Briefing note

USAID Wildlife Asia as a case study in adaptive rigour

Monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management

Jessica Ziegler

September 2020

Key messages

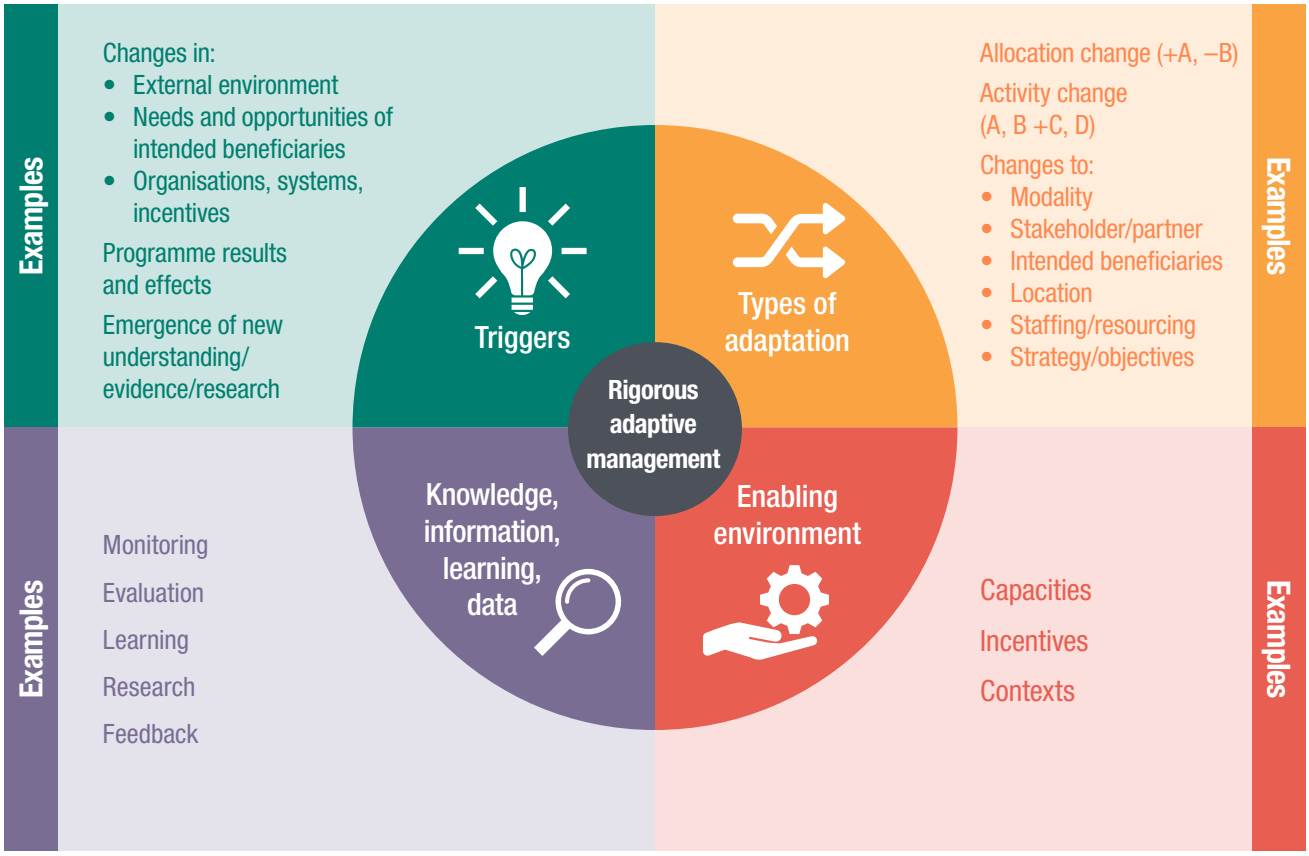
- When faced with programmatic complexity, it is important to take an adaptive approach driven by continuous and iterative monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Wildlife Asia, which works to advance regional action towards ending illegal wildlife trafficking in Southeast Asia and China, has embraced this approach as a way of operationalising adaptive rigour.
- Throughout programming, MEL approaches should reflect the characteristics of adaptive rigour: comprehensiveness, usefulness, practicality, timeliness and support.
- To lay the groundwork for a 'documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions' that typifies the practice of adaptive rigour, it is helpful to facilitate a participatory, evidence-driven and structured process to assess the context, develop a situation model, and design a theory of change.
- Utilising performance monitoring and research in order to test and revise technical approaches and employing mixed methods to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as looking for relevant lessons generated by others, can ensure access to the most useful information for decision-making throughout implementation.
- For adaptive management, it is not enough to monitor, evaluate and learn; it is also essential to pause and reflect in order to analyse and process evidence gained through MEL with colleagues and stakeholders to reach the right conclusions and make good decisions.

