



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



# COVID Big Picture Reflection

## LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

USAID staff provide COVID-19 vaccine training along with prevention and awareness information in Peru.  
Credit: USAID/Peru

## **CONTRACT INFORMATION**

The Program Cycle Mechanism is managed by the Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management and implemented by Environmental Incentives (Contract No. GS-00F-193DA/7200AA20M00002). The authors' views do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We are grateful for the careful guidance of Shilpa Modi Clift and Zhuzhi Moore of USAID's Bureau for Policy, Learning and Resource Management, Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research, as well as the Bureau for Global Health. Thanks also to Big Picture Reflection contributors Parrie Henderson-O'Keefe, Taliah Hodges and Ezinwa Osuoha (formerly of USAID Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management) and Linda Nico of Environmental Incentives, LLC.

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# Acronyms

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ALA   | Agency Learning Agenda                                       |
| BFA   | Bureau for Foreign Assistance                                |
| BHA   | Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs                              |
| BPR   | Big Picture Reflection                                       |
| CLA   | Collaborating, Learning and Adapting                         |
| CO    | Country Office   |
| CRT   | COVID Response Team  |
| CSO   | Civil Society Organization                                   |
| DDI   | Bureau For Development, Democracy and Innovation             |
| DEIA  | Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility               |
| DRG   | Democracy, Human Rights and Governance                       |
| FAO   | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations      |
| FY    | Fiscal Year  |
| GBV   | Gender-based Violence  |
| IFPRI | International Food Policy Research Institute                 |
| IP    | Implementing Partner   |
| IT    | Information Technology                                       |
| M/CCS | Critical Coordination Structure of the Bureau for Management |
| MDLP  | Multi-Donor Learning Partnership for Development Impact      |
| MEL   | Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning                         |
| OECD  | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development       |
| OFS   | Office of Country Support                                    |
| OHCTM | Office of Human Capital and Talent Management                |
| OU    | Operating Unit   |
| PLR   | Bureau for Planning, Learning and Resource Management        |
| PSE   | Private Sector Engagement                                    |
| RFS   | Resilience and Food Security                                 |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| SHARP  | Shock-Agnostic Readiness and Response Portal |
| TA     | Technical Assistance                         |
| TPM    | Third Party Monitoring                       |
| TFRU   | Task Force Readiness Unit                    |
| UN     | United Nations                               |
| UNHCR  | United Nations Refugee Agency                |
| USAID  | U.S. Agency for International Development    |
| UTRAMS | Unified Travel and Mission System            |

# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a public health emergency with second-order effects that extended beyond the health sector (Box 1).

In 2022, USAID's Bureau for Planning, Learning, and Resource Management (PLR)—formerly the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL)—conducted a COVID-19 Big Picture Reflection (BPR), the first ever Agency-wide pause and reflect exercise around a critical priority. The BPR was an iterative process that USAID used to triangulate and analyze various sources of evidence and learning on the response and adaptations to mitigate COVID-19's impact, with special emphasis on the second-order effects. The main goal for the BPR was to consolidate findings from the evidence and generate lessons learned to inform USAID's future decision making on crisis readiness and response.

## **Box 1. Illustrative Second-Order Effects of COVID-19**

- Weakened, overextended health systems, excessive non-COVID deaths resulting from healthcare disruptions, lack of essential services, etc.
- Household shocks and extreme poverty
- Economic crises
- Disrupted markets and supply chains
- Reduced labor force participation and livelihoods
- Food insecurity
- Disrupted schooling and lost educational opportunities
- Pressures on governance, democracy and stability
- Various forms of violence (e.g., gender-based violence)

The COVID-19 BPR focused on five key themes: (1) Adaptations, (2) Second-Order Effects, (3) Unintended Positive and Negative Outcomes of Pandemic Responses, (4) Localization, and (5) Inclusive Development. Those five themes were addressed through a series of steps (Figure 1) and analytical questions (Box 2) that were aligned with the Agency-wide COVID Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plan and broader Agency Learning Agenda (ALA) questions.

