# Monitoring & Evaluation for Adaptive Management:
# 8 Promising Practices

Through the Complexity-Aware M&E (C-AM&E) Initiative, the USAID Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning is learning about using, supporting, and spreading innovative M&E solutions such as C-AM&E approaches.[1] In 2015, the C-AM&E Initiative supported trials of C-AM&E approaches by USAID Missions and Implementing Partners and conducted research on these trials.

Preliminary findings from four trials reveal eight (8) promising practices across four stages as USAID staff plan; design/commission; refine the design; and manage/implement/use M&E. These practices may be applicable when working with C-AM&E specifically or strengthening M&E practice in general.

| Plan | Design & Commission | Refine Design | Manage, Implement, Use |

## Promising Practice #1: Focus on buy-in at all stages of M&E

Generating and using data for adaptive management requires new ways of working together. Uneven incentives among stakeholders (donors, implementing partners, local partners, etc.) can undermine the evaluation or monitoring system and hamper use of data.

- **Engage key stakeholders early**. The "who" will change at each stage in the process, but always ask: "*Who should be included?*" Include those whose cooperation will be necessary to conduct the evaluation or to implement the monitoring system – from design to use of findings and adapting interventions.
- **Invest in learning and dialogue**. Agreeing on the primary intended uses and users sets the stage for a thoughtful design. Collaboration during planning and design supports use of findings.
- **Allow enough time** for planning, designing, and commissioning.

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## Promising Practice #2: Prioritize actionable information

Make critical design choices based on use - rather than reporting requirements - while planning for monitoring systems or evaluations. Adopt tools that focus on use and learning to answer these questions:

- *What is your M&E need related to complexity?* Tool: <u>Six Simple Questions</u> worksheet
- *Who is ready for innovation?* Create internal checklist documenting early conversations
- *Will this C-AM&E approach provide information we can use?* Conduct data simulation exercise

### Promising Practice #3: Lighten the M&E load

- Examine existing M&E systems to determine what information is being used and what is essentially data "dead weight". Check with indicator points of contact to ensure responsible streamlining.
- Encourage collaboration between donors and implementing partners so they can streamline M&E systems and stop collecting and reporting data that are not being used. This will free up time and resources for more actionable data.

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[1] See the <u>Complexity-Aware Monitoring Discussion Note</u>, December 2013 for additional information on C-AM&E approaches.

- Integrate Complexity-Aware M&E approaches with existing M&E systems where possible to avoid duplicating efforts.

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## Promising Practice #4:  Ensure fit between questions and approach
- Avoid the tendency to choose an approach before identifying a use and user. Instead focus on the fit between M&E questions and approaches throughout design.
- Use tools that focus on use and learning to help key stakeholders articulate measurement needs during early design (see Promising Practice #2).
- Consider new questions that fit complexity! In common practice, M&E questions are usually about causality and measuring contribution of the intervention. Many of these questions are better answered with traditional M&E methods. New methods answer new questions.

## Promising Practice #5:  Allow time to find specialized expertise and to introduce them to the context
- Allow enough time to recruit the right expertise for this new field. With a limited pool of expertise in C-AM&E, competitive procurement often fails to locate the right person to work closely with the team.
- Prepare to provide experts with information on key USAID policies, procedures and players related to the practice of M&E inside the Agency. Some experts have limited experience working with USAID, but knowledge of this organizational context will contribute to success of the technical assistance.
- Commit to learning about new approaches to have a better understanding of when an approach can (or cannot) answer the M&E questions and when it does (or does not) suit the situation.

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## Promising Practice #6:  Empower intended users of the M&E information to make key design decisions
- Look for experts who are well qualified in providing technical assistance on new M&E approaches. Iterative and participatory design processes are best led by experts who can demonstrate the approach and lead hands-on application through coaching.
- Include primary intended users of the M&E data when making key decisions about designing the evaluation or monitoring system.
- Consider inviting beneficiaries and local partners to participate alongside other key stakeholders in design depending on the approach and circumstances.

## Promising Practice #7:  Invest in an in-person design workshop
- Prepare for conducting the monitoring or evaluation activity by investing in a participatory in-country design workshop. This also lays the groundwork for use of findings and data.
- Include a variety of stakeholders (donor, implementing partners, and local partners) in design workshops wherever possible to help build the capacity for C-AM&E in the development sector.

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## Promising Practice #8:  Invest in a systemic approach for building capacity for Complexity-Aware M&E at all stages

Capacity building for complexity-aware M&E requires a systemic approach, rather than a one-by-one solution. Problems such as the limited number of qualified experts or contracting procedures that constrain participatory design processes require **a system-wide solution**.

**Everyone has a role to play in adopting a systemic approach to increasing capacity:** from donors to implementing partners to M&E contractors and consultants.

- **Commissioners can seek knowledge about approaches** to more effectively draft scopes of work and manage the monitoring system or evaluation.
- **Experts can train, coach and mentor** the next generation of practitioners.
- **Everyone can maximize the opportunity for hands-on learning** by seeking guidance during application of complexity-aware approaches. These approaches cannot be learned from books or one-hour presentations. Often, the more one puts into the approach, the more they get out of it!