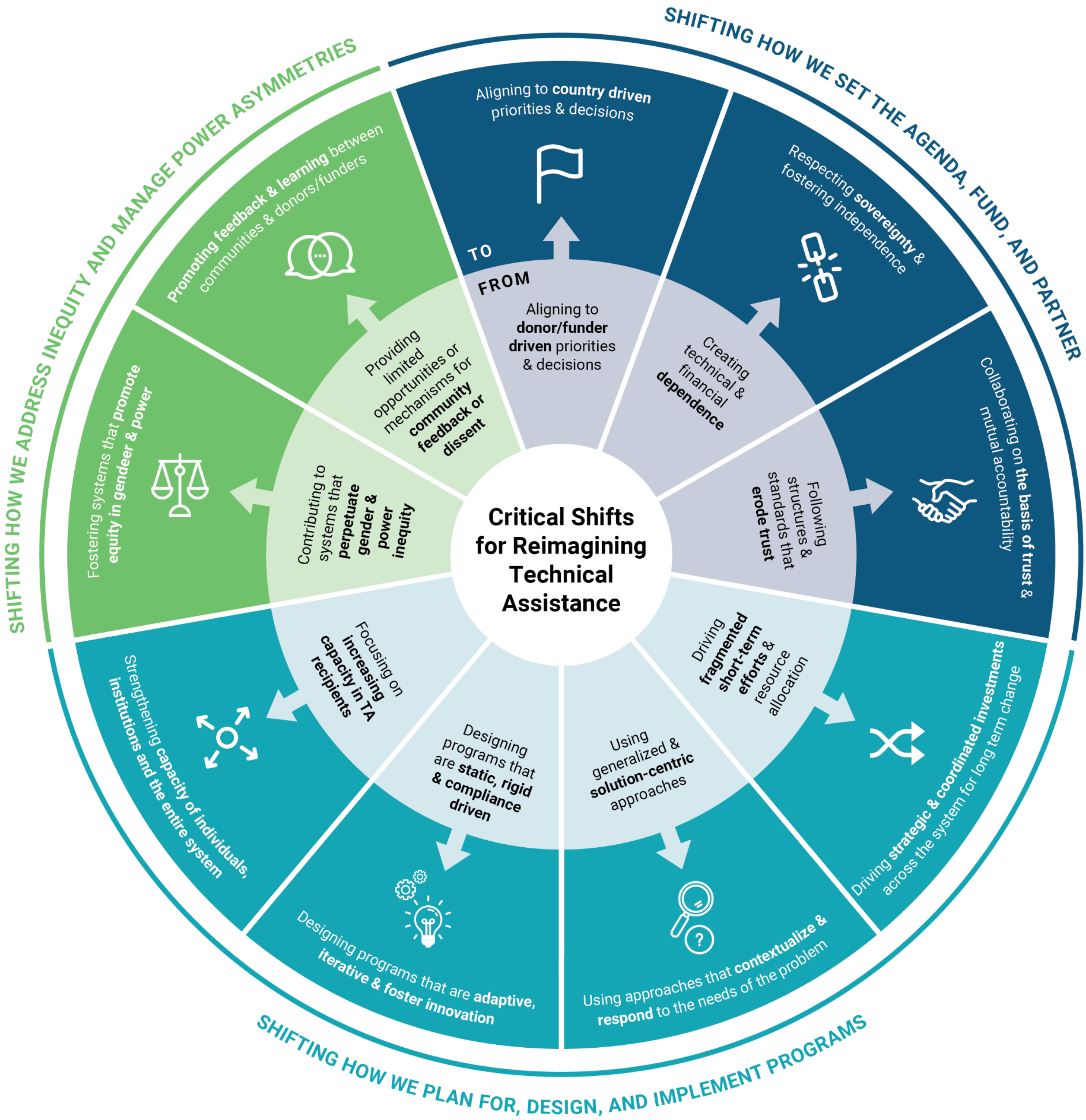

Reimagining Technical Assistance

Benchmarking guidance brief, Version 1

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2023 February / Draft for feedback

Reimagining Technical Assistance (RTA)
Reimagining Technical Assistance is a JSI-led initiative to spark dialogue and change around development assistance norms, practices, and policies. We seek to contribute to a global health system where power and resources shift to local stewards, and where local entities and experts set the agenda, define needs, select approaches, and coordinate programming. At JSI, we approach RTA as a journey, characterized by mutual learning, co-creation, and innovation. We invite you to test and adapt our tools and resources, and welcome your feedback and collaboration. Learn more at JSI.com/RTA.

