Adaptive Management, November 21, 2019

***Number of participants***: Plenary (Diana Picon, Sriju Sharma, Christie Getman, Tim Ogborn)

Discussion highlights and conclusions

**USAID defines adaptive management as “an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.” (ADS 201.3.1.2)**

**WHAT** did we learn about approaches and interventions/activities? (all speakers consolidated)

* Both programs learned over the first two years of implementation that existing mechanisms not sufficient for adaptive management (e.g., workplanning in silos with an insufficient resilience lens).
* Reflection meetings are important to plan intentionally, to bring people together to review data and make adjustments. This requires a skilled facilitator, and needs to happen at multiple levels at regular intervals (e.g., monthly, quarterly), and ensuring that planning and budgeting for CLA is included from the beginning and throughout the life of the activity.
* Monitoring and evaluation: While evaluations may be sound, they are not useful for learning: not timely; staff turnover limits contextualization of findings by program staff; and IEs are designed and implemented with little consultation from IPs, leading to duplicate data collection activities among Implementing partners (IPs). Mid-terms present more of a learning opportunity.
* Internal communications is a major constraint, e.g., communicating how much decision making power and flexibility you have, and for all the people ‘rowing the boat’ to also know.
* Every time you change something at top level of the theory of change (TOC), you have to make changes all the way through the pathways. This is a challenge for teams, especially after the level of effort to develop the PREP (e.g., detailed budgeting and targeting) it is difficult to make changes to enable flexible programming.
* There is a lack of understanding of how much time we have to change: Procurement rules are fairly flexible, but component/regional managers are/were confused about how much power they have to adjust.
* CLA has improved as a result of movement within USAID, better integration of M&E and program staff. We need to be mindful of the difference between performance management and adaptive management. The latter requires different skills and time, to pull information from stakeholders and multiple levels and make adaptations. New DFSAs have requirements around learning and adaptation plans and capacity to do it. There is a learning team within FFP, working with IDEAL to do this more effectively.

What did we learn about **HOW** to implement and manage projects? (all speakers consolidated)

* Management: multi-level (e.g., district, national) review and reflection of routine monitoring data with managers, technical team and MEAL staff; develop action plans to ensure effective monitoring.
* Group capacity assessments (e.g., farmers, mothers, DRR/CCA) using Tuft’s four factors of sustainability allowed Sabal field-level facilitators to assess groups status and then provide appropriate level of mentoring or support, and tailored interventions).
* The Integrated Monitoring Tool (IMT) supported a bottom up planning process and provided PAHAL teams with more granular data for decision making and criteria to asses trajectory of targeted communities, improved adaptive workplanning and efficient use of resources in response to community priorities.
* Use simple tools to track change, identify where the projects is/is not on track, areas of concern, using color coded indicator tracking sheets; simple checklists/ dashboards.

What do we RECOMMEND based on our learning (WHAT and HOW)? (all speakers consolidated)

* Food Aid and Food Security Assessment (FAFSA): In light of evolution of food security programming and emergence of new USAID Bureau of Resilience and Food Security (BRFS), it is an opportune time for another meta review (FAFSA III) that channels findings into a learning agenda.
* Integrate criteria around Gender, Equity, and Social Inclusion (GESI) into adaptive management tools.
* Continue process of changing FFP/ IP structures and RFA design to foster better feedback loops for learning and mechanisms that support linkages between information generation, intentional learning and information exchange.
* In emergency context (e.g., earthquake in Sabal targeting area), timing and context are critical and there is a lack of time for rigorous selection of project beneficiaries, which delays implementation. Find the balance between selecting the “right” beneficiaries and start up when timing is short; collect information from local stakeholders as quickly as possible.
* Communications: For complex programs, work closely with communications team to address to specific target audience(s) in an effective way. Identify who is the audience for various products, what’s the platform for sharing, costs of translation, field agents to share on the ground (DFSAs developing a ‘knowledge management’ matrix of information products to address this).
* Measurement and analysis: For learning and adaptative decision making, panel recurrent monitoring surveys (RMS) are a promising approach; large PBSs (impact evaluations with a control group) water down results of program interventions (looks at mean for HH not in program target areas). Continue to work with BFS/BRFS, FFP to use learning from IEs; communicate learning about how to do evaluations to broader community.
* Include programs in evaluation design and provide opportunities to include additional indicators and analysis to respond to institutional and global learning agendas. This would facilitate greater ownership and uptake of data. Begin conversation with all stakeholders as early as possible (“a year in advance”).
* Reflection meetings: Develop guidance for effective reflection and learning within programs, to standardize the process and ensure these periodic sessions are used to review information and challenge assumptions, rather than merely provide updates and continue along path. Allocate budget for review and reflection at beginning of program.
* Refine and implement (R&I): Promote this promising practice to improve project start-up, get the right teams on the ground, and open up opportunities for a broader range of IPs (currently expensive and time consuming, leading to exclusion of IPs).
* Mid-term evaluations: Use this mechanism to intentionally support reflection and learning, and link to TOC review, ensuring staff from all partners and levels (local to HQ) are included. Plan field visits to share findings and test assumptions of TOC and share findings with communities.
* Be flexible, but not too flexible: Ensure staff from operations, procurement, HR, technical, MEAL, management understand how much flexibility we have: bring the whole team along. Apply flexible mechanisms, recognizing that work plans and budgets or important tools, and that too much change constrains program implementation.
* Exit strategies and activity closure: Build on and extend efforts to improve activity start-up, to other aspects of programming (e.g., transition strategies, closure).

**Key learnings (3-5) – *to be elicited by moderator during the last few minutes of the session***

* Timeliness, relevance and purpose of how we design and use evaluations: consider how to involve IPs, donors; IMPEL can help us learn from this.
* Rethink how we learn from these exercises and how to link baselines, monitoring, mid-terms, final evaluations.
* Understanding adaptive management: among our own staff (it doesn’t mean no systems, structures, workplans; nor always changing and not implementing). We need to understand how much flexibility we have and bring our teams along (at all levels, e.g., HR, ops, procurement, management, MEAL, technical).
* Contextual changes/ emergencies: may require different types of data for decision making (timely, qualitative). Need to position ourselves to be ready to make decisions.
* Capacity: what does it require for our staff to do all this and communicate to appropriate audiences?
* Budget and plan for reflection, adaptation and development of guidance and tools to do this, for both IPs and donor.