Introduction

Effective adaptive management involves anticipating and responding to key triggers for change with different types of adaptations. Adaptive rigour, a concept described by the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative, is about ensuring that the data, information, methods, processes and systems that underpin adaptive management are robust, systematic and high-quality. Combined, these elements make up rigorous adaptive management. Figure 1 shows the triggers and types of adaptation that characterise adaptive management (in the top half), and the knowledge, learning, information, data and enabling environment that allow for adaptive rigour underpinning adaptive management (in the bottom half).

This briefing note[1] looks at how one development programme – USAID Wildlife Asia – has operationalised these concepts of adaptive rigour and adaptive management as part of its approach to collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA).[2] The first three sections describe how USAID Wildlife Asia incorporates monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management (MEL4AM) throughout programming for three key purposes:

Figure 1 The elements of rigorous adaptive management



1 This briefing note was originally written for the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative's programme donors: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Foreign. Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In light of the closure of the GLAM programme, it was agreed to make the note publicly available. It is targeted at other donors and practitioners who would like to know more about these methods and their practical implementation.

2 CLA is a framework and a set of practices for strengthening organisational learning and adaptive management, and the conditions that enable them throughout the programme cycle to improve development effectiveness. CLA is a term coined by USAID that shares many of the same characteristics of rigorous adaptive management as described by GLAM.

- for diagnosis as the programme assesses the context and designs interventions
- for monitoring and learning throughout implementation
- for evaluation and learning during key times of adaptation and strategic decision-making.

For each of these, the section features an example of an adaptation that USAID Wildlife Asia has made, along with a description of the trigger for the change; evidence and MEL tools/approaches used; the type of adaptation made; and the result of the adaptation so far.

The final section discusses some of the specific enabling conditions that USAID Wildlife Asia noted as being important for its practice of MEL and adaptive management more broadly. The case study concludes with reflections from USAID Wildlife Asia about how it plans to further develop its approach to adaptive management.

Programme background

Asia's rapid growth, while having many positive developmental effects, has also created unsustainable and increased demand for natural resources, resulting in a decline in natural capital and degradation of the region's ecosystems. Additionally, as incomes have risen, demand for illegal wildlife products has grown. Wildlife trafficking not only depletes natural resources and threatens endangered species, but also represents a global security threat due to its connections with other crime networks and terrorist financing. Designed to improve regional action towards ending wildlife trafficking, USAID Wildlife Asia is a five-year programme funded by USAID's Regional Development Mission for Asia (RDMA) and implemented by a consortium of six partners that work across six countries in the Lower Mekong region of Southeast Asia and China.[3] There are four objectives:

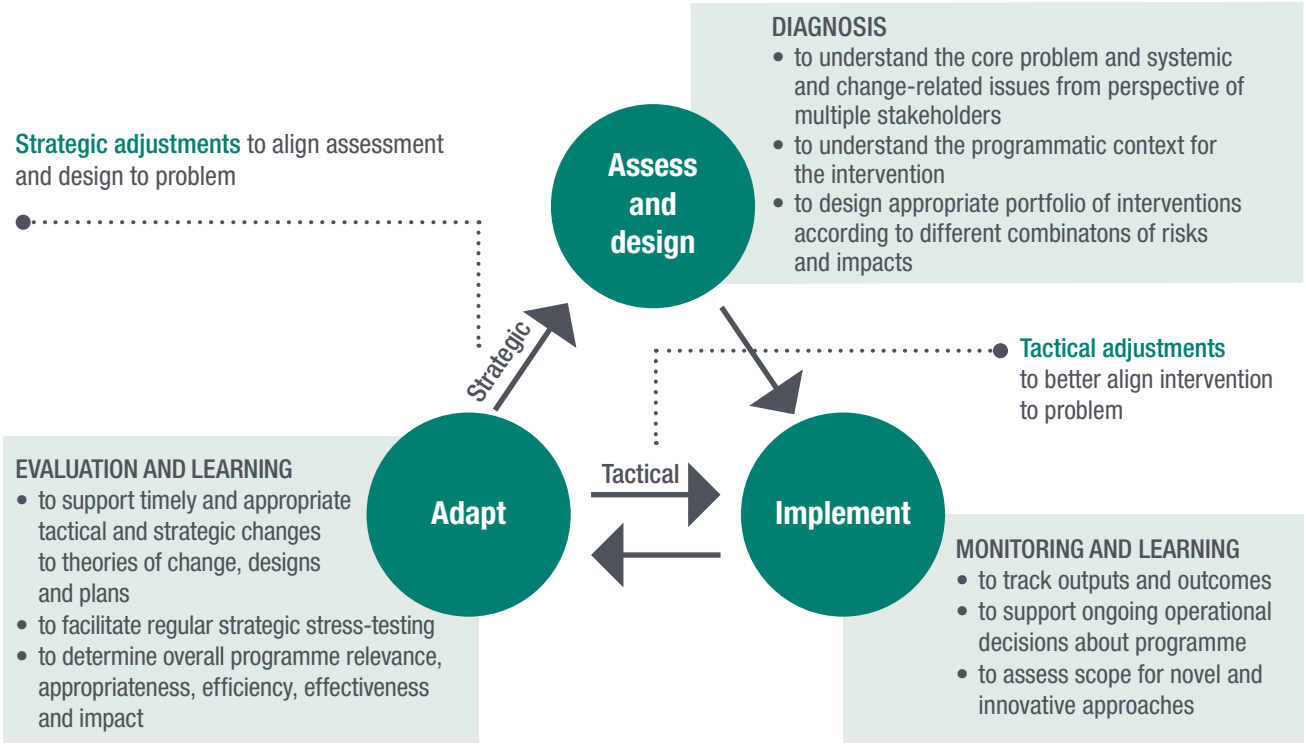
1. reduce consumer demand for wildlife parts and product
2. strengthen regional law enforcement capacity and coordination
3. increase political commitment to countering wildlife trafficking (CWT)
4. support RDMA's regional coordination of CWT stakeholders and efforts to strengthen the US Government's (USG's) interagency CWT team.