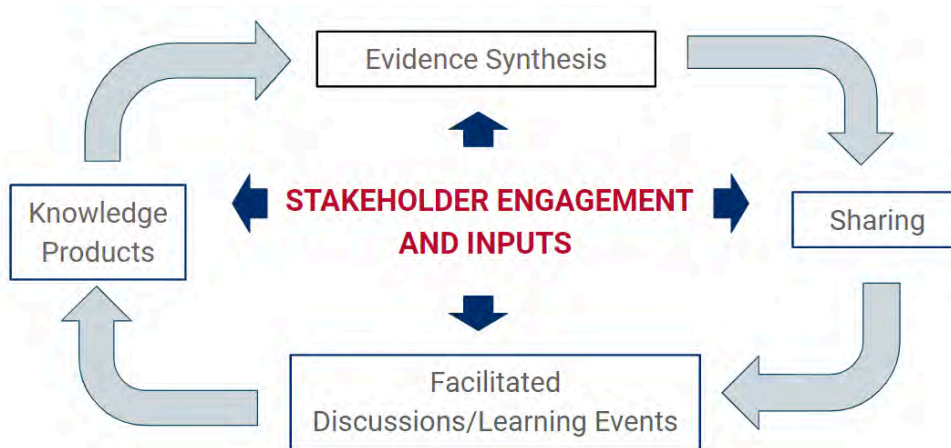


Figure 1. Steps in USAID's Iterative COVID-19 BPR Process

## Box 2. Key Themes and Questions Examined for the COVID-19 BPR



### THEME 1: ADAPTATIONS

- What are the adaptations that Missions and centrally managed programs have made to address COVID-19 second-order effects? Are there any general themes or trends (e.g., gender, anti-corruption, education, workforce participation, preparation for jobs of the future)?
- Are there early indications that adapted programs are having success?
- What factors enabled these adaptations?
- Where adaptations could not be made, what hindered them?
- Are there policy or guidance implications for PPL? Office of Acquisition and Assistance? Others? Implications for MEL?



### THEME 2: SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS OF COVID-19

- What do we know about how the Agency has been able to address second-order effects of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- In what ways are we seeing the overlap or integration of the public health response and other areas (such as economic, social, political, etc.)?
- What lessons emerge from how Missions or centrally managed programs have been able to address second-order effects?



### THEME 3: UNINTENDED OUTCOMES

- Where has the Agency's response to COVID-19 yielded unintended outcomes (both positive and negative)?
- What was the path/link between the Agency's COVID-19 interventions and the unintended outcomes?
- What are the lessons learned to inform program design and implementation to mitigate negative unintended outcomes?



### THEME 4: LOCALIZATION

- Has the COVID-19 pandemic response affected the Agency's efforts to increasingly localize aid? If so, in what ways?
- Are there lessons learned from the Agency's pandemic response for further pursuing localization?



### THEME 5: INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

- In what ways did Agency programming respond to the needs of marginalized and/or underrepresented groups in the face of COVID-19?

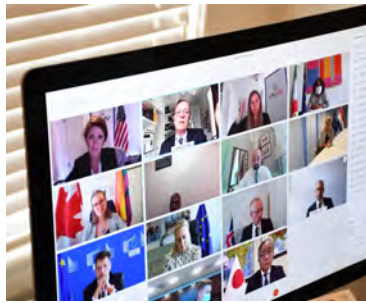
To answer the above questions, PLR reviewed, synthesized, and distilled evidence and key lessons learned from over 100 internal resources (e.g., Agency-specific plans, evaluations, reviews, case studies, and reporting pertaining to the pandemic) and external resources (partner and donor research, evaluations, and learning syntheses on the second-order effects of COVID-19). PLR also facilitated the following BPR learning events:

- Donor and multilateral external event on November 15, 2022, with 52 attendees
- Implementing partner (IP) external event on November 17, 2022, with 45 attendees
- USAID internal learning event on December 6, 2022, with 65 attendees
- A final learning event, Response & Readiness: Lessons Learned from COVID-19, on November 13, 2023, with over 450 attendees from 35 countries and an array of organizations (donor, UN, multilateral, national government, international nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions).

