LAB EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING PLAN

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT DEEP DIVE

SUMMER 2019 UPDATE

QUESTION 2

Integration of Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) into Design and Implementation

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

U.S. GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT LAB

This Evidence Deep Dive *is a companion to the Question 2 Evidence Brief, produced as an output of 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

Known barriers to adaptation can be divided into three categories:

- **Information Barriers** (e.g., not having the right information at the right time)

- **Structural/Process Barriers** (e.g., our own procurement policies and contract management practices)

- **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)

This deep dive expands on the material presented in the *Question 2 Evidence Brief,* providing more robust findings, conclusions, and recommendations for specific approaches that can be used to overcome barriers to adaptive management. It answers "what", "so what", and "now what" questions for each approach:

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

- **What does this mean for us** (in the Lab/at USAID/as development practitioners more broadly)?

- Given this information, **what should we do going forward?**

Program monitoring and evaluation efforts can generate a wealth of information that can inform adaptive management if designed appropriately. Historically, monitoring data has often been used to report to donors and other stakeholders to assure accountability for use of resources, and evaluations have been conducted at the conclusion of a program to determine whether or not it achieved the desired outcome. Increasingly, M&E and research are being designed and used to inform learning and adaptation of programs, projects, and strategies during implementation.

APPROACH: ADAPTIVE PROCUREMENT PRACTICES

Developmental evaluation (DE) is an approach to evaluation that supports the continuous adaptation of development interventions. As a part of a DE, a highly skilled evaluator or team is embedded within the program, project, or activity to contribute to evidence-based recommendations for modifications in program design and targeted outcomes. The DE collects and analyzes data during program implementation in order to feed back into adaptation of the program as it continues. The DE documents both the modifications and the decision-making process, which can also contribute to the accountability function of evaluations. Deploying various data collection activities and methods on an as-needed basis, the evaluator enables real-time, evidence-based reflection and decision-making consistent with a collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION FINDINGS – WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- DE is becoming increasingly popular as an evaluative and adaptive management approach in implementation of development programs.

- Currently, the DE approach is being offered and successfully implemented under the DEPA-MERL buy-in mechanism, which expires at the end of FY2024.

- DE is often perceived as "too expensive," or interested projects and OUs are under-resourced to procure one.

- Despite common perception that DE is "too expensive", the DEPA-MERL contract (a buy-in mechanism that provides DEs for USAID OUs) has had requests for extensions (both no-cost and/or costed) on all of its developmental evaluations.

DE APPLIED TO IMPROVE EFFICACY AND EFFICIENCY OF DECISION-MAKING

PROBLEM: An Agency team's identity, mandate, and objectives were not clear to their main partner, who held decision-making power. This resulted in convoluted decision-making processes, delayed programming, and frustrated relationships between the Agency team and external stakeholders relying on transparent and stable decisions.

SOLUTION: The DE identified this problem and recommended a multi-pronged approach: 1) The team lead of the Agency team should start weekly one-on-ones with someone closer to the decision-maker from their main partner to keep them informed and involve them in discussions earlier on. 2) The team should also better articulate the different components of what they do and create a vision of how the team and their work is evolving. 3) The team should better articulate their unique value add to the broader work of the main partner and discuss the differences in objectives frankly with all stakeholders from the main partner.

OUTCOME: The Agency team took all recommendations. They now have a clearer identity as a team and have a stronger relationship with their main partner, resulting in the main partner wanting to absorb the Agency team to ensure continued programming and staff support. The weekly one-on-ones with the team lead also allowed for expedited decision-making that improved efficiencies on the team and transparency of decision-making with other stakeholders. Increased clarity in the team's identity, mandate, and objectives is continuing to improve their broader stakeholder relationships, enabling increased market coordination, which will directly contribute to stronger programming results.

CHALLENGES/CAVEATS: Finding the right evaluator took some time and several attempts, as the position requires a unique set of evaluative and technical expertise, including a robust monitoring and evaluation toolbox, strong interpersonal and facilitation skills, and in-depth experience with USAID.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS – SO WHAT?

