2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Creating Space for Cross Country TPM Learning

Name:

USAID/BHA/TPQ

Organization:

BHA/Office of Technical and Program Quality

Summary:

USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) provides assistance in some of the most insecure, dangerous environments to some of the most vulnerable populations in the world. The non-permissive contexts in which they operate require third-party monitoring (TPM) for program oversight since BHA staff are unable to conduct site visits directly. TPM is a relatively new way of working for USAID and the body of learning and best practice is limited. These decentralized mechanisms are implemented in silos, yet they experience common challenges.

BHA established a TPM Learning Event series in October 2022 to make connections between TPM mechanisms globally and develop a culture of knowledge sharing and learning that has been missing among and within BHA staff and contractors. To date, the series has hosted four events on topics such as adapting to disruptions and data utilization. Feedback, as well as the continued participation of TPM staff, indicates that these events contribute to the TPM knowledge base, support TPM staff in making programmatic decisions, and break down silos and create a community where none existed before.

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

From Afghanistan to Venezuela, BHA responds to an average of 75 crises in more than 65 countries a year and provides assistance in some of the most insecure, dangerous environments to some of the most vulnerable populations in the world. In many cases, BHA teams are funding programs in non-permissive environments where BHA staff cannot conduct in-person site visits. Thus, the Bureau has relied on third-party monitoring (TPM) mechanisms (implemented through contracts) as a critical component of program oversight. Currently there are BHA/TPM activities operating in 19 countries. The mechanisms vary in their operating context, purpose, approach, sectors and indicators monitored, and services provided. Since TPM represents a relatively new way of working for USAID, there is a limited body of learning and best practices, and TPM mechanisms work in silos to identify their own solutions due to challenging operating environments. Furthermore, TPM planning, management, and design is decentralized. For example, BHA A/CORs are based in Washington, D.C., BHA activity managers are in the field, and TPM field enumerators are in various locations across a country.
While TPM activities have been implemented in some countries for several years, there hasn't been a convening force or venue to make connections between TPM mechanisms globally. What's more, a culture of knowledge sharing and learning has been missing across contractors. BHA is addressing this gap by creating a forum for learning and sharing, a TPM learning series that connects BHA staff managing TPM mechanisms and contractors around key areas of interest aimed at strengthening the quality of TPM. There is an immense opportunity to better support TPMs to meet their purposes, create a community, and empower staff to make better informed decisions.

2. **What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?**

Relationships & Networks

Continuous Learning & Improvement

3. **HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?**

BHA felt learning events could create a safe-space for contractors and BHA staff, across countries, to discuss topics of common concern and insight, exchange information, capture knowledge, rethink approaches, make adaptations, provide feedback on guidance, ask clarifying questions, and build and strengthen relationships. They could also strengthen the quality of TPM activities by identifying and adopting promising practices across mechanisms and regions.

As an initial step, to foster internal cross-country knowledge sharing and a sense of cohesion across TPM managers, BHA established a TPM working group for BHA CORs and Activity Managers which met quarterly. This group served as an essential source of validation of the potential value for a learning series, as well as specific input around learning needs and opportunities across countries.

An October 2022 half day in-person learning event in Washington, D.C. set the stage with a knowledge cafe focused on: 1) what TPM mechanisms (TPMs), measure and why (including sector specific data collection); 2) how TPM information is utilized; 3) challenges/limitations in using information received; and 4) solutions to overcome challenges identified. During the in-person learning event, participants expressed strong interest in engaging the wider TPM community (including BHA field-based staff and TPM contractors) to share promising practices and lessons learned from TPM implementation across country contexts.

The first virtual TPM learning event was held in January 2023 for BHA staff with TPM responsibilities to discuss the various intended purposes of TPM: oversight and verification; accountability to affected populations; and learning. A March 2023 event brought in TPM contractor staff together with BHA to discuss adaptations to TPM approaches and activities during unexpected disruptions that limited site-access for TPM staff (such as natural disasters, conflict, political instability, pandemics, etc). A third session held in June 2023 focused on data utilization and the ways in which TPM staff can “rise above the noise” of the overwhelming number of data points collected to ensure learning from and effective use of this information by all stakeholders. Each session has been designed based on BHA and TPM contractor staff feedback from prior sessions to continuously elevate the conversation, improve the quality of TPM activities, and meet the needs of the audience.

The TPM learning event series has established a forum where TPM staff can benefit by hearing from a diversity of experience that is otherwise unavailable to them. By involving both BHA and external contractor staff, common concerns can be addressed through discussion with various perspectives and solutions. These semi-structured discussions also provide an opportunity to fill evidence gaps within USAID and to engage other M/B/IOs [such as the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL)] around similar exercises. Ultimately the TPM learning events have created a bridge to foster greater connection and knowledge sharing in a concise and structured way.

4. **RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.**

We know you may have answers in mind for both questions; However please choose one to highlight as part of this case story

B. ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

As the first ever learning series for TPMs across USAID, BHA has established a common forum to share innovations and ways of working more effectively, clarify guidance and where things need to be strengthened, and ultimately improve programming at local and global levels. Stakeholders can also hear how guidance created in Washington, D.C. can impact an enumerator at the field level and pick up on nuances that they might not otherwise understand. Stakeholders gain a better understanding of the shared challenges and tested innovations to strengthen how TPMs are implemented. It also creates connections within BHA and an evidence base for activity managers in the field to adapt approaches according to their operating contexts. This allows TPM managers to incorporate lessons learned into the design of future contracts and avoid duplicating issues across TPM mechanisms.

One participant provided feedback of the event saying, “It was a great learning opportunity and allowed us to learn from other contexts how they were able to navigate challenges/issues hurdling partners' monitoring and using innovation and creativity including remote, community and technology to ensure monitoring of the partners and the how and what of the assistance delivery!!!”

Another important component is that TPM isn't just BHA specific. This learning event series creates an Agency-wide body of evidence that others can engage with and draw upon. For example, PPL staff joined the session on disruptions to gather input for a Covid-19 study they were conducting as a way to cross-purpose similar conversations and maximize the use of BHA staff time. The discussions that take place in these learning events have the potential to inform important Agency initiatives that seek to understand and provide guidance on issues that relate to a variety of programming in challenging environments.

5. **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?**

Perhaps the biggest challenge in planning this learning event series was that both BHA and TPM contractor staff are extremely busy, often occupied with urgent and unexpected matters. Investing in the right people, processes and technical focus was key, including engaging support from BHA's buy-in to the Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning and Training (KDLT) mechanism in the design and facilitation of the events. BHA also had to intentionally engage prospective participants by demonstrating the potential value of these events through topics that are highly relevant to their day-to-day work. To create productive, open conversations, it was important that participants came ready to share and engage. Instead of casting a wide net, the planning group first reached out to BHA TPM staff to gauge their interest, and identify priority topic areas and relevant points of contact. This required tailored outreach and frequent follow-up, which is part of the relationship building approach. Since there was a lack of relationships between BHA field and contractor staff across different countries, the planning team helped make these connections through regular correspondence before, during, and after the events.

Planning a nuanced and technically focused event series such as this required a planning team with the right skill sets. The planning cohort includes BHA's Applied Learning and Monitoring and Evaluation Teams, some of whom are TPM experts, as well as an external facilitator from KDLT). The team makes sure the series remains active through weekly check-ins during which new topics are identified; session agendas are designed to emphasize content, participant engagement, and knowledge sharing; participant feedback is discussed and integrated; and outreach and logistics are considered at every step to ensure that form meets function.