**This report summarizes eight key lessons learned from the COVID-19 BPR.**



# Key Lessons Learned From The COVID-19 BPR



## **LESSON 1. 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.**

### Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

- Several countries faced operational constraints related to consistent electricity access, broadband connectivity, possession of mobile phones and/or laptops, computer literacy, and end user comfort and capacity when rolling out virtual/digital approaches.<sup>1</sup>
- The implementation of digital and technological adaptations highlighted equity issues, prompting a reimagining of approaches in sectors that are central to inclusive development (Box 3).<sup>2</sup>

### **Box 3. Spotlight on Kenya**

In Kenya, state-sponsored television programming for learners was an early adaptation to school closures. Although this was a viable option for many children, historically marginalized groups, such as children who are deaf or hard of hearing, were being left behind. USAID supported a Digital Story Time, which was a series of instructional storybooks in Kenyan Sign Language. The series aired on Kenyan television and was also web accessible to improve deaf and hearing-impaired children's access to learning content during the pandemic.

*Source: EnCompass LLC, MSI, and Tetra Tech (Data and Evidence for Education Programs [DEEP] Activity). 2022. USAID's Response to COVID-19: Supporting a Safe Return to Learning: Snapshot of USAID's COVID-19 Activities in Education.*

<sup>1</sup> 2020-2022 Unified Travel and Mission System (UTRAMS) analysis (Nepal illustration); FY 2020 resources on COVID-19 impact on Feed the Future; Learning to Build Back Better Futures for Education: Lessons from Educational Innovation during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> This finding is not USAID specific, but drawn from multiple country experiences (e.g., Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Qatar, Mexico, South Africa) mentioned in *Learning to Build Back Better Futures For Education: Lessons from educational innovation during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, published by UNESCO International Bureau of Education (2021).

## Insights on the way forward:

- There are important operational, equity, and sustainability considerations when rolling out technology-based adaptations. Investing in policy and structural enablers such as roads, wholesale markets, and digital infrastructure enables the use of digital and technological solutions to mitigate the effects of a crisis or a shock (Box 4).<sup>34</sup>
- In the interest of sustainability and harmonization across stakeholders, country governments should lead digitalization efforts.<sup>5</sup> Advocacy on equity and inclusion issues is critical to advancing digitalization.

### **Box 4. Spotlight on Nepal**

Prior to and during the pandemic, USAID made investments in digital inclusion and digitalization, as well as private-sector engagement and local value chains. Nepal already had a national digitalization agenda (2019 Digital Nepal Framework) before the emergence of COVID-19, and that agenda was multi-sectoral in scope.

The pandemic had second-order effects on agriculture, food security, and economic stability in Nepal. Feed the Future's Knowledge-Based Integrated Sustainable Agriculture (KISAN II) activity leveraged USAID's pre-pandemic investments and activity partners in the areas of branchless banking, digital wallets, a USAID-supported national online seed catalog, digital soil maps, and digital seed balance sheets. That strong foundation enhanced the resilience of Nepal's food market actors and helped to elevate Nepal's competitiveness in the supply of staple foods such as rice when global supply chains were disrupted.

*Source: Bixal Solutions Inc. Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning and Training (KDLT) Project. Market System and Private Sector Resilience during COVID-19: Lessons from Nepal.*

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<sup>3</sup> IFPRI, *COVID-19 and Global Food Security: Two Years Later* (2022).

<sup>4</sup> FY 2021 COVID-19 Key Issue Narratives; FY 2020 Feed the Future Analysis (FTF); PPL's Reflections on Leading Through the Pandemic.