- Several conditions are crucial to successfully executing the DE approach: ensuring early buy-in from all stakeholders to iterate during implementation, resourcing appropriately, hiring highly qualified and experienced evaluators, and providing those evaluators with sufficient backup support.

- Users of DEs that are operating under successful conditions see a high return on their investment, as indicated by their desire to continue the DEs beyond the initial period of performance.

ADAPTIVE PROCUREMENT RECOMMENDATIONS – NOW WHAT?

Our review of the evidence suggests that the Agency and other development actors should consider the following:

- USAID could consider revising budgeting guidance for evaluation for cases like DE. DE is as much design and implementation as it is evaluation, and the current policy guidance for 3 percent of a project budget to be reserved for evaluation sets up unrealistic expectations for what an evaluative approach that contributes to design and implementation should cost.

- DE could be made more widely available at USAID through a buy-in mechanism with a firm that has experience and a solid track record of successfully implementing DEs.

APPROACH: RAPID FEEDBACK MERL

Rapid feedback monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (RF-MERL) is a technique that allows for rapid, iterative, side-by-side testing of implementation options. For example, a behavior change activity might deploy and test three different messaging campaigns, then measure which is most successful. Once the best messaging is identified, the activity might then test side-by-side delivery of these messages via radio, print media, and SMS text, then measure which is most effective. This allows the intervention to rapidly adapt the intervention and underlying theory of change to very specific contexts for maximum efficacy.

RAPID FEEDBACK MERL FINDINGS – WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- Rapid Feedback MERL is appropriate for adapting programs to new contexts, such as expanding a successful program into new geographies.

- Currently, the Rapid Feedback MERL approach is offered under the Rapid Feedback MERL buy-in mechanism, which expires at the end of FY2024.

RAPID FEEDBACK CONCLUSIONS – SO WHAT?

- Rapid Feedback MERL is showing early promise by facilitating quick testing of multiple implementation options, so that a program can quickly discern what works best, double down on that approach, and then further refine it.

RAPID FEEDBACK RECOMMENDATIONS – NOW WHAT?

Our review of the evidence suggests that the Agency and other development actors should consider the following:

- Rapid Feedback MERL could be made more widely available at USAID through a buy-in mechanism with a firm that has experience and a solid track record of successfully implementing this approach.

RAPID FEEDBACK EVALUATION APPLIED TO A FAMILY PROTECTION PROGRAM IN CAMBODIA

PROBLEM: In Cambodia, as in most other countries, the large majority of children in residential care, including children's homes and orphanages, have one or both parents living. As a part of a large, multi-stakeholder Collective Impact model, several implementing partners in Cambodia tried to influence donor and community behavior to support children to remain with their families rather than being sent to live in Residential Care Institutions (RCIs).

SOLUTION: The Rapid Feedback team first conducted formative research on behavior change campaigns in Cambodia. They then designed and implemented tests of various behavior change campaigns to both donors and communities to see which of them resulted in the largest change. For the donor side, the question was "which media channels for behavior change communication affects the attitudes of donors and volunteers toward RCIs in Cambodia?" On the community side, the question was "do community members exposed to a formal social behavior change communication (SBCC) messaging campaign in addition to social work services have more knowledge about the potential dangers of RCIs than those exposed only to social work services?"

OUTCOME: Based on results from the Rapid Feedback experiments on the donor behavior change campaign, adjustments were made to the advertisements based on click rates and sample demographics. A second phase of implementation was launched with ads running on several platforms. On the Community Behavior Change Campaign, the campaign was completed in target communities. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected, and analysis of data from respondents in SBCC villages stated that they were unlikely to send their child to an RCI in the future.

CHALLENGES/ CAVEATS: Side-by-side testing often raises expectations for "impact evaluation" level rigor. While some interventions may lend themselves to causal analysis, often that level of rigor requires a lot of time and expense to achieve. The goal of Rapid Feedback MERL is to deliver "good enough" data for decision-making during the decision-making. There are also risks related to contamination: that messaging is provided to a village not assigned to receive it (contamination from other messaging sources is also possible), that there is insufficient sample size (it is not large enough to detect impact) and response bias (that survey respondents provide biased answers).

For more, see the Community and Donor Social and Behavior Change Campaign reports.

