

# Does shared decision-making help or hinder M&E innovation?

The Utilization focused evaluation (UFE) approach has made significant contributions to improving evaluation practice since its introduction in the late 1970s. The basic premise of UFE is that designing evaluations to provide actionable answers to meet specific uses for specific users increases the utilization of evaluation.

When USAID's Complexity-Aware M&E Team began working with staff and implementing partners to design trials of innovative M&E approaches, we adopted a UFE approach to help us overcome both technical and practical challenges. Complexity-aware monitoring approaches are intended to support adaptive management; that is, they should provide information to support specific users in making management decisions where cause and effect relationships are unclear, stakeholders have significantly different perspectives, new needs and opportunities are arising, or a new solution must be developed. Because complexity-aware monitoring's primary purpose is learning and use, rather than reporting and accountability, the choice of the UFE approach was clear!

When a potential trial partner approaches us, our first challenge is to identify the focus and scope of the trial. Large programs with multiple components and diverse stakeholders provide many opportunities for C-AM&E approaches to add value. Since trialing new approaches requires extra time and resources, we want to ensure that each trial is a manageable size and scope. How do we identify the best focus and the right scope? We take a UFE approach and work with trial partners to identify a primary user with a specific intended use and design the trial to meet that need. In practice, this proved to be more challenging than we expected.

In one of our early trials, we worked with a program implemented by a consortium of organizations across several countries in Africa. Consortium members from headquarters and the field participated, as did representatives of the USAID office funding the program. Implementers and funders alike recognized that they were lacking information that could help them make better decisions for steering the program. We met several times to discuss the different ways that C-AM might meet their information needs. Each team member had a different idea about what information might be useful, and the team as a whole could not reach a decision on whose information needs should be given priority for the trial. The program team requested the C-AM&E team to educate all of them on systems thinking, the way complexity works in project contexts, and promising C-AM&E approaches. Once the team had sufficient understanding, they explained, they would be able to reach a decision. Our little C-AM&E team did not have sufficient time and resources to provide such in-depth capacity-building to a large, diverse and geographically dispersed group. We suggested a couple of options for users and uses, but the group could not reach an agreement internally. Unable to identify a primary user, the trial did not move forward.

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The next group to approach us was well acquainted with complexity. They had identified a primary data user and were eager to get started right away. We moved through the early design steps smoothly (relative to our steep learning curve). The group agreed on the information needed for a specific use, and the C-AM approach that would be used. Unfortunately, regulations prevented the implementing partner from joining these initial discussions because the project was in the middle of the re-bidding process. As soon as the contract was awarded, the implementing partner joined the discussions and took part in critical decisions about design and implementation of the monitoring approach. We soon learned that the implementing partner did not feel that the trial approach was useful or feasible. Without unanimous agreement, the group chose not to proceed.

In USAID, key programming decisions are often distributed across a number of people. The authority to take a decision may lie formally with one individual, but many people gather around the table to provide input. The people participating in a decision work in different parts of USAID and in partner organizations. They come from different professional backgrounds and bring different expertise and perspectives. Negotiation and influence are an important part of decision making; groups often seek consensus or broad agreement.

Distributed decision making has a number of benefits. But how does it affect efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation inside the Agency? First, distributed decision making makes it harder to provide actionable data for specific decisions. It's more difficult to identify primary users with common use for monitoring data and evaluation findings. Second, shared decision making tends to discourage innovation. It's harder to do something new because it is more likely that one individual will feel uncomfortable and exercise their veto.

In many ways, distributed decision making may result in better decisions overall, but the effect on efforts to innovate and improve data use is sobering. What's the answer? In our efforts to support M&E innovation in the Agency, we're piloting a few promising practices to address these challenges.

**Assessing Readiness to Learn and Innovate.** Starting early and throughout our engagement with potential partners, we assess a team's readiness to learn and innovate. The C-AM&E team is based in DC and many of our trial partners are based in USAID Missions and partner organizations around the globe. Assessing readiness to learn and innovate is difficult to do remotely. We've developed a checklist to help us listen better and improve our chances of identifying partners who are ready and able to invest the extra effort to try something new.

**Distinguish the Primary Users from the Broader Learning Circle.** We convene learning circles which engage a broad spectrum of people with a stake in the trial. We work with the trial partners to identify key decision makers with the responsibility and authority to use the data generated by new approaches for management decisions. Primary users provide input into design of the trial, while stakeholders who are interested in the trials but are less active in decision-making still have space in the learning circle.

**Data Report Simulations.** This recent addition to our trial launch toolbox is intended to help us to confirm the proposed user and use, and to test whether a chosen C-AM approach would provide actionable data. We present the trial partners with a mock report of data and discuss what actions the primary user would take based on this data. In addition to confirming technical fit, we hope that discussions around mock-up data will provide insight into a trial partners' willingness, responsibility and authority to take action based on evidence.

The Complexity-Aware M&E initiative is still young, and we have much to learn about how institutional factors, such as shared decision making, affect the adoption and adaptation of new M&E approaches. We will continue to learn with and from our partners on what helps and hinders M&E innovation in USAID. Join the conversation!