A programme as complex as USAID Wildlife Asia faces many challenges that have required it to be highly adaptable. Given these complexities, USAID Wildlife Asia recognised the need to understand the programmatic context and core problems in order to design interventions, iteratively test implementation strategies to determine what would be most effective, and then use evidence systematically to inform decision-making about key strategic adaptations. The next sections describe how the programme's MEL4AM system has delivered this. See Figure 2 on the roles of MEL in adaptive programmes, and Ramalingam et al. (2019) to learn more.

For USAID Wildlife Asia, what GLAM calls adaptive rigour involves making informed decisions by drawing from the programme's own quantitative and qualitative data, while also continually learning from others beyond the programme, and synthesising this learning into action through systematic reflection processes with critical stakeholders. This has required MEL4AM practices at the design phase, throughout routine implementation, and at moments of strategic adaptation (Box 1).

3 The USAID Wildlife Asia consortium partners are: RTI International, FHI 360, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Freeland Foundation, the Conservation Council of Nations (CCN) and TRAFFIC.

Figure 2 The roles of MEL in adaptive programmes



Source: Adapted from Ramalingam et al. (2019)

Box 1 MEL4AM throughout programming

As described in the GLAM initiative's briefing note on 'Making adaptive rigour work' (Ramalingam et al., 2019), MEL4AM refers to a tailored package of MEL approaches, methods and tools, staff capacities and attributes, relationships and incentive systems that support a documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions. There is no binary classification of MEL4AM as against all other MEL, but rather a continuum along a number of dimensions that make things more or less adaptive. MEL4AM enables an adaptive management approach that embraces both accountability for and rigour in the use of quality evidence. But it also means understanding rigour differently – accountability cannot be geared to predefined results and processes; rather, it needs to enable experimentation rather than inhibit it. As such, MEL4AM emphasises the following characteristics:

- **Comprehensiveness:** Monitoring, evaluation and learning are embedded throughout delivery – not just at the start and end.
- **Usefulness:** There is appropriate quality of data and any data and evidence generated is actually acted upon, leading to appropriate adaptations. This includes recognition of the complexity and uncertainty involved in bringing about systemic change, and so the need for systematised, regular and reasonably timely learning.
- **Practicality:** Diverse and tailored MEL approaches are focused on progress towards outcomes/objectives and are transparent about biases and gaps.
- **Timeliness:** Trade-offs are managed and there is a balance between different timeframes, ensuring right-time data to inform decision-making.
- **Support:** Tools, staff capacities and attributes, relationships and incentive systems support a documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions.

MEL for diagnosis

Because of USAID requirements regarding theories of change, good practice in the biodiversity sector, and in recognition of the complexity the programme was facing, USAID Wildlife Asia employed a number of MEL4AM approaches and tools during start-up for diagnosis and planning (see Box 2). This emphasis on diagnosis led USAID Wildlife Asia to work with RDMA, USAID's Office of Forestry and Biodiversity (FAB) and the USAID Measuring Impact (MI) programme to generate a situation model through a context/problem analysis, develop robust results chains for its objectives and prioritise learning questions into a learning agenda.

