

LAB EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING PLAN

EVIDENCE BRIEF

SUMMER 2019 UPDATE



PHOTO: AZIM KHAN RONNIE

QUESTION 2

How can the Lab/ STIP best support Agency programming to adapt within shifting environments?



**U.S. GLOBAL
DEVELOPMENT
LAB**

This Evidence Brief was produced as part of a series of outputs from the U.S. Global Development Lab's Evaluation, Research, and Learning (ERL) Plan - a utilization-focused learning agenda supporting evidence-informed decision making in Lab operations and science, technology, innovation, and partnerships (STIP) programming. A process and set of products, the ERL Plan facilitated Lab learning and adaptation around four bureau-wide areas of inquiry: uptake of products, services, and approaches; adaptive management tools and practices; support to awardees and partners; and sustainability of results.

Insights from the ERL Plan are shared here as a record of emerging opportunities for evidence-based adaptation that could be acted on by USAID and other development actors. This work also contributes to the evidence base for the Agency-wide Self-Reliance Learning Agenda - an effort to support USAID as it reorients its strategies, partnership models, and program practices to achieve greater development outcomes and foster self-reliance with host country governments and our partners.

INTRODUCTION

Development programming operates in complex and emergent environments. Historically, development programming has been driven by relatively rigid results frameworks and logic chains that don't account for this complexity and emergence. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to adapt; by the end of a program, we may find that it has "failed" because the context has shifted so much as to make the intervention ineffective or even irrelevant.

Complexity is only increasing, especially in certain areas and sectors such as non-permissive environments (NPEs) and in countering violent extremism (CVE) programming. We should also expect that we will increasingly be doing development work in these kinds of environments, as growth in stable countries means that the remaining low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) will mainly be fragile and conflict-affected states prone to unpredictable and emergent conditions.

Furthermore, responsible use of taxpayer dollars requires adaptation, especially in shrinking public donor budget environments. Adaptation may be perceived as expensive, but how much money do we spend on interventions that don't work, only to find out too late to change them? We must adapt to changes in context in order to successfully achieve desired outcomes in the most responsible, efficient, and effective way possible.

There is no argument among development donors and other actors that managing development programs and interventions to be responsive to new information or

changing conditions is preferable. While much has been written about the why of managing development programs adaptively, there is less agreement on the "what" and the "how."

USAID has recognized the need to fill this gap and has begun piloting a number of approaches that can facilitate adaptive management (AM) throughout its Program Cycle. Those approaches can be roughly categorized into the following emergent framework:

- **AM Approaches for Overcoming Information Barriers** (e.g., not having the right information at the right time)
- **AM Approaches for Overcoming Structural/Process Barriers** (e.g., our own procurement policies and contract management practices)
- **AM Approaches for Overcoming Internal and External Value Barriers** (e.g., our own organizational culture and tolerance for risk, the organizational culture of our partners, or misalignment of our values to those of the beneficiaries)

The brief is intended to inform and support a discussion that will surface additional findings and conclusions related to the question. It summarizes:

- *What is the information?*
How can the USAID US Global Development Lab (the Lab) and Science, Technology, Innovation, and Partnership (STIP) best support Agency programming to adapt within shifting environments?

- *So what?*
What does this mean for us (in the Lab/at USAID/as development practitioners more broadly)?
- *Now what?*
Given this information, what should we do going forward, particularly in light of Agency redesign?

This priority question was identified by the Lab's Evaluation and Impact Assessment Office (EIA) as a theme across the Lab that emerged from several Center-level ERL questions and activities. Some ERL activities have already been completed, and their findings and conclusions are taken as inputs to this analysis. Others are still ongoing, in which case, preliminary findings from those activities are used where available and will be updated as new information becomes available.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE LAB

Adaptive management (AM) is not new to the Lab. In fact, the Lab has served as incubator and a thought leader with other Agency and external partners for many AM approaches, including real-time data for adaptive management (RTD4AM); developmental evaluation (DE); rapid feedback monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (RF-MERL); adaptive procurement; and collaboration, learning, and adapting (CLA), to name a few. The Lab's orientation toward experimentation has resulted in a robust evidence base for some approaches and ongoing testing of many others.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND CAPACITY

Supporting other parts of the agency on knowing where to begin and promoting broader use of AM approaches

