

# Evaluative thinking guides the way: A map to adaptive management for USAID partners

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## Adaptive management is driving change at USAID:

Since 2017, USAID's foundational policy, ADS 201, has mandated that "USAID must be able to readily adapt programs in response to changes in context and new information."

- Practically, it requires that USAID missions conduct annual portfolio reviews, as well as mid-course strategic stocktaking, both of which rely on data and insight from partners.

Recent Agency-wide initiatives emphasize the need to be adaptive:

- To better understand contexts and respond to crises on the Journey to Self Reliance
- To increase inclusion and minimize risk when using technology as part of the Digital Strategy
- To respond quickly to opportunities and develop new markets via Private Sector Engagement

Recent solicitations have included standard contract requirements for collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA). Standard CLA award language, originally developed by Leah Wyatt with USAID/Uganda, helps define expectations for processes and deliverables required of partners.

However, the primary intended audience for most of USAID's guidance on adaptive management is missions, not partners.

### Where can partners turn for directions?

Based on more than 24 years of combined experience supporting USAID and international development partners, we present a 4-point path based on Buckley et al.'s (2015) definition of Evaluative Thinking (ET). These points can help implementing partners

- articulate a process for adaptive management,
- leverage reporting requirements to document adaptation, and - demonstrate a capability to feed into program decisions at USAID.

## Map Key: Components of Evaluative Thinking

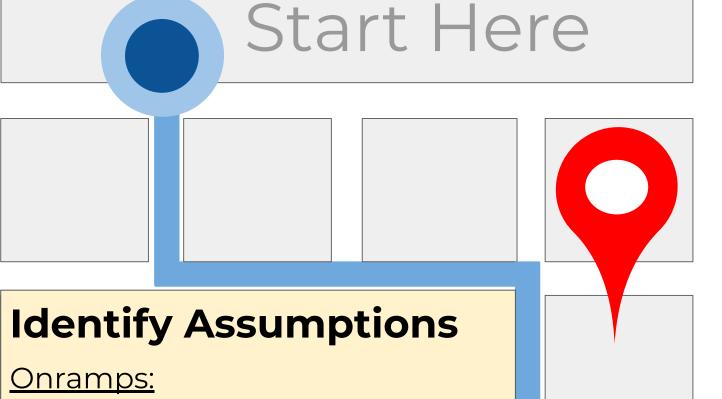
- . Identify assumptions
- 2. Pose thoughtful questions
- 9 3. Pursue deeper understanding through reflection and perspective making
- 9 4. Inform decisions in preparation for action

# Four crucial waypoints for adaptive management: assumptions, questions, reflection, action

Where the rubber meets the road: Buckley et al.'s review found that many researchers recommend that "ET should

not be restricted solely to evaluation-specific activities, but rather should infuse all of an organization's work processes."

Follow these 4 waypoints to get from here to there, keeping in mind what "onramps" might make each stage run



- Ask for input across staff levels and roles: colleagues not typically included in MEL often give crucial insight: admin, contracting, etc.
- Tap local experts and partner knowledge networks; make use of existing evaluations, assessments, and reports.

#### Roadblocks:

- Low appetite for risk, technical or reputational, may result in skipping or skimping on
- discussion of assumptions. - Trying to account for all contextual factors affecting an intervention, rather than specific assumptions for a specific theory of change, can

be overwhelming.

#### Partner insights are crucial to USAID's ability to learn and adapt. The examples below show how teams and organizations alike can create processes using this framework. You can start at any point, from the day-to-day management of interventions to high-level strategic design. What is the value add desired from adaptive management? Set practical goals for where you want to go.

# Adapting at the Team Level

more smoothly, or what "roadblocks" might prevent you from making progess.

# Start here: The week after delivering a routine intervention, such as a training

Where you want to go: Real-time response to successes and challenges, leading to better performance and results

How to get there: Rapid After-Action Review (RAAR), developed by Christine Murphy with USAID/Tanzania and the Global Development Lab, is a quick and easy exercise in adaptive management that can be built into everyday work processes. A 1-hour facilitated discussion with a simple, structured note-taking template, RAAR is designed to help a team not only pause and reflect, but also prioritize specific management actions and timeframes to make change.\*\*

- Assumptions: As team members discuss successes and challenges, focus on what is within the the team's manageable interest: this inevitably brings underlying assumptions to the surface.
- Questions: Keep the questions straightforward. What worked, and what didn't? Why? What realistically could be done differently next time?
- <u>Reflection</u>: Discuss feedback from a variety of stakeholder perspectives. What insights could be gleaned from field staff, government counterparts, operations, community members?
- Action: Review ideas in real-time and decide, together, what actions will be taken, by whom, before a single date agreed upon across the team.
- \*\* More details on RAAR and how teams have used it at christinepmurphy.com.

#### Adapting at the Organization Level

**Start here:** 2 years from the end of a 5-year activity

Where you want to go: Documentation of an effective, evidence-informed, adaptively managed contract to support follow-on.

**How to get there**: Consider conducting a high-level review that mirrors USAID missions' strategic stocktaking.

- Assumptions: Identify and document what you think you know about how the activity is performing, how it is achieving results, and why.
- Questions: Establish what else you need to know and why in preparation for an action: continuation, shut down, or adaptation. - Articulate what you need to know in the form of a question that is
- specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound.
- Reflection: Involve the MEL team, all activity managers who work towards the same results, project managers, and contract office.
- Collaborate across all stakeholders to gather information. Review past reports, assessments, decision documents; initiate site visits. - Discuss all information with the entire activity team, framed with the
- activity's topline result in mind, to gain perspectives on performance.
- Action: Communicate findings and observations to all activity managers, as well as other stakeholders working towards same results.

#### Adaptive management by **USAID** partners can:

- Increase inclusivity in the design, implementation, and management of interventions
- Break down silos and broaden the base of championship for evaluative thinking
- Build confidence, credibility, and skills for critical thinking

#### AND

- Address solicitation criteria for CLA Feed USAID requirements for activitylevel monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans and narrative reporting
- Strengthen mission-level portfolio reviews and country-level strategic stocktaking

#### **Decisions for action**

#### Onramps:

Maintain and consult annual or activity-specific calendars of major decision processes. Align proactively! Teams, work with colleagues and leadership to feed learnings into higher-level processes or reporting. Orgs, reach out to USAID mission officers to include findings in Portfolio

Reviews/CDCS stocktaking.

#### Roadblocks:

Not knowing what decisions can and can't be made, or when, for budget, staffing, operations, intervention design, etc.

#### Pose thoughtful questions

- Ask in a post-award meeting what critical information is helpful for USAID activity managers. How will they judge whether the award is performing or in trouble? - Ask the same question within your team and org.

#### Roadblocks:

- No knowledge of activities working towards common results, working in common geographic areas, working with common national government stakeholders, or targeting common catchment groups or beneficiaries.

#### Understanding through reflection Onramps:

- Check against the topline questions for your team or org to generate insights for strategic decisionmaking.
- Consider how to add value to collaborative efforts across the USAID project portfolio.
- Look at performance data from other activities that
- compliment or are similar in scope and objectives.

#### Roadblocks:

- Mismatched learning agendas between activities and managers working towards common results, either inside an org or across partners.

Where to next? Our original session was intended to be a discussion, and there are many roads that can lead to successful adaptive management. We'd love to hear from you!

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