To initiate this process, RDMA convened a wide range of stakeholders – including members from USAID Wildlife Asia's predecessor contract, local actors and technical experts – to jointly identify the issues surrounding wildlife trafficking in a **situation model.** With help from FAB and MI, they identified three direct threats to the region's biodiversity, two main drivers and their contributing factors. Based on the relationships between the contributing factors, drivers and threats, USAID Wildlife Asia developed a set of strategic approaches.

USAID Wildlife Asia's technical teams then took the situation model generated and drafted **results chains** for each of the programme's strategic approaches by defining the desired results, brainstorming the actions it would take to achieve those results, and capturing critical assumptions and risks. The results chains that emerged were then fully diagrammed using the Miradi software, reshared with the broader stakeholder group, validated and revised based on input and additional information collected through supporting analysis, including a political economy analysis.[4]

The technical teams also identified learning questions based on the results chains by looking at their key assumptions and missing links of critical evidence and then prioritised what information they truly needed to test those assumptions and fill in the evidence gaps in order to achieve their results. The questions formed the foundation of a **learning agenda**, which guided prioritisation of early research needs to enhance staff understanding of the programmatic context, core problem and systemic and change-related issues for programme design.

As the programme's Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist explained, the aforementioned process 'really helped us to think logically and say, "this should come before that can take place, and

Box 2 MEL4AM tools and approaches for diagnosis and planning

A **situation model** is a graphic representation of a context or problem analysis that uses a series of boxes and arrows to succinctly represent a set of observed or presumed causal relationships among factors that impact one or more biodiversity focal interests (see USAID, 2016a).

Results chains, a type of logic model that graphically depicts a theory of change, 'clearly state the expected results and assumptions behind the proposed strategic approaches that make up the [programme's] theory of change. Results chains are useful tools for [programme] design teams because they help them discuss, refine, and make their programmatic assumptions explicit; measure the effectiveness of their strategic approaches; and develop a common framework for cross-program learning among [programmes] using similar strategic approaches' (USAID, 2016b: 1).

A **learning agenda** includes (1) a set of questions identifying critical knowledge gaps, (2) associated activities to address them and (3) knowledge products to disseminate findings for usage and application. It helps align and prioritise MEL efforts based on information needed for decision-making (see USAID, n.d., a).

4 The programme's combined results chain can be seen here: www.usaidwildlifeasia.org/about-usaidwildlifeasia. For Miradi see www.miradi.org.

these are our desired results"'. The results chain visuals remain useful for onboarding new staff, as they explain the underlying logic and primary focus of the programme. Similarly, the focus that the results chains put on expected results has helped the team make decisions about how to respond to or redirect stakeholder requests, especially from host governments, that may not contribute to the programme's purpose. In these ways, they help to keep everyone 'on the same page' so that adaptations are aligned with objectives and not driven by ad hoc requests. USAID Wildlife Asia also intentionally revisits and, if necessary, revises its results chains every year during its work planning process, as described in the adaptive management example in Figure 3.

Figure 3 MEL4AM in action: expanding a results chain

Trigger(s)

Through 'pause and reflect' discussions with USAID, it became clear that a shift in strategic direction would be necessary to ensure that the Law Enforcement Capacity and Coordination Strengthening training interventions were more effectively achieving the desired results. While follow-up surveys with trainees showed that they were learning and using the new skills taught, there were challenges in translating this into stronger CWT response due to limited support from higher authorities and a lack of enabling policies within their organisation.

MEL tools/approaches

Evidence was drawn from quarterly MEL activity reports on performance indicators, training follow-up surveys and key informant interviews. The evidence was incorporated into a review of the results chain during an annual 'pause and reflect' workshop. Additionally, a validation exercise conducted in 2018, including key informant interviews, qualitative surveys with past law enforcement trainees, and agency surveys, resulted in further adaptations to USAID Wildlife Asia's programme design for its law enforcement training.

Adaptative management

USAID Wildlife Asia decided to further strengthen institutionalisation and the engagement of senior management so that the focus on CWT would come from within the organisations themselves. In response, the results chain was expanded to include additional intermediary results reflecting the steps necessary to institutionalise capacity-building efforts within the national training organisations. The programme placed more time and attention on holistic capacity-building packages that included establishing relationships and working with law enforcement institutions, regional bodies and executive-level officers to ensure buy-in, promote adoption and sustain CWT institutionalisation.