The Critical Shifts: A framework for change
RTA is guided by the Critical Shifts, a framework that identifies the changes needed to move to a more country-driven, coordinated, and equitable system. Initially co-created by actors in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria — including government representatives, local and international implementing partners, funders, and community advocates — and later refined and validated with representatives from an additional 13 countries and experts from three funders, the framework calls for changes in how we: (1) Set the agenda, fund, and partner; (2) Plan for, design, and implement programs; and (3) Address inequity and manage power asymmetries. These shifts redefine relationships among funders, national governments, local and international implementing organizations, communities, and individuals. Read the RTA critical shifts brief to learn more »

Recommended citation
Kasungami, D., Coile, A., & Prefontaine, C. (2023 February). *Reimagining Technical Assistance: Benchmarking guidance brief, Version 1.* Reimagining Technical Assistance Working Group, JSI.

Acknowledgements
This brief was developed with the participation and insights of the RTA@JSI working group and builds on the work and insights developed during a multi-year, two-phase project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented in collaboration with the Sonder Collective and Stanford University's Global Change Labs.

Contents

About this guidance brief

This brief was developed as a companion guide to the Critical Shifts Benchmarking Tool, as part of the Reimagining Technical Assistance (RTA) initiative. The brief introduces the benchmarking tool and outlines:

- The rationale behind the benchmarking tool's development
- How different actors might use it to contribute to creating a more country-driven, coordinated, and equitable development assistance system
- High-level guidance on how to facilitate a benchmarking process

This guide is a draft. We will produce and share updated versions as we learn. We welcome questions and feedback, and are available to support efforts to use and adapt the tool. Please contact us at reimaginingtawg@jsi.com.

Changing the way we work

As an international NGO with a mission to improve health outcomes for all, JSI has a long history of implementing projects, providing technical assistance, and serving as a capacity strengthening partner. We have struggled with dynamics, norms, and structures that work against the outcomes we're trying to achieve — and that perpetuate the disparities we seek to diminish.

Sometimes we've been part of the problem. This work is rooted in the humility that comes with that recognition. It started as self-reflection about how we achieve our mission, an exploration of how to organize ourselves for equity and excellence, and a commitment to localization. We called it "reimagining" because it represents a shift toward a co-creative, human-centered, and mutual learning mindset (Schwarz & Bennett, 2021).

Making the case for benchmarking

The critical shifts for reimagining technical assistance lie on a continuum. Actors, projects and initiatives might make progress in one or more areas, yet as a whole fail to achieve lasting results. Reflection and learning are key to advancing our progress.

We developed the critical shifts benchmarking tool to detail what the critical shifts might look like in practice and to facilitate collaborative assessment on where we are and reflection on how we can improve. Benchmarking also signals a commitment to change since it requires monitoring our performance and identifying areas for improvement.

THE CRITICAL SHIFTS BENCHMARKING TOOL

The benchmarking tool (1) **describes** each shift, (2) proposes a set of **characteristics** that elaborate what the critical shifts might look like in practice, and (3) **defines benchmarks** to prompt reflection on progress. Space is also provided to record the benchmarking status and document reflections.

