2020

# GUIDANCE NOTES AND TEMPLATE FOR CONDUCTING AFTER ACTION REVIEWS (AAR)

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# INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning requires continuous assessment of organizational performance. The systematic application of well conducted After Action Reviews (AARs) across an organization can help drive constructive change with the active support of leadership. This tool has been developed at the request of ECOWAS' Directorate of Political Affairs (DPA); however, given that many of the work activities that can be the subject of AARs can involve personnel from across PAPS and ECOWAS, this AAR guidance can benefit the organization and the early warning and response system as a whole. Developing the practice of AARs supports the broader vision of the Commission of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (CPAPS), which is "A more coordinated, results-based and gender-sensitive early warning and early response system in ECOWAS."[1]

This tool draws on past ECOWAS experiences with AARs, namely one conducted on ECOWAS' initiatives in Mali and another on ECOWAS' support to Niger's 2016 presidential elections. It also draws liberally on ideas and templates from other organizations within and outside the field of peace and security, adapted to the context and mandate of DPA. (Please see Annex E for Sources.) These guidance notes describe key considerations and options in planning and conducting AARs.

# WHAT IS AN AAR?

An After-Action Review (AAR) is a process of group reflection used by a team to capture the lessons learned from past successes and setbacks around a particular activity with the goal of improving future performance. It is not a critique or a complaint session nor a full-scale evaluation or evaluation report. An AAR does not grade success or failure but rather provides a learning opportunity for a team to reflect on a project, activity, event, or task so that they can do better the next time. An AAR can also be employed in the course of a project to learn while doing and make course corrections.

There are many different ways to conduct AARs. They can be short, frequent group process checks, or more extended, in-depth explorations. They can be conducted in person, on the telephone, or even online. The simplicity at the heart of the tool means there is much potential to experiment with the process and find the right format for a given group and the work activity under review.

Though the format and length can vary, all AARs ask four fundamental questions:

1. ***"What was supposed to happen?"***
   This question highlights consensus or lack of consensus within the team on what were the objectives and the plan of action. How to frame the question depends on the context. Other ways to ask the same question include: *"What was our vision for success?" "What did we set out to do?"* and *"What was our purpose and plan to achieve it?"*
2. ***"What actually happened?"***
   This question highlights successes and shortfalls by examining the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. It also helps identify what happened that was not expected, whether positive or negative, and the reasons why. A variation on

[1] *This vision was articulated at the CPAPS-REWARD Leadership Meeting on February 7, 2017.*

this question is: *"What were the differences between what we set out to do and what we did?"* Follow-up questions could be: *"Why were there differences?"* and *"In retrospect, were those differences justified?"*

3. ***"What went well and why?"***
   This question surfaces things that were done, whether planned or not, that should be sustained. These should be included in the recommendations. Other ways to frame this question include: *"What did we achieve and why?"* and *"What were our successes and what accounts for them?"*
4. ***"What can be improved, and how?"***
   This question surfaces lessons learned and actionable recommendations for improvement that can be applied to future missions. Depending on the comfort level of the group, one could ask the question more directly: *"What didn't go well?"* and follow-up with *"How can we improve?"* However, a negatively framed question can put some individuals on the defensive, so the first version of the question or asking: *"What are our lessons learned?"* is preferable.

Following are some types of missions and projects where AARs might be used in the context of the work of DPA. It is also possible to have shorter AARs on specific tasks and activities within each of these categories:

- Fact-finding missions
- Electoral observation missions
- Technical assistance/support missions
- Preventive diplomacy and mediation interventions
- Conferences and workshops

## KEY ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL AAR

The following elements were articulated by PAPS staff who participated in an internal AAR held in 2016 on ECOWAS' Support to Niger's Elections and are consistent with good practice:

- ***Brings together different stakeholders to identify ways to improve***

  *This applies to both informal smaller internal AARs and formal larger scale AARs which engage entities who are both internal and external to the organization who had a role in the work activity under review. External stakeholders include other organizations who were either partners in a work activity or who were on some level coordinating, such as in an electoral observation mission.*

- ***Well-timed***

  *The sooner an AAR is conducted after a task or intervention the better as memories are still fresh and lessons can be applied immediately. If it is a field-based intervention, the AAR is usually best conducted while everyone is still deployed and before they disperse.*

- ***Well-facilitated***

  *The facilitator creates an environment that is conducive to* ***honest sharing and learning*** *without blaming.*

- ***Agreement to engage in reform***

  *While agreement to engage in learning is a minimum requirement, agreement to engage in reform or apply what is learned is desirable, as the ultimate aim of an AAR process is improvement in individual and collective performance. Sometimes expressing this* *expectation from the outset can increase motivation and commitment among the group. At other times, this can seem intimidating as change is not easy and people naturally gravitate toward preserving the status quo rather than experience the growing pains of reform. Thus, the facilitator needs to be sensitive to the needs of the group.*