Results so far

In the programme's fourth offering of the Counter Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) course, it worked with Interpol to include a Regional Investigative Analytic Case Management module for participants to work on active cases and share information, and encourage and foster trust and collaboration in the dismantling of organised criminal syndicates. Law enforcement agencies and institutions have shown genuine interest in the CTOC training model. For example, the People's Police Academy of Vietnam is now playing a leadership role in embedding CTOC in its curricula. USAID Wildlife Asia is also currently pursuing ways to work with the National Police Organisation for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEANAPOL) to replicate the approach, including a joint CWT Executive Leadership Consultation.

The second round of law enforcement training validation, ongoing now, will help to inform the next development of the programme as USAID Wildlife Asia looks to move from providing training directly to having it institutionalised within countries' law enforcement training institutions.

Lessons learned in using MEL4AM for diagnosis

The process of developing situation models and associated results chains is well documented by USAID and other conservation groups, including the Conservation Measures Partnership.[5] Below are some considerations from USAID Wildlife Asia about using diagnostic MEL4AM tools like these for adaptive management:

- **Facilitate a participatory, evidence-driven and structured process:** In order to lay the groundwork for a 'documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions' that typifies the practice of adaptive rigour, it is helpful to facilitate a participatory, evidence-driven and structured process to assess the context, develop a situation model, and design a theory of change by consulting with appropriate stakeholders, conducting additional analysis when needed, and drawing on deep technical expertise within the team.
- **Treat the outputs as living resources:** Using situation models and results chains to help keep everyone focused on the expected results does not mean that they are set in stone. As USAID Wildlife Asia does, it is important to stress with staff that these are living resources that can be altered, as needed, each year based on learning and knowledge gained from programmatic learning, new studies and research. The programme's Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) also reflected that having a learning agenda as a living resource reinforces the idea that no one has all the answers and there are still things to learn, which means that everyone needs to remain open to new ways of working.

MEL for monitoring and learning throughout implementation

Throughout implementation, USAID Wildlife Asia's MEL4AM includes many quantitative and qualitative approaches to support ongoing performance monitoring and continuous learning and improvement (see Box 3). It collects data and knowledge through a variety of sources, including programme and partner records, interviews, surveys and participatory methods, and host-country, US Government interagency and regional development partner data. As USAID Wildlife Asia's MEL plan describes, its regular MEL4AM methods fall into three categories:

- primary data collection through assessments, surveys, interviews and focus group discussions

Box 3 MEL4AM tools and approaches for monitoring and learning

As an MEL4AM practice, **performance monitoring** stresses the inclusion of quantitative and qualitative data that speaks to 'the quantity, quality, and timeliness of activity outputs…[as well as programme] and strategic outcomes that are expected to result from the combination of these outputs and other factors' (USAID, n.d., b). Moreover, it goes beyond upwards accountability, requiring greater focus on data utilisation in decision-making by programme implementers, such as through participatory sense-making exercises.

Operational research is most effective as a MEL4AM approach when it builds upon and extends the existing evidence base, when it is targeted to answer critical learning questions necessary for decision-making, and when it is sufficiently but not overly rigorous (i.e. is 'right-sized') and is timed to feed results/findings into decision-making. Just as in performance monitoring, it helps to use participatory sense-making approaches to synthesise findings into actions.

5 Visit the USAID Biodiversity Conservation Gateway to access a series of 'how-to' guides and other resources (https://rmportal.net/biodiversityconservation-gateway/projects/closed-global-projects/measuring-impact/how-to-guides-for-usaid-biodiversity-programming/how-to-guides-for-usaid-biodiversity-programming). For the Conservation Measures Partnership see www.conservationmeasures.org.

- primary data aggregation from programme records, such as training evaluations, pre-post knowledge tests, trip reports and workshop reports
- secondary data analysis from partners or public records.

These data, along with the team's own experience from implementation, are routinely brought into discussions to inform technical team meetings, and also feed into regular quarterly reports submitted to USAID. Prior to developing these reports, USAID Wildlife Asia takes the extra step of highlighting the most recent **performance monitoring** data for each team, to check on where they stand on implementation. These team-specific indicator reports provide progress and target information on each of its indicators across the life of the programme. When sharing these displays with each team lead and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) point of contact, the Senior M&E Specialist also includes probing qualitative questions that encourage teams to think about what the data means, how it is related to CWT, and what the team's next steps should be. Seeing their performance monitoring data each quarter and participating in these sense-making exercises has helped make staff more comfortable with using data as part of their broader approach to implementation, reinforcing a culture of continuous learning.

Similarly, USAID Wildlife Asia has used research – both **operational research** it conducts itself and research findings generated by others – to inform ongoing implementation decisions, for example in the testing and refinement of social and behaviour change communications (SBCC) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 MEL4AM in action: iterative testing and refinement of social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) approaches

Trigger(s)

To support demand reduction, USAID Wildlife Asia conducted numerous formative research studies to understand consumer norms and attitudes about buying, using and owning wildlife parts and products. In response to this internal research, message testing, and research conducted by secondary actors, the programme continuously refined its SBCC approaches.

