and local systems aligned, the Project Purpose is identical to the target result.**

5. **Select and Design Activities (Interventions).** As defined in ADS 201, an activity carries out an intervention or a set of interventions that help to achieve a Project Purpose. The starting point for selecting the activities (interventions) that will be included in the project design is the list of needed change that resulted from comparing the current "as is" system to the "to be" system that is the subject of the project. As this set of needed changes is already organized according to the 5Rs, each of them can be considered a "lever" that can be applied to generate some amount of systems-level change.

   The changes that matter take place at the system level: changes in systems interactions that result in better and more sustainable results. However, those interactions cannot be altered directly by outside actors. They can only be changed by the systems actors themselves through the ways they interact with one another. The situation is much like a musical performance. The director may have an understanding of how the piece should sound. But the director cannot realize that result directly. Instead the performance is a product of how the individual musicians interact as they play their various parts.

   The way to promote system change is indirectly, through a set of interventions designed to affect key aspects of the system such as: improving the performance of a role, promoting relationships where they did not exist, modifying incentives through a change in a rule, or increasing the level of available budgetary resources. A single intervention engages a specific aspect of the system and should not be expected to elicit the type of system change needed to produce the target result. Rather, systems change usually requires the combined efforts of a number of interventions (activities), each engaging a discrete part of the system but together initiating more profound change in the way the system functions. The 5Rs can assist in identifying those key interventions.

   An important design task is to determine which of the identified interventions to include within the project as it is unlikely that a project will be able to incorporate them all. This selection process is in many ways a continuation of the feasibility assessment conducted earlier. Recalling that strengthening existing roles may be a more feasible approach, systems considerations include:

   - ***Systems significance.*** Systems visualization tools, such a Causal Loop Diagramming and Social Network Analysis, may identify issues or actors that may play a significant role within the local system—or are conspicuously absent. Thus targeting these issues or actors can yield large ripple effects. These tools can also help identify virtuous and vicious cycles that interventions may be able to promote or counteract as the case may be.
   - ***Systems stewardship.*** A number of studies have documented the value of one or more actors playing a system steward role during the transition from "as is" to "to be." The role of the

steward is to facilitate the introduction of new dynamics by providing information, coaching, or convening. To be successful, the actor playing the steward role needs to be perceived by other actors as impartial and whose only interest is the improvement of the system as a whole. Thus a design question is whether such a role would be helpful and, if so, which actor(s) should be asked to take it on.

Whatever interventions are ultimately selected, they should be designed with the watchwords of good systems practice in mind: promote local leadership and local ownership of systems change, facilitate that change rather than directing it, respect and respond to differing perspectives, and anticipate the need to adapt.

DISCOVERING SYSTEM RESPONSE

The third phase of systems practice is discovering more about the dynamics of a local system as it responds to interventions. Discovery can reinforce understandings developed through listening and engagement when the local system responds in the ways that were anticipated. And discovery can alter understandings of the system's dynamics when it responds in unexpected ways. The 5Rs Framework assists discovery by providing a structure for capturing systems change, both expected and unexpected. As such, discovery through the 5Rs promotes learning within projects and activities (see Box 5, below).

BOX 5. CLA AND THE 5RS

Strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management link together all components of the Program Cycle. A Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) focus helps ensure that programming is coordinated together, grounded in evidence, and adjusted as necessary to remain relevant and effective throughout implementation. The 5Rs Framework reflects many of the same principles as CLA, and offers a specific process that can help USAID staff to actualize aspects of CLA at the project level.

- Collaborating: Both the 5Rs and CLA promote the idea that contextual learning is key, that USAID is one of many interconnected actors, and that it is necessary to solicit multiple and diverse perspectives throughout design and implementation.
- Learning and adapting: CLA defines a diverse set of practices to promote continuous learning and adapting in USAID strategies, projects, and activities. The four phases of systems practice define a process for continuous learning during project design (the "listen" phase), project implementation (the "discover" phase) and for adapting interventions in response to this learning (the "adapt" phase).
- Using core questions to inform design and implementation: The 5Rs Framework provides a structured process for approaching each phase of systems practice by answering a series of guiding questions. From a CLA perspective, the 5Rs guiding questions could be considered learning questions about a project's local actors, relationships, and implementation context. Both the 5Rs and CLA's Learning Agenda approach begin by defining the critical questions to inform programming, and only then choosing methodologies for answering them, including methods that go beyond standard M&E practices and assessments.