- ***Anticipates what is needed next time***

  *Anticipating is part of translating the group's experience and lessons learned into a vision for improved performance and identifying recommendations. These can be on the individual and/or collective level.*

- ***Produces quality recommendations***

  *Quality recommendations from an AAR are ones that enjoy a strong degree of consensus from the group, are specific (who, what, when, where, how) and actionable (realistic).*

- ***Institutes a follow-up mechanism(s) to prioritize and track implementation of recommendations***

  *A common misstep of AARs is not having a robust implementation plan and follow-up mechanism to track implementation of recommendations. It is important to have some follow-up mechanism and for the group to agree upon it before they disperse. Depending on the number and complexity of the recommendations, a task force or working group to develop an implementation plan and track it may need to be appointed.*

## STEPS FOR PLANNING AND ORGANIZING AN AAR

Below are the main steps in planning an AAR. Key considerations along the way and options are articulated following this list:

1. Decide on the work activity under review – is it a discrete activity within a mission or project or is it focused on a mission or project as a whole? If it's a more complex AAR, get input from key stakeholders and decision-makers on what they would most like to learn from the exercise and the areas of focus.

2. Obtain necessary approvals and funds, if needed.

3. Decide on a facilitator (internal or external) and who will take notes and how the reporting on the AAR will be done.

4. Decide jointly with the facilitator on the specific learning objectives, appropriate length of the AAR given the scope of the AAR, and the type and number of participants.

5. Select a venue that is comfortable and accessible for all who are participating and free from distractions. Sometimes a neutral environment that is off-site is preferable if funds are available.

6. Plan for refreshments and snacks for any AAR over two hours, if budget allows. If not, forewarn participants to bring their own refreshments and snacks.

7. Communicate to the participants well ahead of time where and when the AAR will be held and what to expect.

8. Develop the agenda with the facilitator and distribute it to participants before the AAR.

9. Conduct the AAR.
10. Institute a follow-up or monitoring mechanism for implementation of the AAR recommendations.
11. Document the AAR and the monitoring mechanism in a report, distribute it, and make it accessible for long-term institutional knowledge (through, for example, an on-line knowledge management platform).

## DEFINING THE SCOPE OF AN AAR

*While the broad purpose of every AAR is to learn, the motivations, needs and stage of the project inform the more specific learning objectives and scope of the AAR.*

Defining the scope of the AAR – and whether it is a discrete activity or phase of an intervention that is under review or the entire intervention – depends on what is motivating the AAR. Who is calling for it and why? Why is there a need? What are you hoping to understand or learn through the AAR? Are there systemic problems in how certain activities, tasks or missions are conducted that need to be addressed? In other words, do the same issues keep surfacing? Or did something unexpected happen (good or bad) that needs a closer look? Is a follow-up mission or activity anticipated which could benefit from identifying lessons learned from the first? Are there specific activities or phases in the initiative which were considered particularly successful or challenging and therefore there is a need to examine one particular phase (such as preparation for a mission) and learn from those successes and challenges so they can inform future preparatory phases of missions? Were the types of challenges more logistical in nature or technical or did they have to do with communication, coordination and collaboration between various entities? Is the purpose of the AAR to learn while doing and make course corrections during a mission? For example, during a mediation initiative, the team may have held a multi-stakeholder dialogue as one key activity in a series. An AAR soon after the dialogue may be a wise step before moving to the next activity or phase.

## IDENTIFYING FUNDING SOURCES

Longer more complex AARs that involve external stakeholders are likely to need more time, external facilitation and/or coordination expertise and some funds, whereas internal AARs are much more easily organized. Funding sources and strategies include:

- **Project funds**. At the proposal stage of a DPA initiative that is either funded internally or externally, including an AAR as an activity in the proposal can strengthen the monitoring and evaluation piece of the initiative and make the overall proposal stronger. While the goal of an AAR is not to evaluate a project, the focus on lessons learned can be useful to monitoring and evaluation efforts, and donors are increasingly interested in documenting lessons learned. While some information in AARs can be sensitive and for internal use only, there are other broader lessons that can be valuable and are appropriate to share. Consideration to political and other sensitivities should inform the AAR report. Some organizers may opt for two versions of the AAR report – one for internal use and one for a broader audience.

- **Funds from other projects with a knowledge management and/or learning component**. If an AAR aligns well with the goal of another project, it may be possible to convince the funders and directors of other projects to fund the AAR. For example, in the case of the AAR on ECOWAS' Support to Niger's elections, USAID funded it and facilitated it as the activity aligned with the REWARD project's technical assistance mandate.