MEL tools/approaches

The programme reviewed campaign digital analytics; conducted mixed-methods research studies on the norms and attitudes surrounding consumer demand for and use of wildlife parts and products; and drew upon research studies from other CWT partners, such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF), related to consumer characteristics. To support more timely data collection, USAID Wildlife Asia also recently adapted its data collection methods for their campaigns to include quick tracking surveys on social media including WeChat and Facebook. These used streamlined questions focusing on attitudes and behaviour change within the target audience to see whether campaigns are on the right track.

Adaptative management

USAID Wildlife Asia has made several adaptations to align its SBCC approach with shifts in consumer profiles, norms and attitudes. For example, USAID Wildlife Asia's two campaigns on ivory used social influencers to question ivory's spiritual power to protect a person or bring good fortune, targeting people's beliefs about ivory. In response to WWF and USAID research showing high consumer demand among Chinese tourists, USAID Wildlife Asia adjusted its target audience and SBCC strategies to reach international travellers by working more with the hospitality industry. It also adjusted media placements to better target audiences that were under-reached and shortened the lengths of campaign videos to attract and sustain viewer attention.

Results so far

Early tracking and monitoring data, such as short surveys on WeChat and Facebook, show promising findings that USAID Wildlife Asia is on the right track in its demand reduction strategy. For example, people who have been exposed to campaign messages in Thailand tend to exhibit attitudes against illegal wildlife consumption. The programme is planning to conduct surveys to evaluate these campaigns and use the findings to provide recommendations for future demand reduction efforts.

Lessons learned in using MEL4AM for monitoring and learning throughout implementation

It is widely recognised that building and sustaining a culture of continuous learning, and ensuring that learning informs implementation, takes both effort and resources. USAID Wildlife Asia, with the support and encouragement of USAID/RDMA, has intentionally done this from the very beginning. In doing so, it has learned the following:

- **Be inclusive and expansive regarding data and knowledge sources:** USAID Wildlife Asia has clearly recognised the importance of using data and knowledge from a wide variety of internal and external sources. Using mixed methods to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as looking for relevant lessons generated by others, can ensure access to the most useful information for decision-making.
- **Make the data accessible:** By sharing data with technical teams regularly and in a user-friendly format, USAID Wildlife Asia has helped its staff to feel comfortable engaging with indicator performance data. Working with staff to develop easy-to-use data tools helps them understand their progress against targets.
- **Focus on data utilisation:** It is not enough to have the data, even in user-friendly formats. In order to ensure that data is actually utilised to inform programmatic decisions, especially about any changes that may need to be made, stakeholders (including those who are implementing 'on the ground') must have a chance to consider and discuss what the data means for their work. This often requires active facilitation of a conversation about what is working well, what is not, and what needs to change as a result.

MEL for evaluation and learning at a strategic level

As the sections above describe, USAID Wildlife Asia uses MEL4AM throughout implementation to make tactical improvements to its programmes based on learning. However, larger, strategic adaptations tend to happen in a more structured way during annual work planning (see Box 4 and Figure 5).

For USAID Wildlife Asia, work planning is based on a series of events where the entire team comes together, along with USAID staff, to pause and reflect, take stock of their work, discuss CWT trends and solidify their vision for the coming year. This is highly focused on MEL4AM, as the team brings together the evidence available to them in a very intentional way: performance monitoring data, findings from internal assessments and formative and external research, contextual updates, experiential knowledge and broader USAID policy guidance. The work planning process usually lasts a week, beginning with an in-person 'pause and reflect' workshop (see Box 4). In the words of USAID Wildlife Asia's COR, intentionally pausing and reflecting as part of an adaptive approach 'creates the ecosystem in which we have time, which we don't take in our day-to-day, to reflect on what we are doing, whether the logic still holds, and how the situation has changed'.

Box 4 MEL4AM tools and approaches at a strategic level

'Pause and reflect' simply refers to taking a step back regularly to see beyond the day-to-day tasks and look at the bigger picture in order to decide how to move forward. A strong MEL4AM approach includes individual and team reflection and is both opportunistic (i.e. pausing when the need arises) and routine (e.g. quarterly or annually). Using participatory approaches and adult learning techniques creates an environment where candid conversations become the norm and surfaces the learning needed to make informed decisions. Some common pause and reflect practices include after-action reviews, learning-focused team meetings and stock-taking exercises.

