2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Localized Solutions to Improve Remote Monitoring During COVID-19 Pandemic

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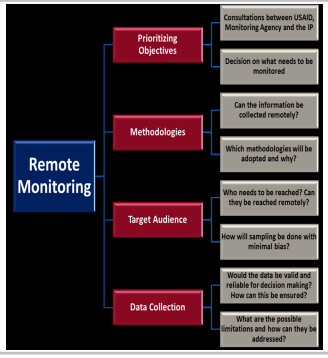

Figure 1: Considerations for Remote Monitoring. Credit: MSP

Summary:

In hard-to-reach areas or areas where USAID staff are prohibited from visiting, third party monitors - usually skilled data collectors based in or with access to these areas, can be deployed to be USAID's "eyes and ears." Third-party monitoring (TPM) verifies activities, collects contextual details, and obtains beneficiary feedback through physical observations and interviews with beneficiaries and stakeholders. The onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions on in-person interactions made traditional TPM impossible and necessitated adapting to innovative monitoring strategies to ensure TPM objectives were achieved within the pandemic context.

In 2020, USAID/KEA, through the Mission Support to Journey to Self-Reliance Pivot (MSP), adopted mixed-methods remote monitoring to verify two USAID interventions in Kenya, the results of which had varying degrees of success. The strategy comprised Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and phone interviews to collect beneficiary feedback. However, the response rate for the first IVR survey was low. Learning from the experience, in the subsequent remote monitoring, MSP adapted and employed radio messaging and interactions through local mother-tongue radio stations leading to a dramatic increase in the response rate.

While USAID and its Implementing Partners could adopt cost-efficient solutions based on lessons learned during the pandemic, such as remote monitoring and IVR, these solutions must be embedded in the local context to be effective. Indeed, in the Kenyan context, MSP discovered that local radio is a trusted source of information that helped build community awareness and confidence to respond to the new innovative IVR technology.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

USAID invests about $500 million annually in development and humanitarian programming in the Kenya and East Africa (KEA) Region. Effective monitoring and verification of USAID-funded programs is critical to ensuring implementation meets expectations and that beneficiaries are receiving quality and relevant support. Monitoring mechanisms must, therefore, be designed to uncover and document contextual or functional challenges and successes that inform adaptive management decisions and that can be used for continuous learning and improvement.

The pandemic necessitated a pivot to pandemic-compliant monitoring strategies. From April to August 2020, USAID/KEA, through MSP, adopted a mixed-methods remote monitoring strategy involving IVR technology to collect survey responses, combined with three-way-call phone interviews between monitor, beneficiary, and interpreter.

MSP first engaged the remote strategy to monitor Food for Peace (FFP) interventions in Kenya's Wajir County. In addition to phone interviews with beneficiaries, Nutrition Officers, and other government stakeholders, an IVR survey was disseminated to a list of 370 known beneficiaries, who were notified of the survey via an SMS alert. However, the survey response rate was very low - only 18% of targeted beneficiaries completed the survey. This illuminated a critical gap in the strategy that we learned from, which sparked adaptive management to better align the strategy to local context in subsequent IVR monitoring.

To stimulate response, we determined the best way to increase awareness and trust for the IVR survey was to contextualize it to local needs by promoting it via local, native language radio. Therefore, in the subsequent remote monitoring activity - for PMI's Indoor Residual Spray (IRS) campaign in Homa Bay and Migori counties - beneficiaries were invited to respond to an IVR survey through local radio messaging. The result was a dramatic increase in survey responses (with a target of 500 beneficiary responses, nearly 1900 responses were received).

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Monitoring and verification of programs must persist despite contextual and functional challenges and adapting the TPM strategy to allow non-physical monitoring was essential in the pandemic context. Furthermore, using continuous learning to inform revisions to the strategy, and further adapting it to local contextual needs, ensured that awareness and trust of the technology was built in the community. The learning and adapting led to remarkable success during the IRS remote monitoring and ensured the strategy will achieve maximum results in future.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

To ensure uninterrupted TPM of USAID/KEA activities, during the most restrictive period of the COVID-19 pandemic, MSP adopted remote monitoring methodologies. Specifically, MSP collected beneficiary data through an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology; conducted virtual Key Informant Interviews (KII's) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs); and used radio messaging and activation for community sensitization to improve response rates for the IVR survey.

To conduct effective remote monitoring, various considerations such as selecting the most suitable tools and approaches to collect the required data; cost and time factors; the efficiency of the proposed method to respond to the TPM objectives; and ensuring validity and reliability of the data collected were considered. MSP summarized the various questions and considerations in an algorithm/flow-chart (see Figure 1).