*Read the **critical shift** to align on the overarching objective.*

*Reflect on how each **characteristic** relates to the initiative being assessed.*

*Use the **benchmarks** to consider extent of progress on each characteristic*

CRITICAL SHIFT		SHIFT DESCRIPTION	KEY CHARACTERISTICS		No	Partly	Fully
1	**Aligning to country driven priorities and decisions**	Shift from a system where priorities, models, and structures are imposed on countries by donors/funders to one where **communities and governments own and lead the agenda-setting and coordination of health programing.** In this way, donors/funders are playing a complementary supportive role, listening and responding to local needs and priorities.	1.1	**Needs and priorities are collaboratively defined** with key country stakeholders and decision makers and signed off by appropriate government authority.	Inform, participate	Participate, decide	Decide, lead, and own it
			1.2	**Activities and approaches are co-created under the leadership of the appropriate govt. authority,** including ensuring the project design and systems are aligned to existing government protocols, plans, priorities, metrics, timelines and systems.			
			1.3	Country stakeholders are engaged in **determining the TA provider** and appropriate partnerships.			
			1.4	**Community stakeholders are engaged** in identification of needs and design, including seeking out diverse voices and opinions and those who may not typically be included.			
			1.5	**Country/government leadership and decision making** processes are defined and documented, including the project coordination and reporting/feedback mechanism/structure.			

A checklist to spark dialogue

As a starting point, the characteristics can be used as a checklist to spark dialogue and document perceptions, or as outcome statements for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

Benchmarking: Four key purposes

Going a step further, teams and groups can use the associated benchmarks to conduct a benchmarking process. Used this way, the tool is a mechanism that serves four key purposes:

1. **Take stock** and establish a baseline
2. **Align on a common vision** of the future
3. **Decide and design** who will do what differently — determine actions; inform or shift the design a policy, strategy, portfolio, program, or project
4. **Monitor or evaluate progress**, identify learning, and adapt

Whatever the purpose, the overall goal remains focused on changing the way we work to ensure that local leaders and organizations set the agenda, to leverage and reinforce local expertise for the long term, and to promote equity and address power asymmetries.

Benchmarking users and use cases

Actors and users

We anticipate that different actors will approach this work with their own lens and purposes. Initial ideas are summarized in the table below. In all cases, we advise seeking out participants with diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

ACTOR / USER	ILLUSTRATIVE GOALS / PURPOSES
Government	Review and adapt health policy and health system operations to enable the critical shifts. Set expectations and boundaries for work with external partners (funders and implementers, for example) and foster mutual accountability towards an agreed vision.
Civil society representatives and advocates	Advocate for change, monitor progress, and hold actors accountable to their commitments. Design partnerships or define partnership criteria.
Country coordination platforms / networks	Align partners around a common vision. Provide a framework for mutual accountability. Promote collaboration and coordination.
Funders	Inform policy, strategy, and grant formulation. More specifically, using the benchmarking tool to assess grant/financing requirements and incentive structures, to determine if/how they can be updated to facilitate the shifts. Share with funding recipients as guidance (a “north star”), or as a self-assessment tool to guide learning and improvements.
Implementing organizations and partners	Assess how a collection of projects, a department, or an organization as a whole is performing against the critical shifts and identify areas of improvement, learning, and positive practices. Spark reflection and learning around organizational-level barriers and enablers.
Project/initiative	Align stakeholders around a common vision. Inform project design and implementation. Assess/monitor progress against benchmarks and inform adaptations.

Emerging use cases at different levels

We anticipate that most people will use the tool to advance the four key purposes outlined above.

The RTA@JSI team is still in the early stages of testing this benchmarking tool, and is focused on supporting its use while gathering insights and feedback to refine it. As we get a better sense of how different actors might approach this work, we will update this section accordingly. As of now, we've thought through different use cases, which we've grouped by level: from an individual project to a broader portfolio or set of initiatives.

Individual project

At the level of an individual project, the tool can be used to guide stakeholders as they consider how to improve project design and implementation throughout the project cycle. The tool can be incorporated into existing processes to inform, for example: planning, partnership and project design at the capture or proposal development stage; activity design, monitoring, and adaptive management during implementation; and evaluation, learning, and project handover through closeout.