- **Cost-sharing**. If the AAR is engaging other partner organizations who are interested in learning from the joint initiative, it may be possible to reduce costs by sharing them and by using a venue or the facilitation expertise of another organization.
- **Piggy-backing**. As noted earlier, AARs are best conducted soon after an activity or mission and before everyone has dispersed and while memories are still fresh. Travel costs for any external partners can be greatly minimized if the AAR occurs while everyone is still deployed. Piggy-backing on the mission/activity and extending the deployment by a couple of days may be the most economical option in the long run.

While funds can be very useful, lack of funds need not be considered an unsurmountable obstacle to learning from an intervention. There are always creative solutions. For example, in the face of budget constraints, AARs can be structured in such a way as to get input from internal stakeholders through an in-person session and input from external stakeholders (who may be in another country) via phone or Skype interviews or through a focus group discussion facilitated on-line or over Skype. Outcomes of the remote interviews can be fed into the live internal AAR and into the AAR report. The main point is to ensure that information and perspectives that are valuable to the learning process are integrated in some fashion. Scheduling difficulties can be eased by structuring the AAR in several phases where different stakeholder groups are convened separately. If there is no possibility of facilitating an exchange between stakeholder groups, then a strong analysis of the perspectives uncovered in the separate meetings can be included in the AAR report.

## SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

Ideally, everyone who had a role in a given initiative would be included in the AAR because in principle virtually all could benefit from the learning process and because virtually everyone could contribute something of value, but there are a number of very practical reasons to limit the number of participants. The first reason is to safeguard the quality of group reflection which is the essence of any AAR. The more people in the room, the more superficial the analysis is likely to be if everyone is expected to participate.

The second reason to limit the number of participants is time limitations. More people participating means less time to delve deeper into content. Another reason to limit participation is that in order for an AAR to fulfill its intended purpose of fostering learning, it needs to be a "safe space" where everyone feels comfortable to speak honestly, thus groups or individuals who might inhibit honest sharing and the learning process should not be included. However, if the individual or group in question may have a valuable perspective to bring, they can be engaged separately through individual meetings.

So, given these constraints, who should participate in an AAR? Organizers first need to carefully consider the specific learning objectives and scope of the AAR and then ask themselves questions along the following lines to help them prioritize the selection of participants:

-  ***Who were the key groups involved in planning, supporting, and carrying out the activity under review?*** Representation from each key group will generally yield a more complete answer to the AAR questions from multiple perspectives.
-  ***Who would likely have critical knowledge or a valuable perspective on the subject?***
-  ***Who has a particular stake in learning from the activity?*** Individuals who are likely to have a key role in similar missions or activities in the future generally fall into this category.
-  ***Who will be instrumental in implementing or supporting the implementation of key recommendations from the AAR?*** While decision-makers may not have the time to be present for the entire AAR nor should they necessarily be present, their engagement at key junctures in the process, such as the opening, can signal their support and help strengthen implementation.

## GUIDELINES FOR GROUP SIZE AND LENGTH ACCORDING TO TYPE OF AAR

The following are only guidelines and not hard and fast rules for planning AARs; however, organizers should keep in mind that since AARs depend on active participation of all present, adequate time should be budgeted to avoid participants leaving frustrated for not having had an opportunity to share their perspective and to avoid overly superficial analysis and recommendations that are not well thought out.

| **Type of AAR** | **Group Size** | **Length** |
|---|---|---|
| ***Informal small scale***<br>Best suited for discrete activities within a larger project or mission. For example, an AAR with the facilitators/trainers and organizers directly following the first day of a 3-day workshop or conference. Purpose is to learn while doing and make course corrections. This type of AAR can also be called a "process check." | 2-7 | 45 minutes for 2 people; add approximately 15 minutes for each additional person up to 7 |
| ***Formal medium scale***<br>Best suited for medium scale projects/interventions such as a fact-finding mission or a single electoral observation mission.<br>Purpose is to capture lessons learned and improve future performance. Usually focuses on stakeholders internal to the organization but can also include outside perspectives if useful. | 8-15 | 4 – 6 hours |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Formal large scale***<br>Best suited for longer-term, complex interventions/projects such as a mediation initiative or a long-term observation mission.<br>Purpose is to capture lessons learned and improve future performance. Usually includes a combination of stakeholders that are internal and external to the organization. | 16-30 | 2-3 Days |

Groups larger than thirty for an AAR are not generally recommended as the quality of the discussion and learning tend to suffer; however, there are a number of ways to get input from a larger number of stakeholders. As was the case in the AAR of ECOWAS' intervention in Mali, for example, the facilitator(s) can meet with certain stakeholder groups or individuals that would have a valuable perspective before the AAR is convened. Consideration should be given to the most appropriate way to relay that perspective to the participants of the AAR. It might be through a representative of the group who would come either for a portion of or the entire AAR. Or a person that has been invited to the AAR could be designated to attend the pre-AAR meeting and relay the information to the larger group.