FINDINGS

- There has been a proliferation of AM approaches with varying degrees of use cases and lessons learned (emerging framework from this ERL Question identifies at least 15 AM approaches that are currently in use or under exploration at USAID—more likely exist).
- Approaches with documented use cases include: Real-time data for adaptive management (RTD4AM); developmental evaluation (DE); rapid feedback MERL (RF-MERL); adaptive procurement; collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA); and thinking and working politically (TWP)
- Approaches that require more evidence include: sentinel indicators, stakeholder feedback, process monitoring of impact (PMI), scenario planning, futures analysis, geospatial analysis, systems analysis, human-centered design, and third-party monitoring (TPM)
- Use cases currently available from within and outside USAID are promising, but so far, the evidence is slim regarding broader uptake across the Agency despite consensus on the value of AM and expressed desire to use AM as a matter of course.
- Achieving uptake of new approaches, like AM, requires a concerted and ongoing engagement between technical experts in the approach and OUs that have 1) interest, 2) fit/alignment, and 3) sufficient resources to work alongside the technical experts. ([Lab Sustained Uptake DE](#))

CONCLUSIONS

It is not always clear which AM approach is the right fit for a particular program, or whether the current program team has the right skills to implement the AM approach and use the AM data appropriately.

For emerging technical approaches (like AM), a critical mass of technical experts in the approach who are

1) internal to USAID, 2) can be deployed to support assessments and custom fit the approach to the OUs needs, and 3) are available for continued in-depth engagement during implementation is crucial to use and sustainable uptake of the approach. ([Lab Sustained Uptake DE](#))

Training and policy guidance alone are insufficient for uptake of new approaches. AM includes many “new approaches.” Successful uptake requires thorough assessment of needs and fit by an experienced technical expert, followed by extensive TA and hand-holding, concurrent capacity building of Mission and local staff to create ownership and foster champions, and planning for a sustainable exit that includes ownership of the approach by FSNs so the technical experts can move on to other engagements without the project in their absence. The prevailing model of providing short trainings that are open to anyone interested, and/or brief TDYs for technical support from Washington do meet some needs, but not for sustained uptake. ([Lab Sustained Uptake DE](#))

An effective uptake strategy within USAID must include:

- Hands-on involvement of USAID HQ staff with technical expertise;
- Alignment with a Missions CDCS, high-level priorities, and Office-level interests;
- Initiation of Mission engagement through pre-existing relationships; and
- Utilization of assessments that identify market gaps and opportunities to refine service offerings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In September 2018, the Lab prioritized and committed to action against one recommendation informed by the evidence base on AM knowledge, skills, and capacity:



Create a “decision tool” to help USAID Staff identify best fit AM approach for their needs.

The Lab deferred action against one recommendation informed by the evidence base on designing and implementing for sustained results, and flagged two for future action by the proposed DDI and PRP bureaus:



Conduct **further research into use cases for a subset of AM approaches** to better document evidence on sentinel indicators, stakeholder feedback, process monitoring of impact (PMI), scenario planning, futures analysis, geospatial analysis, systems analysis, human-centered design, and third-party monitoring (TPM).



Create **staffing patterns that facilitate longer-term in-depth TA on the use of AM approaches** for OUs that are trying AM approaches for the first time. Trainings are a necessary but not sufficient factor for accelerating use of emerging approaches like AM.



Follow **Mission Engagement Playbook** and **Proven Models for Uptake** in order to **maximize potential for OUs to successfully and sustainably implement AM approaches**. This likely means: 1) resourcing both staff and funds in order to provide longer term “consultant”-like engagements with OUs, and 2) being selective about which OUs to engage (quality over quantity).

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT: FLEXIBLE PROCUREMENT MECHANISMS

FINDINGS

- Flexible donor procurement, contracting, and reporting processes are critical for learning and flexible programming. Contractual demands motivate reporting that favors progress updates against project logical frameworks, milestones, and indicators. In practice, monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems encounter tension between fostering the double-loop learning necessary for adaptive decision-making and impact assessment, and single-loop feedback to meet contractually driven reporting requirements. (RTI, 2018)
- USAID currently allows for many flexible procurement mechanisms and processes, though most are not widely in use. Many commonly used procurement mechanisms can be designed to support AM.
- Cultivating trust between donor and IP is crucial to success of most adaptive procurement mechanisms. (RTI, 2018 and Brinkerhoff, 2002)

CONCLUSIONS

Making adaptive procurement and activity management practices the default over more conventional, Results Frameworks-driven PMEPs will alleviate many real bureaucratic constraints (e.g., SOOs rather than SOWs, flexible and iterative workplans in contracts and agreements).

Collaborative and empathetic approaches to program design and implementation (e.g., co-design of program strategy and PMEP, and/or employing a thinking and working politically (TWP) approach) can also help foster trust between AOR/COR and IP, which is a necessary condition for successful AM. (Brinkerhoff, 2002)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In September 2018, the Lab prioritized and committed to action against two recommendations informed by the evidence base on flexible procurement mechanisms:



Any Lab programs with upcoming procurement actions **consult with their OAA team and the OAA Lab to identify flexible procurement instruments** that will support adaptive management of their program.