- [ ] Does our implementation approach, management structure, and budget support the shifts?
- [ ] How might we structure our partnerships and activities to shift decision making power to local entities and experts?
- [ ] How might our activities and approach contribute to advancing equity, amplifying community voices, and promoting feedback and learning?
- [ ] What changes might we make to our M&E indicators and approach? (For example selecting more collaborative and participatory evaluation approaches, or ones suited to complex, dynamic environments.)
- [ ] How might we shift the way we learn and adapt?
- [ ] Looking beyond our sphere of influence, what barriers and challenges are inhibiting our progress? What changes could we advocate for?

An organization or division managing a portfolio of projects

The tool can also be used to examine how a portfolio of projects is performing against the critical shifts, or to benchmark an organization or division's working practices (which in turn affect the project portfolio). Either way, this involves taking a more systemic view and exploring organizational culture, infrastructure, processes, and practices in areas such as budgeting, financial requirements and processes, business development and partnering, and staffing and management.

- [ ] Looking at our organization as a whole, how might we shift the way we work? What are our priority areas? How might we track our progress and share learning?
- [ ] Looking across a set of projects, how are they moving us towards the critical shifts? What good practices and learnings can we identify and share across our portfolio? Are there common barriers or enablers that we can address at the organizational level?

- [ ] Looking beyond our sphere of influence, what barriers and challenges are inhibiting our progress? What changes could we advocate for?

A foundation or bilateral/multilateral funding or financing agency

Foundations and bilateral/multilateral funders or financing agencies can use the benchmarking tool to review and inform a financing or grant-making strategy, including the mechanisms used and how those will be structured. In this case, the tool can either be used as a checklist to assess the approach and the behaviors it might incentivize. Or, the unit of analysis could be an entire portfolio or a subset of funding recipients in a particular domain. For example, this can be used to inform overall policies and practices, funding structure, tracking and reporting requirements, and determining funding priorities.

- [ ] As a funder/financer, what are we doing that is enabling and inhibiting progress on the critical shifts?
- [ ] What updates could we make to our funding/financing strategy or to the way we structure our grants?
- [ ] Do our grant requirements and processes create incentives that contribute to the health of the broader system?
- [ ] What learning and good practices can we adopt/share across funding recipients or divisions?
- [ ] How can we better coordinate and share learning with other funders and partners?

Cross-organization coordination, collaboration, and accountability

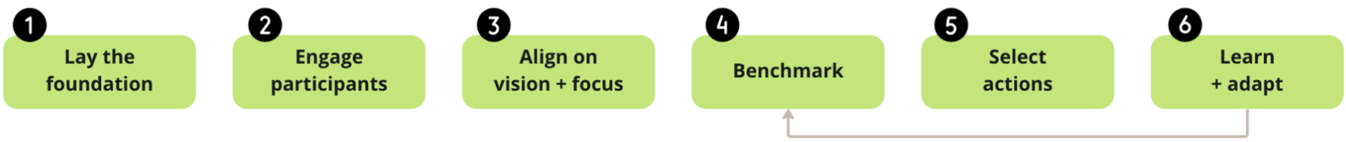
At a higher level, policy-makers, advocates, and network or coordination platform conveners can use the benchmarking tool to support coordination, collaboration, and accountability towards the critical shifts. At this level, the characteristics and benchmarks can be leveraged to co-create a shared vision and agree on ways of coordinating and working with partners. In this case, benchmarking would ideally be led (or co-led) by a government representative to ensure the framework supports the country's vision for partners operating in the country. The tool can continue to be used as an accountability framework to prompt reflection and alignment among the partners.

- [ ] Looking at our current efforts and partnerships, what is enabling and inhibiting our progress on the critical shifts? How can we adapt our policies, strategies, and coordination mechanisms to improve?
- [ ] How might we collaborate towards a development assistance system that supports the critical shifts?

- ☐ How might we facilitate more transparency and shared learning between partners and initiatives?
- ☐ How might we incentivize and hold each other accountable to new ways of working?

Conducting a benchmarking process

This guide proposes a series of steps — illustrated below — that you can tailor based on your priorities, context, and resources.