<sup>5</sup> 2022 CLA Case #28 (Paraguay); 2022 CLA Case #45 (multi-country); 2022 CLA Case #122 (Dominican Republic); 2022 CLA Case #117 (Kenya); BHA FY 2020 COVID-19 Evaluation; FY 2020 resources on COVID-19 Impact on FTF; IDEAL, *Mobile Phone & Remote Tool Considerations for M&E in a COVID-19 Environment* (2020).



Photo Credit: USAID

## **LESSON 2. AWARD AND FUNDING FLEXIBILITY FACILITATES NECESSARY PROGRAMMATIC PIVOTS TO MAINTAIN SERVICES AND SUPPORT WHEN DISRUPTIVE SHOCKS AFFECT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION.**

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Earmarking of special funding to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic supported the modification and/or expansion of the scope of existing programs (e.g., through integration of new services and interventions), not just the creation of standalone COVID-specific activities or projects.
- Flexible funding enabled USAID and partners to meet operational requirements while making critical programmatic pivots to address priority second-order effects of COVID-19, such as democratic backsliding (Box 5) and increased rates of gender-based violence (GBV) during the pandemic (Box 6).<sup>6</sup>

### **Box 5. Spotlight on El Salvador**

In El Salvador, USAID made several pivots predicated on flexible funding and budgeting to support efforts to mitigate democratic backsliding during the pandemic. In response to movement restrictions and shutdowns, program funds that were originally allocated for in-person meetings were transferred to other activity budget line items to meet the operational requirements of some adaptations (e.g., supporting Wi-Fi connectivity for beneficiaries to participate in virtual trainings). USAID also redirected funds from government support to civil society organizations (CSOs) and oversight committees to strengthen their effectiveness in online civic engagement during the crisis.

Flexible activity funding was not the panacea, however. Three other factors—1) USAID’s lifting of its funding freeze in the region, 2) USAID and IP staff flexibility, and 3) the existence of capable local civil society partners—were operational enablers of efforts to mitigate COVID-19 second-order effects in the country. The El Salvador Mission also leveraged its experience and capacity in USAID’s Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) model to support adaptive management during the pandemic.

*Source: The Cloudburst Group. 2022. Retrospective of USAID Response to Pandemic-Enabled Democratic Backsliding: Findings Report.*

<sup>6</sup> FY 2021 USAID COVID-19 Key Issue Narratives from Bosnia and Herzegovina; UNHCR evaluation of its response to COVID (June 2022); FAO COVID Thematic Evaluation Series (incl. “Annex 3. Case studies’ good practices and lessons learned”).

## Box 6. Spotlight on Morocco

Experiences from Morocco illustrate the intersection of flexible funding, responses to unintended outcomes, localization, and deliberate strategies to better support certain marginalized or vulnerable groups. In Morocco, USAID redirected fiscal year (FY) 2021 country funding to two existing, local CSO–implemented awards, to address increased rates of GBV and better support GBV survivors. The reallocated resources also supported efforts directed at another vulnerable group, persons with disabilities, to access assistance during the pandemic.

*Source: USAID FY 2021 COVID-19 Key Issue Narratives*

### Insights on the way forward:

- Budgeting and financing must be addressed in tandem with other key enablers such as USAID and IP staff flexibility, global projects and mechanisms, and prior experience with crises.<sup>7</sup>
- To realize the full benefits of funding and budget flexibility, address bureaucratic issues specific to USAID (e.g., challenges navigating Agency funding processes, procurement system rigidity).
- In designing activities and projects, build in sufficient award flexibility to facilitate necessary programmatic and administrative pivots in response to shocks and crises.

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<sup>7</sup> The Cloudburst Group. Retrospective of USAID Response to Pandemic-Enabled Democratic Backsliding: Findings Report (2022); UNHCR evaluation of its response to COVID (June 2022).