All Lab AORs/CORs and activity managers should receive **training from OAA** on some of the **lesser-known flexible procurement mechanisms**, and from **iDesign** on co-creation, co-design, and other collaborative approaches.

RESOURCES (HUMAN, TIME) FOR SUCCESSFUL ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

FINDINGS

- Strategic Learning Review: Individual work planning, expectations, and performance reviews don't allow time and space to prioritize learning and adapting, which can ultimately lead to success (also aligned with findings from the Evidence Base for CLA, [EB4CLA](#) workstream).
- Hiring for an adaptive mindset and hiring local staff greatly increase the success of adaptive approaches:
 - Hiring Syrian staff means the South and Central Syria program has better access to information on the evolving conflict as well as deeper understanding of the geographic challenges and operating norms facing in-country partners. (Mercy Corps, 2016)
 - In Uganda's RAIN program, recruitment interviews included problem-solving scenarios or trips to the market to see how candidates analyzed context in real-time. The contextual knowledge and analytical skills of these team members were invaluable in several program pivots. (Mercy Corps, 2016)
- Dedicated analytical capacity with time and space for reflection allows people to close the loop between information and use. The likelihood of useful synthesis can be increased through: dedicated staff to conduct context analysis; greater integration of M&E functions into programs; allowing deliberate time for incubating new approaches or systems (e.g., through extended inception periods); external networks of informants; and iterative use of tools like results chains, network analysis, and scenario forecasting. These are all ways to make sense of the context, detect shifts in that context, and gauge the results of a team's work. It does not happen naturally when needs are great and resources are stretched, but building this analytical capacity can help teams to focus their work in the right ways. (Mercy Corps, 2016)

CONCLUSIONS

To conduct AM successfully, USAID needs to free up time and space for all staff, particularly for AORs/CORs, to engage in a more collaborative design and implementation process with their IPs and OAA, and to fully participate in the pause and reflect exercises with the IPs and stakeholders.

Current staffing patterns at USAID represent real constraints to AORs/CORs working in this way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In September 2018, the Lab prioritized and committed to action against one recommendation informed by the evidence base on resources for successful adaptive management:



Prioritize **hiring for an adaptive mindset** (inquisitive by nature, able to ask the right questions, bring broad, flexible competencies and skillsets), in addition to technical skills to cultivate and reinforce a culture of adaptation.

The Lab deferred action against three recommendations informed by the evidence base on resources for successful adaptive management:

- X Prioritize **hiring and certifying more AORs/CORs** in order to spread the administrative load and free up LOE for AM.
- X **Incentivize AM practices at the individual level.** Write individual position descriptions, performance standards, and annual performance reviews to accommodate and incentivize taking smart risks and managing adaptively. This must include more actual LOE allocated for managing activities adaptively.
- X Invest in **further research on balancing cost and security risk** when hiring local staff in third party monitoring (TPM) or alternative approaches **in non-permissive environments** (NPEs), where the risk presented by missing important contextual information is particularly high.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES FOR SUCCESSFUL ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT/ INTEGRATION OF MERL INTO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

FINDINGS

- The costs associated with adaptation and learning continue to be underestimated. Ambitious research agendas are developed to support learning, and are fleshed out in MEL plans, but donors then balk at approving the budgets necessary to implement them. Implementers are on occasion told to accommodate research and learning within existing project budgets (RTI, 2018). This finding is consistent with emergent learnings from the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning Innovations Program (MERLIN) Learning Agenda.
- Budget constraints can be loosened by: allocating funding in broad categories with the opportunity for flexibility within each; holding a reserve of funding for learning and adaptation; or ensuring that budget changes receive rapid approvals from donors (Mercy Corps, 2016).
- Currently, there is no evidence that can point to the “right” proportion of budget that should be devoted to MERL/AM.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently, USAID Evaluation Policy (ADS 201.3.5.13) stipulates that around three percent of the OU’s budget should be allocated for external evaluation when an external evaluation is required. Frequently, these evaluations consist of short-term engagements with evaluators at baseline, endline, and midline in some cases. This model is not consistent with an ongoing, iterative AM approach that relies on either more frequent/ongoing engagement with evaluators or more frequent/ongoing data collection and analysis through other means.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lab deferred action against two recommendations informed by the evidence base on financial resources for successful adaptive management/integration of MERL into design and implementation:

X

Invest in **research to determine a better proportion of project budget for AM** and update the ADS accordingly. Identifying an optimal budget range as a proportion of project budget per AM approach should be a priority going forward.