ADDITIONAL APPROACHES

WHAT OTHER MERL TOOLS FOR ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT ARE AVAILABLE?

Other monitoring and evaluation approaches, which can facilitate adaptation by *complementing* traditional M&E:

- Sentinel Indicators – A sentinel indicator facilitates monitoring and communicating about complex processes that are difficult to study. It can raise a red flag that a certain element of the system is changing. As a proxy, however, this type of indicator provides incomplete information, and judgments about complex processes or entire social systems based on a single indicator can be dangerous. Therefore, a sentinel indicator should be used as a "canary in the coal mine" to trigger further observation or probes.

- Process Monitoring of Impact (PMI) – PMI involves drawing a logic model that includes outputs, first level results, and known processes that transform outputs into intended results. The logic model also includes

any known context factors that affect the achievement of first level results, and feedback loops between the project and contextual factors. Rather than measuring a single data point (an indicator linked to a result), monitors track the processes and interrelationships represented in the logic model, which are referred to as the "area of observation." Monitoring of these areas of observation enables project managers to track results-producing processes together with the influence of contextual factors so that the project can be steered effectively long before performance monitoring data is available.Stakeholder Feedback – Monitoring approaches that privilege feedback from stakeholders or make use of participatory methods are particularly valuable in complexity, which requires an adaptive management approach. Complex aspects of systems are characterized by a diversity of perspectives about desired results and pathways to achieve results. Diverse perspectives are important for at least two reasons. First, in complexity, knowledge of the system is partial, and predictability is low. Second, how actors perceive a situation motivates their behavior. Understanding the system from different perspectives will help any single actor create a more holistic and useful picture.

HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND MY PROGRAM'S EFFECTS IF IT ADAPTS IN A WAY THAT DOES NOT FOLLOW THE LOGFRAME OR THEORY OF CHANGE THAT I DEVELOPED DURING DESIGN?

Other monitoring and evaluation approaches to understand the *effects* of adaptive management:

- Outcome Harvesting – Outcome Harvesting is a participatory monitoring and evaluation method that enables users to identify, verify, and make sense of outcomes with or without reference to predetermined objectives. This is particularly necessary when the adaptations made to a program mean that the originally predicted outcomes have shifted or are no longer valid. When managing adaptively, it's possible that new outcomes — both intended and unintended — will emerge as a result of the adaptations themselves or changes in context.

- Most Significant Change – Most significant change (SMC) is a participatory monitoring and evaluation technique that involves the collection and analysis of stories describing the most important project outcomes. The method works well when adaptive management practices in different or dynamic contexts lead to diversity of implementation and outcomes. The method captures differences in development outcomes across sites and time, as well as different perspectives on the same outcomes. MSC is particularly useful when different interpretations of significant change are considered valuable.

ARE THERE ANY WAYS TO ANTICIPATE POTENTIAL ADAPTATIONS IN ADVANCE?

Other design and implementation approaches support adaptive management by providing insights into *context:*

- Scenario Planning – Scenario planning develops contingency scenarios to adapt to uncertainty related to changing political space due to contextual factors such as conflict, peace agreement negotiations. or election outcomes, as well as shifts in the USG ability to influence change. Anticipating these possible scenarios builds in opportunities for predictive rather than only reactive adaptation, which can increase effectiveness and efficiency in implementing those adaptations.

- Geospatial Data and Analysis – Understanding the geographic nuances in context (e.g., local weather/climate patterns, population density, demographic differences) can help decision-makers to adapt their programs according to shifting local needs rather than applying an intervention as a "one size fits all" approach.

- Systems Analysis – All development efforts involve working in complex systems. Unaided, understanding and addressing such systems can be difficult. Without an understanding of the dynamics of a system, interventions can be unsustainable; result in multiple secondary, tertiary, and reverberating effects; and even lead to unintended consequences. Innovation impact potential assessment, innovation pipeline tracking and optimization, systems mapping, computational modeling, and social and organizational network analysis are all tools to better understand the complexity of systems in which we work that are available through the SPACES-MERL mechanism. Understanding the context, especially when complex, will lead to more effective and sustainable adaptive management of interventions working in those systems.