## ROLE, ATTRIBUTES AND SELECTION OF THE FACILITATOR

During the planning stages of the AAR, the role of the facilitator is to work with the conveners/organizers to:

- Determine the scope, learning objectives, and selection of participants
- Design an appropriate structure and methodology (related to the above)
- Craft an agenda

Once the AAR participants have been convened, the key functions of the facilitator are to:

- Create an environment that is conducive to honest sharing, learning, and the expression of new ideas and original thinking.
- Encourage participation by all
- Keep the group on task and on time
- Lead the group in planning the way forward, including recommendations, reporting, and follow-up mechanisms.

The most important attributes of a facilitator are:

- Accepted and trusted in this role by <u>all</u> participants
- Open-minded
- Behaves non-judgmentally and impartially (doesn't take sides)
- Uses active listening skills (knows how to reframe; summarize; reflect back)
- Asks open-ended questions and knows when and how to probe deeper
- Sensitive to the needs of the group
- Flexible
- Effectively manages group dynamics and any tensions that surface
- Ideally, someone who is familiar with the particularities of the ECOWAS context

### *When to use an internal vs. external facilitator?*

Deciding whether to use a facilitator who is internal or external to the organization depends on a variety of factors. The first and foremost deciding factor is whether the organization has someone internally with both the requisite skills, qualities and the time to carry out the aforementioned responsibilities. If the AAR is an informal half day activity, it may be relatively easy to find an internal facilitator. The more people are involved in an AAR, the more complex the work activity under review, and/or the more tensions or distrust are a part of group dynamics, the more time, experience, and facilitation skills are needed.

Following are some pros and cons of using an internal (whether staff or supervisor) vs. external facilitator:

| Advantages of an Internal Facilitator | Disadvantages an Internal Facilitator |
|---|---|
| - Strong knowledge of the context<br>- More cost effective and sustainable (not dependent on outside funds)<br>- Participants have easier and longer-term access to him/her which can help in the implementation of AAR recommendations. | - Biases may be more pronounced; more difficulty in exercising impartiality<br>- May take them away from other responsibilities and increase time pressures<br>- Depending on the rank of the person in the organization, some people of higher rank may or may not want to participate or accept him/her in that role. |
| **Advantages of an External Facilitator** | **Disadvantages of an External Facilitator** |
| - Likely more specialized skills and experience from different contexts to bring to bear.<br>- Perceived as or is more impartial.<br>- May have more credibility with some AAR participants.<br>- Staff are not diverted from other duties.<br>- Opportunity for AAR organizers and participants to learn facilitation techniques from a professional facilitator. | - Less or no knowledge of the ECOWAS context<br>- Less cost-effective and sustainable.<br>- No ongoing presence to help support and monitor implementation of AAR recommendations and internalization of lessons learned, unless the scope includes this type of follow-up. |

An internal facilitator should be used when there is someone internal to the organization who has the time and sufficient level of experience and skills for the type of AAR to be undertaken, and when this person will be trusted and accepted in the role of facilitator by the people participating in the AAR. If this expertise does not exist within an organization, training staff in facilitation skills may be a worthwhile long-term investment as facilitation skills can be used for a range of purposes within an organization such as ECOWAS, including facilitating dialogue with various groups in the context of DPA's missions.

An external facilitator should be used when the above conditions do not exist and when there are resources to hire an external facilitator. In the case of AARs involving multiple organizations who collaborated on an initiative, finding a facilitator who is external to all the organizations may be necessary to help ensure impartiality. Where to find an external facilitator? One way is to ask colleagues in and outside the organization for recommendations. Practitioners with strong backgrounds in participatory group processes such as training, organizational development, strategic planning, mediation, and facilitated dialogue often have the facilitation skills needed to design and conduct more complex AARs.

### *Should a supervisor or someone of high rank facilitate an AAR?*

Careful consideration should be given as to when it is appropriate to have a supervisor or manager present and/or facilitating. A supervisor may not be the best choice to facilitate (or in some cases be present during) an AAR, as some participants may be less likely to communicate openly. If a supervisor is present, they must give a clear signal to the group that the purpose of the AAR is learning and not blaming and do his or her part to model and foster self-reflection and open communication. If the supervisor or authority figure is someone who the entire group accepts and respects in the role of facilitator, the advantages are that the group may take the exercise more seriously. Accountability for implementing recommendations may increase if the supervisor makes this expectation clear and if he/she actively monitors implementation. The disadvantages are that group members may filter their opinions and limit their comments to things they know the supervisor is likely to agree with, thus inhibiting healthy debate. Another disadvantage is that the mere presence of a decision-maker may impede the quality and quantity of analysis and deliberation and there may be more of a tendency to jump prematurely to solutions and decisions. This runs counter to the core purpose of an AAR which is to facilitate learning through open and frank dialogue and reach well thought out recommendations.