X

Set aside larger, more realistic budgets for MERL and AM to be integrated throughout design and implementation, and allocate funds more flexibly within portfolios AND awards, which should be clearly articulated in the procurement instrument and the project's workplan(s).

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Opinions presented in the document do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the U.S. Government. Feedback and questions may be directed to the Lab's Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment at LabEIA@USAID.gov.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

[Adapting to learn and learning to adapt: Practical insights from international development projects](#) – 2018, RTI

[ADAPtIng AID: Lessons From Six Case Studies](#) – 2016, Mercy Corps

[Business Environment Reform Facility: Adaptive Programming and Business Environment Reform – Lessons for DFID Zimbabwe](#) – 2017, DFID

[Context-Driven Adaptation](#) – 2018, USAID

REAL-TIME DATA FOR ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (RTD4AM)

[Bridging the Gap: How Real-Time Data Can Contribute to Adaptive Management in International Development](#) – 2018, USAID

[Bridging Real-Time Data and Adaptive Management in International Development - RTD4AM Case Studies Paper](#) – 2018, USAID

[Bridging Real-Time Data and Adaptive Management: Ten Lessons for Policy Makers and Practitioners](#) – 2018, USAID

[Can ICT-based real-time data contribute to adaptive management in international development programs?](#) – 2018 (submitted), USAID. *Development in Practice*

[Fighting Ebola with Information](#) – 2018, USAID

[Paper-to-Mobile Data Collection: A Manual](#) – 2018, USAID

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION (DE)

[Learning from Practice – Developmental Evaluation In Practice: Tips, Tools, and Templates](#) – 2017, USAID & DEPA-MERL Consortium

[Developmental Evaluation for USAID](#) – 2016, USAID & DEPA-MERL Consortium

[Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity \(DEPA-MERL\) Fact Sheet](#) – 2016, USAID & DEPA-MERL Consortium

RAPID FEEDBACK EVALUATION

[Rapid Feedback \(RF-MERL\) Fact Sheet](#) – 2016, RF-MERL Consortium

OTHER COMPLEXITY-AWARE MONITORING AND EVALUATION (C-AME) APPROACHES

[C-AME Discussion Note](#) – 2016, USAID

FUTURES ANALYSIS/ SCENARIO PLANNING

[Webinar on Scenario Planning in CDCS Development](#) – 2015, USAID

SYSTEMS ANALYSIS (SPACES-MERL)

[Strategic Program for Analyzing Complexity and Evaluating Systems Fact Sheet](#) – 2016, SPACES-MERL Consortium

THIRD PARTY MONITORING (TPM)

[Webinar on Third Party Monitoring](#) – 2018, World Bank Independent Evaluation Group, hosted by DM&E for Peace

[Third Party Monitoring in Volatile Environments – Do the Benefits Outweigh the Risks?](#) – 2017, World Bank Independent Evaluation Group

[The Use of Third-party Monitoring in Insecure Contexts](#) – 2016, Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE), funded by DFID

ADAPTIVE PROCUREMENT PRACTICES

[Kosovo Award Fee Contract Case Study](#) – 2017, USAID

[PEB-2014-01 on Adaptive and Flexible Contracting Types](#) – 2014, USAID Procurement Executive (NB: other mechanisms have become available since this PEB was issued)

[USAID Implementing Mechanism Matrix](#) – 2017, USAID

COLLABORATING, LEARNING, AND ADAPTING (CLA)

[Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting \(CLA\) Toolkit](#) – USAID LEARN Contract

[Evidence Base for CLA \(EB4CLA\) report: Summary](#) – 2017, USAID LEARN Contract

[EB4CLA report: Part 1](#) – 2016, USAID LEARN Contract

[EB4CLA report: Part 2](#) – 2017, USAID LEARN Contract

[EB4CLA report: Part 3](#) – 2017, USAID LEARN Contract

[Evidence-Driven Decision Making blog post](#) – 2017, USAID LEARN Contract

[Applying Evidence: What Works? A Rapid Literature Review](#) – 2017, USAID LEARN Contract

[CLA Case Competition Winners](#) – 2016 & 2017, Learning Lab

THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY

[Making good on donors' desire to Do Development Differently](#) – 2018, Honig, D. & Gulrajani N. Third World Quarterly

[Two Tunes, One Dance: Keeping Programming Agile](#) – 2017, David Jacobstein, USAID Learning Lab

[Thinking and working politically: Lessons from FOSTER in Nigeria](#) – 2017, Developmental Leadership Program

[The case for thinking and working politically: The implications of 'doing development differently'](#) – Developmental Leadership Program