Photo Credit: Mike Zeltakins for U.S. Embassy Beirut

### **LESSON 3. CRISES SUCH AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TAKE A TOLL ON AGENCY STAFF, NOT JUST PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS**

#### Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Human resource challenges such as chronic under-staffing and COVID-19-related staff evacuations exacerbated challenges in responding to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>
- Agency staff contended with multiple stressors during the pandemic, and there were unmet prevention and mitigation needs, including mental health and psychosocial support. In addition to grappling with the effects of the pandemic on their personal lives, staff dealt with an increased pace and overall intensity of work (Box 7).

#### **Box 7. Spotlight on Zambia**

Despite lower numbers of reported COVID cases and COVID-related deaths in Zambia than in other countries, there were notable human resource impacts, even in the earliest stages of the crisis. The Zambia Mission employed several ad-hoc measures to address human resource needs. For example, the Mission Director established Google chats with foreign service nationals and conducted daily check-ins with staff, regardless of their physical location. Some practices that USAID/Zambia instituted before the pandemic served the Mission well during the crisis. For example, the Mission Director had an informal mentoring program that cultivated a small pool of young leaders within the Mission. The Mission leveraged those relationships and internal engagement mechanisms to identify and troubleshoot staff needs during the height of the pandemic.

There were valuable lessons learned related to the likelihood of accelerated burnout when staff work remotely or at unconventional hours. Mission leadership also learned about the merits of accessing Agency resources (e.g., Staff Care) as early as possible during a crisis.

*Source: PPL. 2022. Reflections on Leading through the Pandemic.*

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<sup>8</sup> The Cloudburst Group. (2022)

## Insights on the way forward:

- In addition to ensuring that Agency staff have timely surge capacity support during crises, ensure that staff and their families can access comprehensive mitigation interventions, including mental health and psychosocial support.
- To optimize support to Missions, there is a need to fill gaps pertaining to 1) real-time learning exchange and knowledge sharing and 2) intentional feedback loops between Washington Operating Units (OUs) and Mission staff.



Photo Credit: K.Kadyrov, USAID Governance Support Program in Turkmenistan

## **LESSON 4. ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT USING USAID’S COLLABORATING, LEARNING AND ADAPTING (CLA) MODEL HELPS MISSIONS/COUNTRY OFFICES (CO) AND IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS REMAIN AGILE IN RESPONDING TO EVER-CHANGING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES DURING A CRISIS.**

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Several Missions/COs, activities, and Implementing partners (IPs) leveraged CLA to devise and implement timely, transparent, and participatory adaptations to existing programs in order to mitigate the second-order effects of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>
- Across diverse settings, IPs and activities used CLA to enhance partnerships, institutional arrangements, and inter-agency coordination (Box 8).<sup>10</sup> CLA helped to dismantle the divide between local and international partners, enabling community organizations and structures to participate in higher-level strategic discussions, coordination, and partnerships to address COVID-19 second-order effects.<sup>11</sup>
- Two aspects of CLA—scenario planning and pause and reflect—were commonly used to inform responses to the pandemic’s secondary impacts and bolster future crisis preparedness in multiple geographical regions and sectors.<sup>12</sup>
- Missions/COs and IPs that were already implementing CLA before the pandemic were agile in making rapid pivots and adaptations.<sup>13</sup> Other Missions/COs were interested in applying CLA during the pandemic but lacked the requisite CLA capacity or experience.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 2022 Pandemic-enabled Democratic Backsliding Report; 2022 CLA Case #45 (IDEAL centrally-funded AgFS program); 2021 CLA Case Competition document; 2022 CLA Case #28 (Paraguay); 2022 CLA Case #77 (Jordan); 2022 CLA Case #122 (Dominican Republic); September 2020 BIFAD Recommendations.

<sup>10</sup> 2022 CLA Case #77 (Jordan); 2022 CLA Case #99 (DRC).