If a decision to conduct remote monitoring is made, the next step is to determine the most effective data collection tools to use to capture the information needed. Interactive Voice Response (IVR) is a telephone interviewing technique in which the interviewer is a high-quality recorded interactive script to which the respondent provides answers by pressing the keys on a cell phone. MSP first piloted this technology to monitor FFP activities in Wajir county. The survey consisted of seven questions in three languages (English, Swahili, and Dholuo) to allow the respondent to choose their preferred language. To confirm that the questions were responding to the TPM objectives, an internal message pretest was done to ensure comprehension and the logical sequence of the survey questions. In the IVR survey, respondents were required to dial a toll-free number and would immediately get an automated callback taking them through the seven questions in the survey.

However, a major limitation to the IVR survey turned out to be low response rates due to lack of awareness of an ongoing survey, or disinterest/distrust in participating in the survey. Learning from the experience in Wajir, to mitigate this, during the remote monitoring for the IRS activity, MSP adopted a technique of community sensitization through radio messaging and activation. The radio activation was done through three local radio stations (Ramogi, Nam Lolwe, and Mayienga) with high listenership in the targeted locations/counties. The messages were aired through vernacular language during the radio peak hours (morning breakfast shows 6am-10am and evening drives 4pm - 7pm) with commercial spots aired randomly 10am - 4pm. The radio messages were developed in English and submitted to the radio stations for translation into Luo language and production into radio content. This adaptive management approach led to success in the IRS monitoring, with 2,397 respondents to that survey (1,893 beneficiaries and 504 non-beneficiaries).

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Applying continuous learning and adapting to TPM during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed MSP to maintain and achieve its monitoring/verification objectives. Adapting to the remote monitoring through the IVR technology and employing learning from the first attempt to improve response rate through radio activation was key to the success of continuing activity monitoring when other options for in-person monitoring were not feasible.
The strengths of remote monitoring through IVR included:

- Low cost in data collection compared to in-person data collection
- Less time in data collection, rapid responses, and analysis
- Ideal for respondents with low literacy levels
- Can contact large samples within a shorter time
- Allows for anonymity of respondents
- Easy consent as the respondent initiates the contact

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

MSP is a support mechanism to USAID. Data from the remote monitoring was collected in a short time at a lower cost than in-person monitoring, enabling USAID to make quicker decisions on their ongoing spray activity as well improve future spray campaigns. USAID used key learning and recommendations from the remote monitoring to adapt the implementation strategy, leading to increased success in future campaigns. For example:

1. Improved efficiency: Findings from interviews with the spray operators revealed needed improvements in the “walk to work strategy,” as some sites assigned as “walkable” from the health facility were, in reality, too far. Thus, the strategy was revised so that spray operators who completed their allocated sites early on any given day then moved to support sites that were more distant, keeping the activity on-schedule.

2. Improved awareness and mobilization: In the 2020 spray campaign, only mass mobilization was done to sensitize the community. However, remote interviews with the mobilizers, county/sub-county leaders and supervisors, and spray operators revealed that mass mobilization was not sufficient to reach the intended population with essential information to facilitate a successful spray campaign. As a result, door-to-door sensitization was integrated into the mobilization strategy, increasing awareness, and improving coverage in the subsequent campaign from 94.2% to 97.5% in Migori County; and from 87.5% to 97.3% in Homa Bay County.

3. Increased community acceptance: Another key learning from the remote monitoring was that spray operators who were not from the local community were not accepted by the community, which interfered with their ability to carry out the spray exercise. Thus, in future campaigns, local religious and administrative leaders were engaged in the mobilization, and local Community Health Workers were enlisted as spray operators, which increased community acceptance to have their houses sprayed.

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

When considering using IVR for remote monitoring, some of the limitations need to be considered:

● Survey responses can be low if the targeted respondents are not aware of the ongoing survey, if they don't trust the technology, or if they don't know how to navigate the survey. In these cases, radio activation is thus a critical component.
● Network instability can hinder access to the survey or increase non-completion. IVR is most effective in areas with high mobile penetration; otherwise, more respondents without mobiles are likely to be left out. Perhaps a hybrid approach with in-person data collection can mitigate this.
● IVR may have high initial engagement but with high non-completion rates. However, with radio activation increasing the overall number of respondents, achieving the target number of complete surveys can still be managed.
● The technology requires prior sensitization to increase response rate, hence budgets for advertising or community sensitization are required, and thus IVR is more expensive than normal telephone interviews/surveys. However, overall costs are lower compared to in-person data collection that requires travel, which is expensive and time consuming, and sometimes not possible in non-permissive areas.