

Context Monitoring for Household Resilience

AUTHORS

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ACTIVITY/PROGRAM

Ifaa

ORGANIZATION

Catholic Relief Services

COUNTRY

Ethiopia

CONTEXT

Ifaa is a USAID/BHA-funded resilience food security activity (RFSA) implemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Ethiopia's Oromia region under the Ethiopian Government's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP). Ifaa aims to improve the food security of vulnerable households in targeted communities, contributing to a sustained reduction in rural poverty in Oromia. It provides a range of support interventions focused on strengthening and improving government services; agriculture and livelihood opportunities; health and nutrition; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); gender and youth empowerment; and natural resource management and the environment.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

Describe your adaptive management example. What is the problem you were trying to solve? Why did you choose to implement it this way?

The Ifaa activity recognizes that external shocks can introduce significant risks to poor households and communities. Mitigating these risks requires both an awareness of the shocks that communities are experiencing, including droughts, pests and diseases, conflict, and spikes in food prices, and an understanding of how households are coping with these shocks and their impact on activity interventions. This understanding relies on regular monitoring of Ifaa's operating context and how shocks are evolving, alongside regular household-level data on coping strategies and responses to observed shocks. As a result of this need for regular context and resilience data, the Ifaa activity introduced the Monthly Interval Resilience Analysis (MIRA), a high-frequency data collection mechanism that CRS has used in Malawi and Madagascar.

MIRA uses community-embedded enumerators to collect monthly household-level data from 880 households across 44 *kebeles* (village clusters). The data is collected in the activity's data collection software, where activity staff can access and analyze it. This allows for rapid context monitoring, as staff are immediately made aware of any context changes and shocks that occurred that month. The aggregated and analyzed data collected through MIRA is shared both internally and externally to plan for changes to the sequencing, layering, and integrating of interventions; collaborate with the government and other stakeholders; and engage with communities around emerging issues. Internally, the data is used



MIRA Community Engagement participants in a group discussion. East Harerghie Zone, Deder Woreda, Lele Kufa Kebele, 2023. Photo Credit: Solomon Worku / CRS

to inform the activity's work planning and respond to specific emergencies by allocating contingency funds for communities experiencing severe shocks. The data collection schedule determines the frequency with which MIRA data is used to inform adaptations. While data on household shocks is collected monthly and can inform short-term prioritization in response to significant identified shocks, other data on agricultural production, water availability, and other conditions is collected quarterly, semi-annually, or annually and informs longer-term adaptive management decision-making. Externally, MIRA's data complements other existing data collection mechanisms, including the Joint Emergency Operation Program and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, to provide the government and stakeholders with critical data to strengthen their decision-making. For instance, MIRA's data on crop diseases was used by government officials to help them understand how much households were affected and improve coordination in response to issues of pests in local crops.

MIRA's high-frequency data collection system allows Ifaa to embed other studies within its existing data collection structure, helping the activity understand the dynamics underpinning observations from routine monitoring data. Specifically, the activity layers qualitative research questions on top of MIRA's regular data collection to better understand the causal relationships behind these observations and draw more accurate conclusions about the impact of shocks and interventions. For example, in its refinement year, Ifaa learned that indebtedness was a critical issue faced by many households due to droughts in the region. As a result, the activity layered a household indebtedness assessment onto MIRA's data collection to better understand households' levels of debt and whether it would impact their ability to afford Ifaa-promoted technological investments, such as point-of-use water treatment. This assessment, combined with learnings from other studies, resulted in two key adaptations: 1) advising agro-dealers with which Ifaa works to sell organic fertilizer packaged in smaller quantities, which is more affordable for households; and 2) using the digital records of saving groups to help households document their credit and savings history to demonstrate their capacity to borrow and repay credit to potential creditors.

IMPACT

Describe the impact your adaptive management approach has had on your activity and its objectives. If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The high-frequency nature of MIRA data collection allows the activity to observe trends over time that might be lost with data collected at one point in time. These trends have informed the activity's understanding of how shocks and food shortages vary over time and how interventions can be designed to maximize their effectiveness. As Ifaa looks to adapt its food distribution plan to provide an additional round of food to eligible households, MIRA's trend data is helping the activity schedule the additional rounds in the months in which the data indicates households have the most need to receive extra food. Ifaa also intends to use this trend data to adjust the promotion of different foods at various times of the year, depending on availability of items in markets and homes. Similarly, this data will inform adaptations to the timing of cash transfers in favor of periods when indebtedness and the cost of livestock tend to be lower, so that graduating households may more effectively participate in the market.