Discovering system response is in many ways analogous to the listening phase of systems practice. In the complex environments where USAID works, it is often not possible to fully predict how a specific project will influence the system. Even after having invested in listening and developing robust contextual assessments, engaging in a system through a specific project or activity will yield new information about how a system works. The 5Rs Framework can provide an organized approach to monitoring that captures information from each dimension of the system throughout project implementation. Regularly assessing project activities, both individually and collectively, for effects on the local system will allow teams to track progress toward the envisioned system "to be." This approach to monitoring can help a project team stay aware of how influences in one part of the system may bring about changes elsewhere, and identify ways to course-correct if a project is not producing the anticipated outcomes.

1. **Develop a Project-Level Monitoring Plan Attuned to Systems Change.** Monitoring takes place at both the activity level and the project level. Both are important and both can be organized with the 5Rs Framework. But robust monitoring at the project level is central for capturing and assessing systems change and, by extension, the prospects for achieving and sustaining results.

   Most activity-level interventions target a single "R", such as introducing new roles, strengthening existing relationships or reforming rules. Monitoring at this level will be focused on whether the actual intervention, whether training, facilitation, or introduction of a new technology, is yielding the desired change in that particular "R." However, changes to a single "R" are not likely to elicit system-level change. Rather it is only at the project level, where multiple interventions addressing multiple "Rs" come together, that systems change will become noticeable.

   Thus robust project-level monitoring is essential. And that begins with a thoughtful project level monitoring plan that is designed to capture system-level change. Doing so goes beyond aggregation of activity level monitoring and focuses on the collective effect that the discrete activity-level interventions are having on overall system functioning. Project level monitoring looks at how all five of the Rs are changing and how those changes are interacting with one another. It also looks at how the local system is interacting with its broader environment, especially if the system results are generating the type of support needed to continue the flow of resources needed for self-sustainability.

2. **Select Appropriate Monitoring Methods.** When framing a project-level monitoring plan, it is important to select methods attuned to capturing systems change. Such methods can be drawn from three broad categories:

   - ***Systems visualization methods***, such as Social Network Analysis or Causal Loop Diagramming can be used iteratively to capture broad system-level changes
   - ***Narrative methods***, encompasses a broad array of methods ranging from informal consultations and focus groups to outcome harvesting or most significant change. What these methods have in common is that they are all grounded in narratives from system participants—or key external stakeholders—about what they are observing from the inside about how the system is evolving.

- ***Indicator methods*** use data, usually quantitative, to capture key changes in a system.

Table 4 provides a list of monitoring methods, drawing from all three categories, which have been identified as useful for capturing aspects of system change. Some of the listed monitoring methods are tried and true. Some are less familiar. USAID is currently collecting and testing promising approaches to identify those that are most useful in development settings.

As Table 4 also indicates, some methods are better attuned to capture change in some Rs than others, so a portfolio of monitoring methods is likely. It is unlikely that a single monitoring method will be sufficient to capture system change. But whichever methods are selected it is important to include multiple perspectives throughout this process to ensure that the indicators and monitoring targets chosen capture what is important for progressing towards the system "to be." To this end, the proposed monitoring plan should be validated with a variety of stakeholders.

Table 4. Methods for Monitoring Systems Change

Element	Illustrative Information Sources
Results	Outcome indicators Citizen feedback/user surveys Outcome harvesting Stakeholder consultations
Roles	Social Network Analysis Organizational Performance Index Citizen feedback/user surveys
Relationships	Social Network Analysis Stakeholder consultations
Rules	Rapid Political Economy Analysis Stakeholder consultations
Resources	Market studies Indicators

ADAPTING TO DISCOVERIES

The fourth phase of systems practice focuses on adapting in response to what has been discovered about the effects of interventions on system dynamics. If those effects appear negative, adapting might entail modifying, scaling-back, postponing or even cancelling one or more interventions. Alternatively, if an intervention has particularly positive effects on the system, adapting might call for an expansion of an activity. Or if a new opportunity arises, adaptation might include adding a new intervention.