Consider options and adapt the steps to fit your needs

As you prepare to begin, there are three big decisions to consider: (1) conducting benchmarking as a standalone or integrated process, (2) the level of participant engagement, and (3) your format.

For all of these choices, the most important thing is to start — taking on too much can be overwhelming. Starting with small steps and a narrower scope will allow you to test, learn, and iterate along the way, building a sense of what works and preparing you to make bigger, more-informed investments.

Integrating benchmarking into existing processes

While the steps in this guide focus on key benchmarking tasks and milestones, we don't intend to suggest that it must be conducted as a separate process. You can initiate benchmarking at any time, and start with a more limited scope. That said, aim to integrate this work into your existing decision-making, planning, and implementation processes. We want to work differently, not add extra tasks.

Participant engagement: From co-creation to consultation

The level of participant engagement that you select will have time and cost implications. On one end of the spectrum is co-design or co-creation: designing *with* people — especially those with lived experience. This involves sharing power, prioritizing relationships, providing multiple ways to contribute, and encouraging new ways of being and doing (McKercher, 2020). At the other end is designing *for* people, developing initial designs — typically based on expert recommendations — and consulting stakeholders to seek their insights, feedback, or inputs. In this case, influence is limited by pre-determined parameters and upstream decisions.

Co-creation requires investing more time. In return, you will gain diverse perspectives, increase your likelihood of making better decisions, deepen relationships, and demonstrate your commitment to working differently.

Format options

Formats can be individual or collaborative, and asynchronous or simultaneous. Individual and asynchronous formats are quicker and less costly, but limit your ability to unpack assumptions or explore reasoning. Collaborative and synchronous formats are more expensive to facilitate, but the shared experience can produce many benefits, including a deeper sense of connection and empathy, the ability to surface and understand conflicts, and increased transparency and accountability. Formats to consider include:

- **Convening a series of workshops**, either in-person or online
- **Individual interviews** conducted by a small team
- **Using a collaborative document** to collect inputs with the ability to spark dialogue and facilitate interactions
- **Conducting a survey** to asynchronously collect inputs
- **Individual self-assessments** using the tool

Regardless of the format you choose, be sure to identify who will synthesize data into the benchmarking tool, and discuss how you plan to validate and/or share your findings.

MODELING: HOW WE WORK IS FUNDAMENTAL TO MAKING CHANGE

The guidance that follows includes details around facilitation and collaboration practices. Our reasoning: **Reimagining technical assistance starts with us.** Values and mindsets express themselves as behaviors: How we relate to each other, how we run our teams, how we operate our initiatives and organizations. So *how* we do this work is just as important as *what* we do. This benchmarking process is an opportunity to test and model these new ways of working and interacting. Put simply, actions speak louder than words.

1 / Lay the foundation

The first step is to convene a small “core team” to establish a strong foundation for your benchmarking process. Two or three people is ideal, with one person designated as the main point of contact. Responsibilities include:

- **Establishing boundaries** — Document the mindsets and principles that will serve as your boundaries and guidelines. This can include developing criteria for identifying participants and defining the purpose, scope, and anticipated outcomes of the process. Finally, budget, level of effort, and timeline are important constraints — ensure that those are secured and defined.

- **Communications** — Drafting emails and workshop descriptions, agendas, and materials (decks, boards, handouts). Communications includes engaging/responding to participant questions or concerns. A good practice is to use an online single point of reference that is always up to date. This can include a collaborative spreadsheet for your core team, and an "everything document" for participants.
- **Workshop design and facilitation** — If you've opted to use a series of workshops to facilitate the benchmarking process, establishing the purpose and expected outcomes for each meeting or workshop, along with the process you'll use to get there. For shorter meetings this can be as simple as designating a facilitator and listing agenda topics. For workshops, this means designing sessions, planning/delivering participant care, and creating a "run of show" (timeline detailing activities and transitions, along with facilitation notes and materials). If you're meeting face-to-face, this will also include logistics: securing a location, organizing refreshments, procuring workshop materials.
- **Synthesis and documentation** — Capturing, reviewing, and synthesizing workshop outputs. Filling out the benchmarking tool. Documenting significant moments and learning.