Another consideration regarding using a supervisor in the role of a facilitator is the precedent it sets institutionally. If the supervisor begins to conduct AARs, the role of "facilitator" in the organization will come to be seen as someone who has authority rather than someone with the requisite skills and qualities and experience to facilitate organizational learning. While a supervisor may have these skills and qualities, it is not a given. So, when there is a change in management, there is a risk that the AARs will either stop or deteriorate in quality if the incoming manager is not well suited to the role.

Since the role of the facilitator is not to be a decision-maker, or tell others what to do, but only to guide a learning process, rank should not be a factor. Nevertheless, until staff become accustomed to AARs that are conducted by their colleagues, rank could potentially present a stumbling block in a hierarchical organization.

It should be emphasized that group members' concerns about a facilitator, either because they are perceived as biased or because of a difference in rank, can be overcome. If the facilitator clearly explains his/her role (along the lines described above) and effectively establishes credibility with the group through demonstrating skill early on in the exercise, reticent group members' doubts can be allayed. Having a supervisor introduce the AAR session and the facilitator and, in essence, endorse the facilitator's competence and experience can also help increase the confidence of the group and mitigate concerns.

## CRAFTING AN AGENDA

The organizers and facilitator must decide what structure makes sense based on the specific AAR objectives and what they hope to learn. The agenda can be more or less formal depending on the type of AAR and the group participating. For example, the objective of an internal AAR on a fact-finding mission might be:

**Objective**: This AAR brings together all ECOWAS staff who participated in the fact-finding mission to country X to identify lessons learned and recommendations to improve future fact-finding missions.

Regardless of the type of AAR, every AAR agenda has the same basic structure with the following key guiding questions tailored to the context:

| **Basic Structure for an AAR** |
|---|
| - Welcome, context for this review, and objective(s)<br>- Role of the facilitator, ground rules for participation / communication agreements<br>- What was intended?<br>- What actually happened?<br>- What went well, and why?<br>- What can be improved, and how?<br>- The way ahead: closing comments, preparation for the report, and preliminary plan (who, what, when, where, how) for fleshing out and implementing any recommendations or lessons learned, or making "course corrections" in the case of an AAR conducted during an ongoing initiative. |

The wording of the questions should be adapted to the context and fit with the institutional culture, such as in the following example:

| **Basic AAR Agenda adapted to a Fact-finding Mission in the ECOWAS Context** |
|---|
| - Welcome remarks, context for this review, and objectives / what we hope to learn<br>- Role of the facilitator and communication agreements<br>- Presentation of the Fact-finding Mission to Country X (objectives and key phases or activities)<br>- Discussion and analysis of lessons learned<br>- Best practices to carry forward in future fact-finding missions<br>- Areas for improvement<br>- The way forward and next steps |

## FACILITATION AND DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

### *Structuring the discussion according to phases, events, or themes*

One of the strengths of the AAR format is its flexibility. The facilitator can use a chronological format to structure the discussion, or the discussion can be organized around key events/activities, themes, or issues[2]. In the fact-finding mission example above, some of the key phases might include:

- Deciding to undertake a fact-finding mission
- Planning the mission
- Executing the mission
- Follow-up to the mission and deciding on next steps

Key activities within a fact-finding mission around which to structure the AAR could include:

- Planning
- Meetings with various stakeholder groups
- Data collection, analysis and reporting
- Communications
- Logistics (travel to and within the country) and security

Process items (logistics, management, administration, and support) can either be discussed separately or woven into the substantive discussion.

No matter which of the above techniques is chosen, the discussion should identify: strengths and successes; weaknesses and areas for improvement; and concrete, actionable recommendations. The facilitator then uses open-ended questions to spark discussion and reflection.

### *Open- vs. close-ended questions*

Open-ended questions begin with "what" or "how" and are preferable for generating discussion. Questions that begin with "why" are also open-ended, but should be used sparingly as they can put some people on the defensive; *e.g.*, "Why did you did you do that?" is not as effective as "What were the reasons behind your decision?" Close-ended questions can only be answered with yes or no, so are not useful for generating discussion. For example: "Do you agree with what Miss X said?" would be better phrased with an open-ended question: "What do you think about what Miss X said?" Close-ended questions are best used to confirm something; e.g., "So, you think the mission was mostly successful. Did I understand you, correctly?"

Taking the phase structure referred to above, open-ended guiding questions for the discussion the facilitator might use to extract lessons learned on the performance of each phase include:

[2] For an example of an internal AAR agenda organized round key stages/events, please see Annex C.

