Long-Term Parallel and Integrated Evaluation Activities Amplify Learning and Results
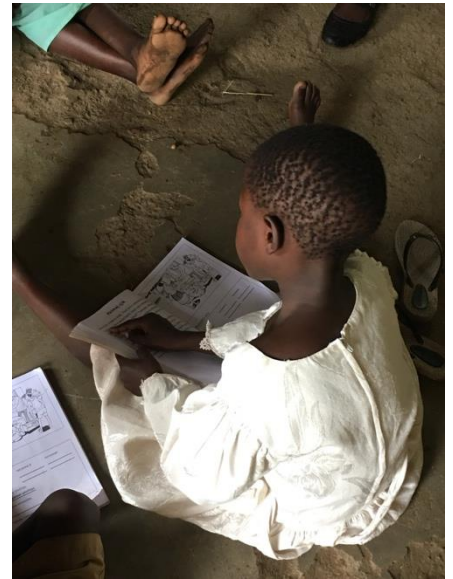
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Reader, Motoro. *Betsy Bassan.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

To tackle unacceptably low literacy, the Government of Uganda has embraced early-grade, mother-tongue reading instruction, coupled with health and school safety interventions — health and HIV/AIDS education under the USAID School Health and Reading Program (SHRP) and school safety in USAID's scale-up effort, the Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA). With additional scale-up financed by the World Bank, almost 80 percent of school children in Uganda are benefiting.

RTI implements both cooperative agreements. Central to each activity is the concept that improvements in ancillary conditions (health and safety) will yield literacy improvements.

Given the scale of the projects, their national and global importance, and USAID's commitment to collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) and monitoring and evaluation in Uganda, the mission created two parallel performance and impact evaluation (P&IE) contracts to provide evaluation information to SHRP (2012–2019) and LARA (2015–2020) aimed at improving their performance and results.

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P&IE-SHRP and P&IE-LARA are five-year contracts implemented by NORC at the University of Chicago and the small business Panagora Group.

This case focuses on the interplay among core P&IE activities — impact evaluation (led by NORC) as well as performance evaluation and continuous evaluation[1] (both led by Panagora) — and the heightened CLA results that an integrated package of evaluation activities under a P&IE contract makes possible. The P&IE contracts appear to be unique integrated evaluation mechanisms within USAID, and thus deserve special attention. As P&IE-SHRP has nearly four years of history, we concentrate on that contract, examining the entire P&IE package, complementing last year's case on continuous evaluation.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

Challenges. Both P&IE contracts are unique in USAID's portfolio. The agency has contracts that provide crosscutting support to missions and implementing partners on monitoring, evaluation, and learning, but no contracts that provide focused, multi-year support to one implementing partner across the gamut of integrated evaluation activities, including performance, impact, and continuous evaluation.

Therefore, we broke new ground in figuring out how to organize each element of the work, maximize synergy between the parts, and facilitate constructive relationships with the implementing partner, while maintaining independence as an external evaluator. As described in our last CLA case, we also broke ground in creating a continuous evaluation process and clarifying the difference between monitoring against indicators and targets (the implementing partner's job) and continuous evaluation (performance feedback on activity rollout).

Another challenge was coordinating schedules so the impact evaluation and performance evaluation could truly shed light on one another, be available to inform annual work planning, and be disseminated in a workshop sufficiently proximate to the two evaluations to still be of interest. We were not able to coordinate this very well between the impact evaluation and the midterm performance evaluation, but greatly improved our process by the final performance evaluation. We take that learning into implementation of P&IE-LARA.

A major challenge is developing and maintaining a constructive relationship between the implementing partner and the external evaluators in a P&IE context. It requires overcoming a deeply entrenched belief that evaluation is a "gotcha" exercise, versus newer thinking in which evaluation is an opportunity for collaboration, learning, and improvement aimed at maximizing development effectiveness. The entrenched perspective is exacerbated when performance does not match perception; for example, under SHRP the difference in actual reading performance of children in

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[1] Under continuous evaluation, implementing partner activities are continuously evaluated, with monthly real-time appreciative and constructive performance feedback (in written form) provided to foster adaptive management.

treatment versus control areas is quite modest, whereas the perception of reading improvement based on observational data is overly positive. Those are hard truths, especially against the herculean efforts it takes to roll out a program of this scale.

Another factor is the implementing partner's perception that it already has and uses data collected and examined through continuous evaluation or performance evaluation. Whether that is the case or not, the external evaluation creates focus around the performance data and the requirement to address data through explanation or adaptation. These issues rarely arise when an evaluation is a one-off effort by a team that does not have a continuing relationship or presence.

Key opportunities. It was very satisfying to have the opportunity to experience and have evidence showing the benefit of grouped external evaluation activities under one multi-year mechanism. For example, the performance evaluations — especially the final performance evaluation — was substantially strengthened by having annual impact evaluation results covering three years of implementation. Both performance evaluations were strengthened by having the continuous evaluation data as well as the familiarity with the project gleaned via continuous evaluation.

Having the same team perform the continuous evaluation and the performance evaluations focused our analytical lens, allowing more robust recommendations and feedback and thereby creating a broader platform for adaptive management. **Properly implemented, the P&IE mechanism allows a virtuous circle of discovery, learning, and application in which the whole is definitively greater than the sum of the parts.**

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

To implement P&IE SHRP, we used the following approaches.