<sup>11</sup> 2022 CLA Case #77 (Jordan); 2022 CLA Case #99 (DRC); internal document on 2021 CLA Case Competition.

<sup>12</sup> 2022 CLA Case #77 (Jordan); 2022 CLA Case #122 (Dominican Republic); 2022 Pandemic-enabled Democratic Backsliding Report; FY 2020 resources on COVID-19 Impact on Feed the Future.

<sup>13</sup> 2022 CLA Case #117 (Kenya); 2022 CLA Case #99 (DRC); 2022 CLA Case #45 (IDEAL centrally-funded AgFS program); 2022 CLA Case #28 (Paraguay); USAID, *2021 CLA Case Competition: CLA Approaches in Response to COVID* (internal document).

<sup>14</sup> The Cloudburst Group. (2022)

### **Box 8. Spotlight on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**

In DRC, USAID's Integrated Health Program used CLA to dismantle the divide between local and international partners and improve coordination. CLA spurred improvements in multi-stakeholder coordination at all levels of DRC's health system, particularly in relation to disease control. In addition, CLA helped to create entry points for community organizations and structures to participate in higher-level stakeholder working groups and coordination, which bodes well for greater coherence and trust across different types of stakeholders.

*Source: Abt Associates. 2022. Locally Led Working Group Moves the Needle on Donor Efforts to Fight COVID in the DRC. 2022 CLA Case #99.*

#### **Insights on the way forward:**

- Cultivating CLA capacity and experience before a crisis is a critical success factor in having nimble, evidence-driven, and collaborative crisis responses.
- Foster real-time learning exchange and cross-fertilization among OUs based on their CLA experiences during crises to support effective use of CLA before, during, and after crises.





Photo Credit: USAID/Colombia

## **LESSON 5. WHEN DISRUPTIVE SHOCKS AFFECT SERVICE DELIVERY AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS, CREATIVE LEVERAGING OF LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERSHIPS CAN ENSURE THAT ESSENTIAL INFORMATION, SERVICES, AND COMMODITIES CONTINUE TO REACH VULNERABLE AND AFFECTED POPULATIONS DURING A CRISIS.**

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- During the pandemic, adaptations and responses that were equity- and inclusion-sensitive addressed root causes of vulnerability and poor resilience such as poverty, gender inequality, and/or loss of livelihoods. USAID engaged local actors and institutions (e.g., community radio stations, faith-based groups) to overcome access barriers to information, services, and resources, as well as to foster trust in pandemic adaptations.<sup>15,16,17,18,19</sup>
- IPs conducted contextual analyses or rapid needs assessments to determine their target populations' most pressing needs. They also engaged local staff and communities in program design to address the pandemic's effects.<sup>20</sup>
- Strategic and direct strengthening of private-sector entities supported a systems approach to enhancing resilience. The informal sector, whose businesses are often women-owned or youth-led, was crucial in mitigating crisis effects on vulnerable and marginalized groups such as the urban poor (Box 9).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 2020-22 UTRAMS analysis

<sup>16</sup> The Cloudburst Group. (2022)

<sup>17</sup> PPL, *Reflections on Leading through Learning* (2022); 2022 Pandemic-enabled Democratic Backsliding Report.

<sup>18</sup> Bixal Solutions Inc. for the Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning and Training (KDLT) Activity), *The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Fiscal Year 2021 Results from Feed the Future Activities* (2022).

<sup>19</sup> Implementer-led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning Activity (IDEAL) *HINDSIGHT 2020: Key Lessons and Reflections from BHA's FY20 Response to COVID-19* (2022). COVID-19 Evaluation Brief–September 2022.

<sup>20</sup> BHA FY20 COVID Evaluation.

<sup>21</sup> Kiremidijian et al., [USAID's Private Sector Engagement Amidst COVID –19: A Landscape Study](#) (Washington, DC: prepared by DAI through the Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships [MSP] Activity, 2023).