Figure 5 MEL4AM in action: broadening the focus

Trigger(s)

Despite the programme's intention to work with the USG interagency CWT team, the initial design assumption that USAID Wildlife Asia was the right actor to drive collaboration within the system was wrong; the programme could not leverage the required incentives to convene these stakeholders.

MEL tools/approaches

During pause and reflect activities, the slow progress on milestones related to convening approaches, such as very low uptake of collaboration tools developed, was clear. Staff also shared experiences about the challenges working on convening activities, raising questions about the key assumptions.

Adaptative management

USAID Wildlife Asia worked with RDMA to expand the focus of this strategic approach beyond the USG. Based on the incentives and needs of new stakeholders, the programme shifted to 'support information exchange, alignment and coordination amongst both USG and non-USG actors (focal country governments, development partners/donors, NGOs, private sector)'.

Results so far

USAID Wildlife Asia now promotes coordination in the broader community by producing and sharing an annual knowledge product of updates in the evidence for CWT programming. By encouraging knowledge exchange among CTW partners, the programme increases transparency and access to information, thereby increasing the effectiveness of organisations in its network. The shift also resulted in better-coordinated strategies and leveraged resources among CWT actors.

During the pause and reflect workshop, staff revisit the situation model and the theory of change, and each team presents their results chain again to refresh everyone's memory of the assumptions and outcomes. Then each team is given a set of questions to help them analyse where they are in a 'stoplight' exercise. They categorise elements of the results chain as completed ('green'), in progress/ongoing ('yellow plus'), in progress but delayed or not going according to plan ('yellow minus'), or not accomplished, usually because of an issue ('red'). Each team presents their findings, focusing primarily on the yellows and reds, and sharing their thoughts about the causes of the challenges and what to do differently in response.

The annual pause and reflect workshop is also when teams re-examine their strategic approaches and, as a result, often update their results chains, addressing previously held assumptions, inserting additional intermediate results (as described earlier), adding new learning questions to the learning agenda and removing questions deemed to be sufficiently addressed, no longer as relevant or not feasible to answer. During the workshop, when appropriate, technical experts within the teams are invited to present on emerging trends or issues that are relevant to the group and may influence the work plan.

Lessons learned in using MEL4AM for evaluation and learning at a strategic level

For adaptive management, it is not enough to monitor, evaluate and learn; it is also essential to pause and reflect in order to analyse and process evidence gained through MEL with colleagues and stakeholders to reach the right conclusions and make good decisions. 'Pause and reflect' activities will likely look different for every team and organisation, varying in length of time, composition of participants and facilitation approaches, but USAID Wildlife Asia's lessons are still broadly relevant:

- **Build in time and space:** Despite the resources that it takes to carve this time out from implementation, it is worthwhile when it leads

to appropriate changes in targets, techniques and approaches that ultimately lead to better results. In fact, USAID Wildlife Asia sees such substantial value in setting this time aside that it had planned for a two-day workshop this year. These plans were interrupted by the Covid-19 outbreak, and it is now looking into whether it would be possible to do some of the team's pause and reflect activities virtually.

- **Neutrality promotes openness and learning:** When conducting group pause and reflect exercises, it helps to have a neutral individual familiar with the technical content to facilitate discussions. A skilled facilitator can depersonalise performance-related discussions and focus on learning from challenges rather than justifying certain results (or lack thereof). For USAID Wildlife Asia, it has been useful to have RMDA's Strategic Information Specialist (SIS) from the Regional Environment Office (REO) participate in and sometimes facilitate their reflection.

An enabling environment for MEL4AM

The approaches described throughout this case study often depend on an enabling environment for MEL4AM: the mindsets, structures and resources that have helped USAID Wildlife Asia to practise and utilise robust MEL to assess the context, generate and source evidence and inform decisions. In reviewing USAID Wildlife Asia's MEL4AM, some additional considerations stand out.