- **Deciding to undertake a fact-finding mission**
    - *What was the decision-making process to undertake the mission?*
    - *What were the strengths of the decision-making process?*
    - *What could have been improved?*
- **Preparing for the mission**
    - *What was the process (key activities and tasks) to prepare for the mission?*
    - *What went well in the preparation process?*
    - *How could the preparation have been better?*
- **Executing the mission**
    - *What was the plan – the goals, objectives, and key activities designed to achieve the mission?*
    - *What actually happened? How did it deviate from the plan and why?*

    Note: the facilitator might then choose to break down each activity and ask the following questions for each:
    - *What went well and why?*
    - *What were the challenges?*
    - *What should be done differently the next time?*
- **Follow-up to the mission and deciding on next steps**
    - *What were the plans for follow-up to the mission and the next steps?*
    - *What actually happened and didn't happen and the reasons?*
    - *What are our lessons learned in terms of follow-up? What can be done better next time?*

### *Communication agreements / ground rules for the AAR*

As mentioned earlier, the facilitator is responsible for creating the right climate. An essential tool for doing this is establishing Communication Agreements or Ground Rules for participation at the beginning of the AAR session and reinforcing them throughout the AAR. Following are the ones PAPS staff identified in the internal AAR on ECOWAS' Support to Niger's 2016 Elections.

**Sample Communication Agreements for AARs**

- *Chatham House Rules – No attribution of what is said*
- *Cell phone and email communication only during breaks*
- *Keep it short and simple (KISS)*
- *Respect for what others have to say*
- *Equal participation (all are here to learn regardless of rank)*
- *It was also agreed that a focal point in each directorate who participated in the AAR would review the AAR report for any sensitivities prior to finalization and distribution to others within and outside ECOWAS.*

It is a valuable exercise to elicit communication agreements from a given group as groups can vary in terms of what they think is important to include. It is also more likely that the rules will be respected if they are elicited rather than imposed. It is also helpful for the facilitator to suggest additional guidelines that are important to the success of the AAR that participants frequently overlook, either because they lack experience with AARs or because of cultural assumptions. For example, one important AAR guideline that runs counter to many organizational cultures is the notion that everyone participates equally regardless of rank. For an AAR to fulfill its intended purpose of fostering learning by drawing on the experiences and perspectives of all present, encouraging equal participation is a must.

### *Other key skills and techniques*

The AAR facilitator must remember to:

- Use open-ended questions (ones that begin with "what" or "how")
- Be specific and avoid generalizations
- Be thorough, covering all relevant aspects of the program or event
- Manage time
- Focus on issues related to the mission, project, or activity purpose or objective
- Probe differences of opinion in a way that helps clarify what happened or what could be improved
- Encourage new ideas, and guide participants toward identifying corrective actions and solutions to address areas of weakness
- Ensure no one person(s) are dominating the discussion, and gently draw out quieter participants.
- Summarize often
- Introduce the way ahead

### *Pairs and small group work*

While most of the AAR should be spent in plenary, occasionally breaking up the group into pairs or small groups can help build relationships, promote collaboration, liven up the discussion, and draw out participants who are less comfortable speaking in a large group. It can also save time. For example, having pairs or small groups work on formulating actionable recommendations for each of the issues identified by the whole group and then sharing them with the larger group for discussion can be more efficient than the whole group working on each recommendation.

### *Closing the AAR*

To close the AAR session, the facilitator should review and summarize key points identified during the discussion. The session should end on a positive note, linking observations to recommendations for future improvement. The program, activity, or task leader can offer concluding remarks, reinforce plans and an outline for the AAR report, and introduce the way ahead. In the case of longer AARs, a working group will likely need to be designated to flesh out recommendations and institute a mechanism to put in place recommendations and action plans to sustain the successes and to improve upon the shortfalls.

## DOCUMENTING THE AAR AND FOLLOWING-UP ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The main reasons to document the outcomes of an AAR are to preserve institutional memory, reinforce the lessons learned so they can be applied to future missions, and to lay the ground for implementing recommendations. A template for an AAR report can be found in Annex D.

Implementing recommendations can be a challenge for a variety of reasons, including the quality of recommendations, an unclear or weak implementation plan, insufficient human or financial resources, lack of incentives or motivation, other work pressures, and lack of accountability. The following strategies can increase the likelihood of AAR recommendations being implemented:

- **Get buy-in and input into the AAR process from key stakeholders and decision-makers in the planning stages.** For example, ask them what they would most like to learn from the process (whether by participating or reading the AAR report or getting a briefing). Ask them if they would be willing to attend a briefing (or virtual discussion if the person is in another country) on the outcomes of the AAR and discuss the recommendations. The more people are engaged in identifying the solutions, the more ownership they will feel and the more they are likely to support their implementation.
- **Develop actionable recommendations.** Actionable recommendations are realistic (achievable) and specific; they indicate at a minimum what the issue the recommendation is seeking to address is, what the recommendation is, and how it can be implemented (who, what, when, where, and any resources needed).