### Box 9. Spotlight on Cambodia

USAID's Women Entrepreneurs Activity (WE Act) strengthens the business and leadership skills of women entrepreneurs (e.g., female street vendors) in Cambodia's urban centers, a segment of Cambodian society that was already navigating sociocultural, educational, and financial barriers to business and livelihood success before the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, the activity shifted to online platforms for participant training and learning (e.g., on financial literacy and digital marketing) and pursued new financing opportunities to link women micro and small entrepreneurs to mini-grants and mini-loans. Some activity partners also implemented interventions to address mental and management stresses reported by WE Act's program participants.

*Sources: (1) FY21 COVID-19 Key Issue Narrative database. (2) Pact. 2020. "In Cambodia, as Covid-19 Adds New Burdens for Young Women Entrepreneurs, Pact and USAID Move Support Online" (Blog post), published May 4, 2020.*

### Insights on the way forward:

- Engage both formal and informal businesses to enhance their resilience and ensure that equity and inclusion issues are reflected in crisis mitigation efforts.
- To advance the Agency's localization agenda, leverage partnerships with the above to inform the funding, design, and implementation of development strategies that directly engage and better equip members of marginalized and vulnerable groups to withstand and rebound from shocks.<sup>22</sup>
- Continue to develop the capacity of local or national organizations to assume roles as direct recipients or sub-award recipients to improve future crisis preparedness and responses.

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<sup>22</sup> 2020-2022 UTRAMS analysis (Ethiopia and Nepal are examples); Bangladesh FY21 COVID-19 Key Issue Narrative; corroborated by FAO (FAO Thematic Evaluation Series—see FAO Programme Committee Memo on the Final Evaluation Report) in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Uganda in the AgFS sector.



Photo Credit: National Office of Electoral Processes

## **LESSON 6. THERE IS MERIT IN STANDALONE DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE (DRG) PROGRAMS, BUT DRG STRATEGIES NEED TO BE MAINSTREAMED ACROSS DEVELOPMENT SECTORS AND GROUNDED IN LOCALIZATION, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT CRISIS MITIGATION.**

### Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Pandemic-associated corruption was a second-order effect of the pandemic that the Agency was underprepared to systematically address across sectors.<sup>23</sup>
- DRG-related adaptations during the pandemic were aligned with localization principles; for example: (1) leveraging of capable local partners to facilitate DRG-related adaptations and response; (2) USAID's increased support for watchdog CSOs and investigative journalists in some countries; (3) training of judicial bodies to more aggressively prosecute fraud; and (4) enhanced support to local governments that were responsible for administering COVID-19 response resources.<sup>24</sup>

### Insights on the way forward:

- Prioritize the mainstreaming of DRG strategies in key development sectors, such as health, agriculture, and education, ensuring that those strategies are grounded in localization, equity and inclusion principles.

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<sup>23</sup> USAID. [Performance Evaluation of USAID's Response to Covid-19 Enabled Corruption Final Evaluation Report.](#) (May 2023).

<sup>24</sup> USAID. [USAID Elections and Political Processes Adaptations During Covid-19: Final Report.](#) (June 2023.)



Photo Credit: Karen Kasmauski, MCSP and Jhpiego

## **LESSON 7. HEALTH SYSTEM RESILIENCE IS CENTRAL TO MOST RESPONSES TO CRISES AND SHOCKS, NOT JUST PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES.**

### Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- A 2023 Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) learning synthesis found that per capita health spending increased by over 6 percent across the 38 OECD member countries (spanning North and South America, Asia-Pacific, and Europe) during the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>
- Despite surge funding for the health sector during the pandemic, critical services and program areas—particularly those that are often historically under-resourced and impacted by equity issues (e.g., sexual and reproductive health services, youth-friendly health services)—were compromised during the pandemic.<sup>26</sup>