This work will illuminate misaligned incentives, behaviors, business models, and biases. People may get upset. So, as a team, it's important to decide on how you'll facilitate an inclusive, participatory process and build trust — including how you'll leverage differences (sectoral, cultural, language, etc.), manage power, and handle conflicts. Drawing on our experiences with human centered design, community organizing, and agile management, we have developed a set of practices that you may find helpful:

- **Define participation pathways** — List the different types of participants who will engage in this process, including your core team. For each, describe what makes them important, what they'll contribute, what they'll gain — along with the criteria used to select them. Then estimate the level of effort for each. This will help you model transparency, communicate your reasoning, and establish expectations.
- **Center participant experiences** — *How* we do this work is as important as what we do. When engaging others, use your participant pathways to keep in mind what your communications and convenings might feel like from their perspective, given their current responsibilities, needs, and context. Invite people into experiences that support their voice and make it easier for them to switch from their everyday tasks to contributing to this work.

- **Identify and manage power dynamics** — This work will involve bringing together people with different levels of influence, control, and risk tolerance. We manage this by (1) making power transparent by explicitly stating who will make decisions and how decisions will be made, (2) favoring activities that focus on ideas rather than the station of the person proposing an idea, for example by using "alone together" and "note and vote" formats, and (3) using mutual learning facilitation techniques. The goal is to create a space where participants state their views, explain their reasoning, and tackle undiscussable issues.

- **Establish accountability** — Using a DARCI accountability grid as part of the benchmarking process and action plan will help you clarify roles and responsibilities, define who is accountable, identify supporters, and agree on how progress will be tracked and communicated.

2 / Identify and engage participants

Depending on your benchmarking parameters, you will likely already have a defined group of stakeholders. In this step, identify who should be engaged as participants, and how you will engage them. To consider:

- Diverse backgrounds or roles
- Different perspectives
- People whose voices are typically left out

Explore ways to include new voices, considering their needs and context and what accommodations might facilitate their participation and sense of belonging.

For all, pay special attention to "participant care" — being intentional about the design of experience, providing assistance, and developing materials that contribute to a sense of psychological safety and wellbeing. (For example, designing gatherings where people can interact and contribute early on, instead of spending the first 20-30 minutes silently sitting through a text-heavy presentation.)

Once secured, this is your Benchmarking Team. Next, convene your team for a short orientation session (online is fine) to review and get feedback about the purpose, outcomes, and proposed process. No matter which format you've selected, look for opportunities to invite participation and engagement.

3 / Align on the critical shifts as a vision and select focus

Since the purpose of the benchmarking tool is to improve our progress towards the critical shifts, it's important for everyone on the team to agree on them as a guiding vision — or modify them to reach agreement and fit the context.

Using the tool, review the descriptions and characteristics of each shift. Decide if you'll assess all of them, prioritize them, or hone in on a subset. Once you've selected your focus, check in again with participants to assess alignment and decide if the characteristics and benchmarks need to be modified.

When making these decisions, check that the team has a common understanding of why they're engaged in this benchmarking exercise and how the results will be used.

At the end of this step, ensure that all participants have access to the modified tool.

4 / Convene team and conduct benchmarking

The tool functions as a discussion guide. In a workshop setting, the facilitator will help the team explore each shift in turn, considering individual characteristics in relation to the benchmarks. If you are using a non-workshop format, the tool may need to be adapted to facilitate inputs.

The critical shifts are aspirational, yet they can feel daunting. Think of the benchmarks as milestones along a spectrum. Aim to generate an honest snapshot of where you are right now, with the intention of determining how to push your work to the next level — toward the vision they describe. Explore each shift with a mutual learning mindset: with curiosity, compassion, and transparency (saying what you're thinking). As you review the characteristics and benchmarks, consider:

- How does this characteristic relate to our project/initiative?
- What are we already doing that is working well or that supports this outcome?
- Where are we struggling? Where could we do better?
- What can we build on or do differently?
- How might we push our work a bit further along the spectrum?
- Who do we need to collaborate with or influence to advance our progress?