- **Appropriate staffing:** The Senior M&E Specialist reflected that M&E experts are now expected to be 'both data nerds and expert facilitators, convenors and collaborators'. These are different skill sets and few people can play all these roles well. This may mean having a broader MEL4AM team rather than just a sole M&E specialist, or making sure you can easily tap into a pool of skilled facilitators to enable participatory learning where everyone can consider common outcomes. These facilitators may come from within the existing team, so it is useful to look for staff with facilitation skills, either acknowledged or latent.
- **Partnership between donor and implementer:** From the beginning of the programme, there has been a strong tripartite partnership between USAID Wildlife Asia's implementers, RDMA's REO, and USAID's FAB Office (including FAB's Measuring Impact programme) on MEL. As the COR described, across USAID's CWT efforts, there is 'a collection of people and an organisational culture that values evidence-based work', and that 'having USAID managers who both support and expect this is so valuable'. That shared mindset and donor support has created the space and resources for adaptive rigour and an openness to adapting the programme's tactics and strategies when appropriate.
- **Leadership:** Over the course of the programme, USAID Wildlife Asia has undergone numerous leadership transitions, but when there has been strong internal leadership, it has been an important enabler of adaptive rigour. The Senior M&E Specialist reflected that it helps immensely when leaders can set expectations for staff participation in MEL4AM activities and can encourage cross-programme collaboration that breaks down silos. As part of this effort, in 2018 the COP began convening the leaders of USAID Wildlife Asia's various subcontractors as a Consortium Executive Team, treating this group as a 'strategic brain trust' that meets regularly to discuss technical issues, rather than just when contractual issues arise.
- **Shared expectations:** Even with an organisational culture and strong leadership supporting MEL4AM, it is important to recognise that not all staff will have the same familiarity with or expectations of what this means in their work. It is not enough, for example, to write into a MEL plan that results chains are meant to be living resources, or that everyone is responsible for learning. These messages have to be reinforced among existing staff and shared with new staff who join the team. Staff also need to experience the value that MEL provides, so it is critical to ensure that these efforts are aligned to and useful for their technical work.

Final reflections

At the beginning of the case study, several characteristics of MEL4AM were listed: comprehensiveness, usefulness, practicality, timeliness and support. It is clear to see that USAID Wildlife Asia has worked intentionally and systematically to ensure that their MEL reflects these characteristics. However, like all good practitioners of adaptive management, USAID Wildlife Asia is continuing to evolve how it practises MEL4AM by combining traditional M&E with CLA and knowledge management approaches. The programme is beginning to identify 'three levels of learners and adapters' in order to move beyond simply learning internally (level one), or even with the donor (level two), to learn and adapt *with* country stakeholders (level three) in recognition that 'the outcomes depend on country partners and affect them the most'. USAID Wildlife Asia has discussed the idea of developing quarterly dialogues with country stakeholders on performance outcomes, why things are happening the way they are, and to identify ways in which everyone can work together more effectively. With this new approach, the programme looks forward to extending the MEL4AM practices outlined here to a broader and most relevant group of stakeholders in the battle against wildlife trafficking.

References

Ramalingam, B., Wild, L. and Buffardi, A. (2019) 'Making adaptive rigour work: principles and practices for strengthening monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive management'. Briefing Note. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/11311-making-adaptive-rigour-work-principles-and-practices-strengthening-mel-adaptive-management).

USAID – United States Agency for International Development (2016a) *Biodiversity how-to guide 1: developing situation models in USAID biodiversity programming*. Washington DC: USAID (https://rmportal.net/biodiversityconservation-gateway/projects/closed-global-projects/measuring-impact/how-to-guides-for-usaid-biodiversity-programming/biodiversity-how-to-guide-1-developing-situation-models-in-usaid-biodiversity-programming/view).

USAID (2016b) *Biodiversity how-to guide 2: summary. Using results chains to depict theories of change in USAID biodiversity programming*. Washington DC: USAID (https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/htg2_summary_508.pdf).

USAID (n.d., a) 'CLA toolkit: learning agenda'. Webpage. USAID (https://usaidlearninglab.org/qrg/learning-agenda).

USAID (n.d., b) 'Monitoring toolkit: performance monitoring'. Webpage. USAID (https://usaidlearninglab.org/monitoring-toolkit?tab=3&subtab=2).

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to USAID Wildlife Asia's Chief of Party, Peter Collier, and Senior M&E Specialist, Pakprim Oranop, and the programme's Contracting Officer's Representative from USAID/RDMA, Craig Kirkpatrick, for sharing their experiences and examples for this case study and reviewing it along the way. We also appreciate the input and feedback provided by peer reviewers Megan Hill, Patrick Ward, Sarah Parker, Paola Abis, Salman Jaffer, Matthew Foley, Pablo Yanguas and staff from the USAID Measuring Impact 2 programme.

About the author

Jessica Ziegler is an Organizational Learning Advisor at Social Impact. As a facilitator of organisation development processes, she uses MEL4AM as part of the practice of continuous improvement.

As a member of the GLAM Consortium, Social Impact leads technical assistance engagements to test and deliver MEL4AM solutions alongside FCDO and USAID, and documents the learning generated from practical application of MEL4AM.

The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the UK Government, the United States Agency for International Development or the US Government.

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

odi.org
odi.org/facebook
odi.org/twitter

ODI is an independent, global think tank, working for a sustainable and peaceful world in which every person thrives. We harness the power of evidence and ideas through research and partnership to confront challenges, develop solutions, and create change.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.