**Example of an Actionable Recommendation**

Issue: The delegation arrived on the ground and the president refused to meet with the delegation, so the trip wasted time and resources and relations were further strained.

Recommendation: The leader of future delegations [*who*] should ensure that the support team has adequately laid the ground on a diplomatic and operational level for the delegation to be received prior to giving final approval to make the necessary expenditures (e.g.; purchasing plane fares) [*what*]. Develop a trip preparation check-list with the team and monitor progress [*how*] at weekly meetings in the DPA Operations Room [*when and where*].

It should be emphasized that during the AAR, it is important to let the group creatively brainstorm recommendations without worrying about whether they are actionable or not at the outset. It is better to get all ideas out on the table before analyzing their merits and feasibility. Remember to include things that were successful and should be sustained in the future. If there is time, people can work in small groups or pairs to select realistic ones and articulate the specifics to make them actionable. If there isn't sufficient time, the facilitator or a committee can be designated to work on the recommendations and agree on a date to reconvene to discuss the draft recommendations and suggested prioritization. Once again, meeting in person can create a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to supporting reforms.

- **Categorize and prioritize recommendations and develop an implementation plan.** Once the designated working group has agreed on a draft list of recommendations they must turn to the task of categorizing them and prioritizing them. Useful ways to categorize and prioritize include:

    - Short, medium and long-term recommendations
    - Recommendations that are cost-free and relatively simple to implement (such as the example of the checklist above)
    - Recommendations that will make the biggest positive difference regardless of cost (and suggest where to find funds).

Implementation of actionable recommendations, to the extent resources allow, is likely to have a strong positive effect on performance and staff morale and reinforce a culture of learning. Conversely, lack of implementation can result in weakening of group morale and future commitment to genuinely engage in reform as well as in future AARs. Therefore, it’s important to ensure there is an implementation plan for any actionable recommendations. This includes identifying tasks which require senior leadership decisions and determining a follow-up schedule and a point of contact for each follow-up action. The implementation plan should either be included in the AAR report (if the facilitator and writer of the report is still involved in developing the implementation plan) or be developed separately.

An AAR process may reveal a need to change established procedures and/or SOPs. If so, the director and heads of division will need to make revisions and ensure they are communicated to all appropriate staff and any relevant partners external to the organization. Persistence, patience, a supportive attitude and a spirit of problem-solving should continue throughout the process of implementing recommendations, recognizing that overcoming obstacles and resistance is a normal part of any reform process.

# ANNEX A

**Sample Basic Agenda for an Internal AAR**
**ECOWAS Fact-finding Mission**

Note: *This agenda can be adapted for more specific and/or more formal AARs*. For more detail on crafting an agenda, please see p. 10.

- Welcome remarks, context for this review, and objectives / what we hope to learn
- Role of the facilitator and communication agreements
- Presentation of the Fact-finding Mission to Country X (objectives and key phases or activities)
- Discussion and analysis of lessons learned
- Best practices to carry forward in future fact-finding missions
- Areas for improvement
- The way forward and next steps

# ANNEX B

## Process Template for Facilitating an AAR

1. **Create the right climate**. Welcome everyone and set a tone of open communication and commitment to learning. Everyone should participate in an atmosphere free from the concept of seniority or rank. AARs are learning events rather than critiques. Elicit Communication Agreements or Ground Rules. Suggest additions, if needed. Explain the role of the facilitator, which is to guide the discussion but not contribute his/or her opinions or show partiality for any one perspective or recommendation.

2. **Ask, "what did we intend to happen?"** The facilitator should start by dividing the event into either discrete activities or phases, each of which had (or should have had) an identifiable objective and plan of action. The discussion begins with the first activity: 'What was supposed to happen?'

3. **Ask, "what actually occurred?"** This means the team must understand and agree on the facts about what happened. Remember, though, that the aim is to identify a problem not a culprit.

4. **Compare the plan with reality**. The real learning begins as the team or teams compares the plan to what actually happened in reality and determines: "Why were there differences?" and, "What did we learn"? Identify and discuss successes, shortfalls, and any deviations from or adaptations to the plan. In the case of deviations and adaptations, ask: "What were the reasons? In retrospect, was it the right decision?"

5. **Record the key points**. Recording the key elements of an AAR clarifies what happened and compares it to what was supposed to happen. It facilitates sharing of learning experiences within the team and provides the basis for a broader learning program in the organization.

6. **Put in place recommendations and actions plans to sustain the successes and to improve upon the shortfalls**.