### Insights on the way forward:

- There is a need to redouble efforts to achieve sustainable health financing, with an emphasis on 1) physical infrastructure, 2) digital infrastructure, 3) services, and 4) social protection in low- and low-middle-income countries.
- Specific areas for strengthening health system resilience include the following:<sup>27</sup>
  - Service preservation (e.g., safeguarding resources for sexual and reproductive health and rights services because funds are often redirected for crisis responses)
  - Service expansion (e.g., mental health care)
  - Gender-sensitive human resources for health strategies (especially for frontline workers, including often unpaid community health workers and volunteers, who tend to be female)
  - Supply-chain resilience
  - Data strengthening, including further investments in digital infrastructure
  - Governance and trust in health institutions and structures, including the strategies to mitigate misinformation and disinformation.

<sup>25</sup> OECD, *Ready for the Next Crisis? Investing in Health System Resilience*, OECD Health Policy Studies (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/1e53cf80-en>.

<sup>26</sup> Sachs, J. D., et al., “The Lancet Commission on lessons for the future from the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Lancet*, 400(10359), (2022): 1224-1280; World Bank, *Change Cannot Wait: Building Resilient Health Systems in the Shadow of COVID-19* (2022), © Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/38233> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO; Women Deliver, [The Impact Of Covid-19 On Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights: Youth-led Perspectives and Solutions for a Gender-Equal World](#) (n.d).

<sup>27</sup> OECD. (2023); J. D. Sachs, et al. (2022); World Bank. (2022); Women Deliver. (n.d.)



Photo Credit: USAID Philippines/Blue Motus

## **LESSON 8. OPTIMIZATION OF DIGITALIZATION, REMOTE MONITORING, AND THIRD-PARTY MONITORING (TPM) BODES WELL FOR SHOCK-RESPONSIVE MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL).**

### Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Remote monitoring techniques, many of which centered on the use of digital and technological platforms and solutions, were common during the pandemic.<sup>28</sup>
- TPMs employed a mix of process and technological innovations. Process innovations (e.g., changes to data collection and analysis methods) predominated as the primary response to shocks and stressors.<sup>29</sup> This was evident in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen—all of which have endured complex emergencies, not just the COVID-19 pandemic.
- USAID’s TPM experiences across multiple settings and shocks and stressors highlight: 1) the importance of reviewing and revising TPM contracts and scopes of work to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility, but also 2) the need to standardized guidance that balances adaptation and flexibility with the need for clarity of expectations on the part of USAID and the donor.<sup>30</sup>

### Insights on the way forward:

- TPM can be a cornerstone of MEL in crises. However, there is a need for clear TPM guidance in order to standardize TPM approaches and adaptations during shocks and crises.
- Pay attention to multi-stakeholder harmonization of data collection and data sharing agreements when designing, adapting, and implementing shock-response MEL strategies and systems.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> USAID, [Guide for Adopting Remote Monitoring Approaches During COVID-19](#) (2020).

<sup>29</sup> The Bloomsbury Group LLC and Environmental Incentives, [Third-Party Monitoring \(TPM\) Lessons Learned and Best Practices during External Shocks and Stressors](#) (2023).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> USAID, [Guide for Adopting Remote Monitoring Approaches During COVID-19](#) (2020).

# The Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has promoted a reimagining and strengthening USAID's crisis readiness and response. As highlighted in USAID's "Performance Evaluation of USAID Resilience and Crisis Response Programming in the Context of COVID-19" (January 2024), there is a need to do this in tandem with investments in sustainable resilience-strengthening in supported countries.

In addition to the lessons learned outlined in this report, the BPR highlighted the need for greater efficiency in linking Agency staff, particularly Mission/CO staff, to timely and effective information, expertise, and resources that can strengthen crisis readiness and responses.

To respond to this need, PLR, in conjunction with other OUs, is developing an Agency-wide, **Shock-Agnostic Readiness and Response Portal (SHARP) to assist staff in navigating clearer pathways to resources, guidance, and other support** to prepare for and respond to shocks in the future.

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