As a systems practice, adaptation entails working though the steps described under Engaging Systems, though this time with the benefit of additional insight uncovered through discovery. The amount of effort devoted to reconsidering the "to be" system, recalibrating which interventions are a priority, adjusting activity designs, modifying implementation plans, or tweaking project monitoring plans will

depend on what is discovered and how much those discoveries of actual system response deviate from initial expectations. Continued use of the 5Rs Framework can help organize discoveries by relating them to what is now known about each of the five Rs. Adaptation in the engagement approach is likely to be needed where new understandings differ most from the initial ones.

As with the engagement tasks, it is also important that possible adaptations be considered collaboratively with system actors. One way to do this, drawing from the growing practice of adaptive management, is to build regular points of reflection into implementation plans. Gathering together system actors and key stakeholders to review what has been discovered and assess what, if any, adaptation is required not only helps build local ownership for systems change, but also reinforces that important shared stake in good systems performance.

ANNEX A. LINKING THE 5RS WITH THE PROGRAM CYCLE.

Though systems practice should be an ongoing consideration throughout the Program Cycle, this table identifies the specific project design tasks identified in ADS 201 where the 5Rs Framework can be particularly helpful. The brief descriptions of how to use the 5Rs in these instances summarize steps described in more detail in the body of this Note.

Program Cycle Element	How the 5Rs Can Help
Project Design Planning (ADS 201.3.3.12)	Completing the Project Design Plan (PDP) will entail at least one iteration of "listening" to the "as is" system to identify its boundaries and describe the system in terms of each of the 5Rs.
Preliminary Project Purpose	Determining the focal result is an essential part of defining and bounding the "as is" system. At this point, this focal result can serve as a preliminary statement of the Project Purpose. However, it may be modified as more is learned about the "as is" system and attention shifts to envision the "to be" system during project design.
Plan for conducting analyses	The 5Rs can structure the review of existing analyses and help to identify gaps in understanding the "as is" system. Where gaps exist, consider some of the analyses listed in Table 1. The aim is to develop a reliable working understanding of the local system in terms of the 5Rs.
Plan for engaging local actors	An initial iteration of listening to the "as is" system will identify key systems actors and their roles and relationships. Consulting them during project design is important to improve understanding of the system and its strengths and weaknesses, validate system boundaries and assess support for systems change.
Plan for considering possible use of G2G	Listening to the local system with the 5Rs in mind will help identify the roles government actors play and their relationships to other actors. This analysis will help identify if those roles and relationships need to be addressed through the project and, if so, if direct assistance to government actors is the appropriate mechanism.
Project Design (ADS 201.3.3.13)	Completing the analysis and design tasks involved in project design and the preparation of the Project Approval Document (PAD) draws on three phases of systems practice: listening, engaging, and discovering. This would include completing the analytic tasks set out in the PDP to arrive at a working understanding of the "as is" system, identifying the "to be" system, comparing the "as is" and "to be" systems to identify the scope and feasibility of systems change, identifying those interventions that will be addressed through specific activities, and framing the project-level monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan. The 5Rs Framework is integral to all of these steps and ensures consistency across them.
Project Purpose	The target result of the "to be" system becomes the Project Purpose.
Context	This portion of the PAD can be addressed through a thoughtful description of the "as is" system in terms of the 5Rs and how that system relates to its environment.
Project Description	The Project Description would include a description of the "to be" system in terms of the 5Rs plus the analysis of what needs to change and feasibility of that change. The analysis of change and its feasibility provides the basis for the articulation of the theory of change.
Summary of conclusions from analyses	The 5Rs provides an efficient way to identify and relate the key findings and insights from various analyses, including consultations from local actors. And if the context and Project Description are also presented in terms of the 5Rs, it is easy to make the case that the project has made good use of the analysis.
Activity plan	Part of engaging with systems is using the 5Rs Framework to identify the key interventions that are expected to prompt systems change. These interventions will be implemented through activities that are summarized in the PAD's Activity Plan.
Project MEL plan	The 5Rs provide a structure for identifying those aspects that of systems change that need to be monitored. This Note also includes suggestions about methods that can be employed to monitor each of the Rs. The 5Rs can also serve as a structure for identifying priorities for learning.
Project logic model	The requirement for a logic model can be satisfied with a graphical depiction of the "as is" system and some indication, perhaps with arrows, of the interventions/activities that will be implemented to elicit systems change.