## ANNEX C

**<u>Example of an Internal AAR Agenda Organized by Key Stages/Events</u>**

**After Action Review of ECOWAS Support to Democratic Elections in Niger**

**June 6, 2016, DPA Operations Room, Abuja, Nigeria**

*8:30* ***Welcome, introductions, objectives and overview of AAR exercise***

- What makes an AAR successful?
- Ground rules for participation

*9:15* ***Mapping the context, impetus and key stages/events of the missions to Niger***

- Remarks by Mr. Oke. What was the context in Niger and why did it seem important for ECOWAS to be involved?
- Small group mapping exercise to set the stage for exploring the links between early warning and response and reflecting on key junctures and decisions

*10:30* ***Defining success***

- Plenary discussion: What was the vision of success at each stage of the process?

*10:45* *Tea break*

*11:00* ***Analyzing performance***

- Reflection exercise and small group discussion
- Plenary debrief

*12:00* ***Identifying lessons learned***

- What are some lessons learned that should inform future missions?
- What are some strategies for an integrated approach to analysis and response?
- What SOPs should be formulated?

*12:45* ***Conclusion***

# ANNEX D

## AAR Report Template

**Name of activity/project:**

**AAR date, time, and location:**

**AAR rationale, scope, objectives:**
If the scope of the AAR covers only part of a project or initiative (such as an activity within a project), this should be indicated. A short description of the rationale and specific objectives of the AAR should also follow. An agenda can be included as an Annex, if useful.

**Project/Activity Background**:
Background to the activity or project under review. This section could provide a brief history of the project or event and facts and figures.

**Objectives of the mission /project/activity:**
Indicate what the intended or stated objective of the mission, project or activity. If there is no consensus among the participants about the exact objective, this should be noted here.

**Achievements/results of the mission/project/activity:**
Summarize the main achievements and results of the activity/project. Include achievements that led towards meeting the objective, as well as other unintended results (positive or negative).

**Process (mapping and/or methodology):**
Help colleagues avoid having to "reinvent the wheel" by summarizing the methodology and tools used by the team in the course of the project. The purpose of this section is to provide an account of how the activity was carried out and using what tools in order to facilitate replication in another mission. Useful project documents such as checklists, staffing tables, terms of reference, planning documents, assessment sheets, etc., should be attached as annexes. If possible, a process map should be included to describe the sequence of actions leading to the final result. Existing guidance on the process should be referred to, and conformity or divergence between how the process was conducted and official guidance or established SOPs should be noted and explained.

**Good/best practice/what worked well:**
Note activities or approaches that worked well. Specifically, note approaches/activities that in the group's opinion, could or should be adopted or repeated by others conducting a similar exercise in the future.

**Lessons learned/what did not work well or could be improved:**
Note activities or approaches that proved to be problematic. Specifically, note activities or approaches that should be avoided by others conducting similar exercises in the future.

**Quotes from the AAR:**
Note memorable and highly descriptive quotes from the AARs. Select the quotes on the basis of how representative they are. They should succinctly describe the learning that occurred in the AAR.

**Specific actionable recommendations:**

*i. Mission-level (if applicable)*

Provide recommendations on how best to execute the event/project under review. Recommendations should be action oriented. For example, when the "what did not work well" section above includes "We had no clue what was expected of us," the recommendation could be "the project lead should define and distribute the objectives of the tasks well in advance of the project."

*ii. DPA/PAPS/Commission-wide (if applicable)*

Include actions that should either be repeated or avoided in a similar event or project in other missions or at DPA/PAPS, paying particular attention to how things should be done differently to improve the overall event/project. Most recommendations will apply to DPA and/or PAPS as a whole. If applicable, recommendations that could be applied Commission-wide should also be listed. All recommendations should be directly correlated to address a specific issue. Identify areas where policy development could provide a solution.

**Keywords associated with this AAR *(optional):***
Identify some keywords to be associated with this AAR for search purposes. This is especially useful when the report is housed in a knowledge management platform.

**AAR annexes and background documents *(optional):***
List relevant background documents, such as a project proposal, project management documents, or any available guidance relevant to the activity or project.

**Participants in the AAR:**
List the participants in the AAR, including the facilitator and note taker.

**Contacts:**
List a contact person (or people) for follow-up questions; include names, titles, phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

# SOURCES

African Union Peace and Security Department Standard Operating Procedures for Mediation Support (January 2012). http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/au-mediation-sops.pdf

After-Action Review Technical Guidance (USAID February 2006)
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADF360.pdf

ECOWAS/CEDEAO Draft Report of the Mali After-Action Review ECOWAS Initiatives and Responses to the Multidimensional Crises in Mali: November 2013- February 2014.

Knowledge Sharing Toolkit
http://www.kstoolkit.org/After+Action+Review

Report of After Action Review on ECOWAS' Support to Niger's 2016 Presidential Elections (internal PAPS AAR facilitated by REWARD technical team, available by request to DPA).