The context monitoring data provided by MIRA alerts the activity of emerging challenges and strengthens its ability to engage with and promote self-reliance of community members in responding to shocks. Once the information from MIRA is collected and analyzed, the Ifaa Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) and program teams translate the data into the local language, print the relevant visualizations on paper, and organize three-hour sessions with kebele-level early warning committees to reflect on the data from their respective kebeles. In these sessions, the early warning committees develop action plans to respond to significant issues highlighted in the data. For example, in response to MIRA data showing that households had been affected by an increase in the price of agricultural inputs, particularly fertilizer, the committee decided to organize composting efforts at the kebele level to reduce their reliance on purchasing fertilizer. In another instance, when MIRA's observations revealed high levels of illness-related shocks in 33 out of 44 participant kebeles, the committees made efforts to increase awareness within their kebeles of the existing community health insurance schemes.

REFLECTION

What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?

The design of MIRA in the Ifaa activity was informed by previous iterations of MIRA in other contexts and activities. Ifaa staff spoke with staff members that had implemented MIRA in Malawi and Madagascar and learned from how they had structured the design of the data collection and sharing with governments and partners. They were also able to adopt data collection tools, training modules, and guidance from the implementation of MIRA in Malawi. Conversations with and learnings from the Malawi and Madagascar teams allowed Ifaa to be more precise in budgeting and planning for the data collection activities.

Ifaa's experience implementing MIRA was also enabled by supportive leadership and sufficient resourcing. Ifaa leadership understood the value of MIRA data to the activity and took ownership of the process, remaining committed to providing the team with sufficient resources to make the process successful. These resources included hiring a staff person specifically focused on context monitoring and assigning a member of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) team the responsibility to share MIRA findings with government partners, communities, and other relevant stakeholders. Outside of the MEL and CLA teams, Ifaa ensured that technical teams were also engaged in reviewing, analyzing, and using the MIRA data within their respective workstreams.

Since its rollout, other programs and decision-makers have shown a lot of interest in the data gathered through MIRA. In response, Ifaa expanded its communication protocols to include online access to a data dashboard, a newsletter, and monthly meetings with Ifaa partners. Ifaa is also beginning evaluative thinking workshops to help partner staff better interpret and utilize MIRA data. Additionally, when looking at how this data is used by decision-makers outside of the activity, it is important to underline that MIRA data is representative only of households participating in Ifaa and not representative of the population in a given kebele, district, or region. This limits the ability of decision-makers working in areas outside of Ifaa's catchment area to use the data with confidence. Therefore, MIRA would need to expand data collection efforts beyond Ifaa participants to a sample of all households within a chosen geography to be most useful to a broader range of stakeholders.

Finally, based on Ifaa's experiences implementing MIRA over the last year, the team is considering three additional adaptations to facilitate the data collection, analysis, and dissemination process: 1) limiting the number of additional studies that are layered on MIRA's data collection to those which are aligned with MIRA's methodology and sample; 2) strengthening the community engagement process through deep dives into the data with communities and staff; and 3) reducing the frequency with which MIRA data is collected and disseminated. Ifaa already reduced the amount of data being collected monthly and is considering collecting household shock information on a quarterly basis. Lastly, Ifaa plans to publish the MIRA newsletter only twice a year to reduce the level of effort involved, while continuing to publish the dashboard on an ongoing basis.



MIRA Community Engagement participants in a group discussion. East Harerghie Zone, Deder Woreda, Lele Kufa Kebele, 2023.
Photo Credit: Solomon Worku / CRS.

TOOLS

What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach? Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.

The Ifaa team uses [this manual](#) to train enumerators from participant communities and ensure high-quality data is collected consistently. The manual provides enumerators with detailed instructions on conducting interviews and is paired with in-person training and supervision. The data collected through MIRA is uploaded monthly to [this dashboard](#) and shared with partners and stakeholders through [newsletters](#).