The main purpose of the benchmarking tool is to support learning and improvement, so space is provided in the tool to capture key notes as you reflect on these questions. Once the group has discussed these elements, agree on and record a benchmark status— no, partly, fully — for each characteristic and document your reasoning and any nuance for future reference.

5 / Select areas for improvement, identify objectives, and determine actions

Use your benchmarking findings to select areas of improvement, identify objectives (your targets), and determine actions. If you have strategic planning expertise on your team, it's time to use those skills!

When you're determining actions, consider both quick wins (things you can start/stop doing immediately, or shorter-term changes) as well as longer-term plays, such as:

- Who is inside/outside our sphere of influence — and how might we engage them differently?
- Who do we need to collaborate with and engage more?
- How can learnings be shared to inform organizational/cross-organizational improvements?
- What changes can we make to the ways we develop business, raise or allocate funds, partner, design, implement, and communicate?

At this point, you may want to build in opportunities to co-create, consult, or simply test ideas with a broader set of stakeholders. Once you've decided on a set of actions, assign one person who will be accountable for each. In this case, accountability means:

- Serving as a point of contact
- Ensuring that the action is implemented and monitored — doing or delegating the work, determining who will contribute, etc.
- Ensuring that progress is evaluated and that learnings are captured, synthesized, and well communicated
- Scanning for inflection points and convening the team when there's a need to pause, reflect, and course correct

As noted at the beginning of this section, we recommend integrating your new objectives and actions into existing strategic planning, MEL, and communications processes — rather than creating an extra plan.

That said, it will be important for the team to agree on its approach to monitoring, evaluation, learning, adapting, and strategic communications. We believe that the active sharing of experiences and robust dialogue is a key part of achieving the critical shifts.

6 / Learn and adapt

In this step, you'll carry out your actions. This is where the real learning begins. It also provides those involved in the benchmarking process with an opportunity to model the types of relationships, power dynamics, and behaviors that you want to see.

Establish healthy collaboration and monitoring practices, including a regular cadence of check-ins as well as specific times to pause and reflect, capture learning, and course correct. Here are some examples:

- A weekly **heartbeat meeting** to provide a regular touchpoint to check-in, update each other on progress, discuss challenges, and agree on priorities. The overall purpose of weekly heartbeats will be to help us stay on track, coordinate, support each other, and foster collaboration.
- A monthly learning **retrospective** to take stock of what's going well, what could go better, and identify inflection points and adaptations.
- A quarterly **community call** with the people who helped you benchmark / stakeholders you consulted in this process. The purpose of the call is to report on progress and adaptations, share learning, seek their feedback, and reflect together.

Throughout this process it is also key to document any barriers or challenges that inhibited progress — this could include organizational structures or hurdles, donor requirements or funding constraints, etc. Documenting these hurdles can be used to spark dialogue with stakeholders on areas outside your sphere of influence and surface necessary changes to advance progress.

Share your learning!

This guide and the corresponding benchmarking tool are drafts. We welcome questions and feedback, and are available to support efforts to use and adapt the tool. Please contact us at reimaginingtawg@jsi.com.

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Reimagining Technical Assistance resources

Reimagining Technical Assistance website: JSI.com/RTA

Reimagining Technical Assistance – Critical shifts to enable strengthened capacity and better health outcomes (PDF, brief)

Reimagining Technical Assistance at JSI (PDF, brief)

Critical Shifts Benchmarking Tool (Microsoft Excel file)

Three of the journal articles cited above were produced as part of the initial project work funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:

- Country perspectives on improving technical assistance in the health sector
- Critical barriers to sustainable capacity strengthening in global health: a systems perspective on development assistance
- Exploring system drivers of gender inequity in development assistance for health and opportunities for action