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On November 13, 2023, the Bureau for Planning, Learning, and Resource Management (PLR) and Bureau for Global Health (GH) hosted “Response & Readiness: Lessons Learned from COVID-19.” The event shared key findings from the COVID-19 Big Picture Reflection (BPR), an Agency-wide pause & reflect exercise that synthesized COVID-19-related learning on responses and adaptations to address the pandemic’s second order effects and also featured lessons from USAID’s South Africa and Philippines missions and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Big Picture Reflection Key Takeways

Digitalization	Digital platforms and technology can be the cornerstone of adaptations during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when physical access and interpersonal contact are limited.
Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis responses cannot lose sight of equity and inclusion, which should inform program: funding, design and implementation. • Deliberate strategies and targeting can better equip marginalized and vulnerable groups to withstand and rebound from shocks.
Administrative and Contract Flexibility	Award and funding flexibility facilitates necessary programmatic pivots to maintain services and support when disruptive shocks affect program implementation.
Democracy, Human Rights and Governance	In addition to standalone programs, DRG strategies need to be mainstreamed across development sectors and grounded in localization, equity and inclusion principles.
Local Private Sector Engagement	When disruptive shocks affect service delivery systems and programs, creative leveraging of local stakeholders and partnerships can ensure that essential information, services, and commodities reach vulnerable and affected populations.
MEL during Shocks/Crises	Optimization of digitalization, remote monitoring and third-party monitoring bodes well for shock-responsive monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).
Health System Resilience	Health system resilience is central to most responses to crises/shocks, not just public health emergencies.

USAID South Africa

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more than 4 million reported cases and 100 thousand deaths. USAID, PEPFAR, and the CDC provided a coordinated effort to provide vaccines. This effort began as a direct service delivery model (focused on community outreach vaccine strategy) and shifted to an integrated approach (providing vaccination as part of routine health services for at risk populations).

Key Takeaways:

- Partnership and collaboration with governments critical for co-creation of emergency response and for mutual trust and response
- Understanding donor and stakeholder landscape important to ensure we are leveraging on other support and reducing redundancy and duplication
- Interagency collaboration important to leverage on each agency's programs
- Developing the capacity for locally led emergency response critical. Learnt many lessons on what worked and did not in South Africa that will strengthen future locally led and managed programs

USAID Philippines

In the Philippines, there were more than 4.1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, resulting in 66 thousand deaths. USAID/Philippines received additional \$50M assistance. Lock downs resulted in implementation disruptions, including in health services especially on family planning, tuberculosis, and HIV support. Mission's long standing partnership with Philippine government made it possible to mobilize assistance quickly

Key Takeaways:

- Harness the power of digital technology to connect people, services, resources
- Strong global collaboration to mitigate the impact of the pandemic
- Protect and take care of the HR/health care providers including having a strong mental health program for healthcare workers

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition

The OECD is conducting the global *Strategic Joint Evaluation of the Collective International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* to capture findings from partner countries in their response to the pandemic. The final report will be disseminated in mid-2024.

Emerging Findings:

- Building on trusted partnerships was effective to quickly deploy resources at scale
- Rapid responses for new COVID-specific support and adjusting existing programming made possible when partners adopted a "crisis mode" way of working.
- Challenges in consistent, effective communication and transparency of development co-operation
- Displacement effects of COVID-19 on longer-term development funding, and the balance of support between immediate health needs and secondary effects of the pandemic
- Gaps, inconsistency and low reliability of financial, results data
- Unsustainable pressures on staff
- Organisations insufficiently reactive to revisit decisions or update strategies (rapid but not necessarily agile)
- Prevention hard to prioritise before crisis full blown
- Backsliding on human rights