Our impact evaluations measure the impact of SHRP's early-grade reading intervention on the literacy skills of learners, as measured by the Early Grade Reading Assessment in English and mother tongues. To assess the impact of SHRP at the school level, NORC is using an experimental (randomized controlled trial, or RCT) design. Specifically, we use random assignment of schools to treatment and control groups in SHRP intervention districts, an experimental design that allows us to isolate the effects of school-level interventions.

Our performance evaluations used the following basic design:

- Best practices:
    - Subject-matter specialists in early-grade reading, health and HIV/AIDS, school safety/gender-based violence, and CLA
    - Ugandan specialists to ensure knowledge of local context and build capacity
    - Range of mixed methods, including stakeholder consultation, document review, key informant interviews, purposeful school sampling, and classroom observation

- - Utilization Focused Evaluation to ensure transparency and maximize use of evaluation findings by primary users (stakeholders)
- Cross-sectional descriptive and analytical evaluation
- Focus on qualitative data
- Integration of quantitative data via the impact evaluation and implementing partner surveys
- Multiple data sources rigorously triangulated

Our continuous evaluation uses an appreciative inquiry approach of building on strengths, leading with appreciative comments about what went well so that we build trust and receptivity to all feedback. We developed observational guides to cover all types of activities and events. Each month, we collaborate with the implementing partner's management team to obtain updated information on the next month's activities, observe selected activities over the month, and then prepare a monthly performance feedback memo with appreciative comments (what went well) and constructive comments (what could be improved). We share this memo with the management team in written form, followed by a meeting or call to confirm understanding. The deeper understanding of each other's perspectives through dialogue greatly facilitates the adaptations that can improve efficacy and outcomes.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

There were many enabling factors. The most important by far was that USAID created a P&IE contract with the mandate, resources, and ingenuity to develop a pragmatic and productive system for carrying out multi-year, third-party evaluation activities, including impact evaluation, performance evaluation, and continuous evaluation. Setting up a pragmatic and productive system for these activities required a strong understanding of USAID, knowledge of development evaluation methodologies beyond traditional performance and impact evaluation, and deep experience with program implementation under USAID-funded mechanisms.

From a resource perspective, the P&IE contracts are in line with USAID's estimated monitoring and evaluation resource allocations. Since USAID is investing some $100 million in SHRP and LARA, with the World Bank investing parallel amounts in other parts of Uganda, it is crucial for all parties to obtain the evaluation data they need to assess results and adapt accordingly.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

To date, P&IE-SHRP has carried out three annual impact evaluations and two performance evaluations, and provided monthly feedback over 28 months.

The impact evaluations enabled the critical recognition that the reading intervention is having a very modest impact and allowed focus on factors inhibiting improvement in reading outcomes. This helped

the mission and the implementing partner identify some key design differences in the subsequent activity, LARA. For example:

- Much more emphasis is being placed on the overall school environment, with dedicated efforts to making it a safer and more conducive setting for learning.
- USAID also placed considerable emphasis on systems strengthening and national ownership.
- To foster integration between reading and school safety activities, USAID now has one development hypothesis connecting both elements.
- The implementing partner is focusing heavily on school-based mentoring and coaching of teachers, versus national and district training events.
- The implementing partner is placing much attention on communication and mobilization of influential voices to galvanize parents on the importance of early-grade reading and education to reverse high levels of student absenteeism.

These and other similarly important issues have been flagged in P&IE-SHRP feedback, especially as part of the performance evaluations.

Under continuous evaluation, between May 2013 and January 2016, P&IE-SHRP provided 254 appreciative comments, defined as actions we have observed that were done well, and 211 constructive comments, defined as actions that could be improved. From the 211 constructive comments, SHRP identified 166 follow-up actions — provided comments via feedback memos on the 166 actions SHRP could take to address the comments — representing 79 percent of the follow-up intentions. Actual implementation of such actions achieved 37 percent follow-up. Over the 28 months in which we provided feedback, we provided an average of 7.5 constructive comments per month, and SHRP acted on an average of more than 2 actions per month (38 percent).

What were the most important lessons learned?

Although we aspire to evidence-based decision-making, it is often an elusive goal. The sheer presence of a P&IE contractor means that there is a dedicated actor whose services focus on raising evaluative evidence and creating focus on the evaluation data by all parties — the implementing partner, USAID, government counterparts, and other supporting implementing partners. This increases the possibility that the information will be considered and used for adaptive management and improved outcomes.

By having the same implementing partners on both contracts, there is enhanced identification and agreement on learning that can be applied from one contract to the next. Some examples of learnings from P&IE-SHRP that will be applied to P&IE-LARA include the following:

- We are integrating much more of a Utilization Focused Evaluation approach throughout all of our P&IE evaluation activities, on the premise that user involvement in the design and implementation of the evaluation largely determines the degree to which the evaluation data are actually used for adaptive management.
- We have ramped up the level of evaluation expertise in all respects.

- In our continuous evaluation, we are:
  - Making written products a higher priority.
  - Tying our observation of activities much more tightly to key evaluation questions.
  - Creating data records by activity and evaluation question to facilitate analysis for the monthly feedback memos and performance evaluations.
  - Streamlining the process for efficiency gains while committing to direct communication following each performance feedback memo. This improves understanding by both parties of the intent of each other's comments, which in turn fosters use of the feedback (adaptive management actions) and more relevant and targeted feedback.
- We have isolated key issues affecting performance for all areas of work, such as country ownership and systems strengthening, integration modalities, robustness of community mobilization and engagement of influential voices and parents in school-based capacity building initiatives.