

A Case from the Portfolio: BRAC International



Strengthening BRAC International's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Systems: From a single diagnosis to organization-wide transformation

Type(s) of RFE services: MEL Diagnostic, Technical Assistance

Main partner(s): BRAC International

Timeline: 2019-2021

One sentence description: IPA's Right-Fit Evidence Unit (RFE) partnered with BRAC International to conduct a diagnosis of their Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices. What began as a single diagnosis of a large agricultural program in Liberia evolved into an organization-wide effort to enhance continuous improvement in program design and implementation.

The Challenge

BRAC is often considered the world's largest nongovernmental organization. Its international branch, BRAC International, operates across 10 countries and dozens of projects in education, health, poverty alleviation, and humanitarian assistance. The organization is widely recognized as a pioneer in the development of evidence-based programs. For example, the well-known Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) approach and Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescent (ELA) program originated at BRAC and were the product of deliberate efforts which put iterative use of evidence at the core of the program development. However, like many large and diverse organizations with a culture of evidence use, BRAC faces the challenge of ensuring that data is collected credibly and used effectively across the board, not only for accountability purposes but also to inform actual learning. Accordingly, BRAC International had the goal of strengthening its monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure it enables improvement, both on program design and program implementation.

The Engagement

BRAC International reached out to IPA's Right-Fit Evidence (RFE) Unit to conduct an in-depth assessment of its existing monitoring and evaluation on a large agriculture project in Liberia. The assessment involved reviewing MEL guidelines and procedures, and analyzing how data was collected and if and how it was used. This participatory diagnostic produced a list of “quick-win” improvements that the project and MEL teams in Liberia could quickly implement to strengthen the quality and use of data. Examples of these improvements included survey instrument modifications, specific quality control mechanisms, and the strengthening of routines around data use.

In the second phase, the engagement was extended to provide technical assistance to implement the proposed recommendations and transform the Liberia project into an “exemplar” of the latest MEL practices from which the entire organization could learn. This process lasted 10 months and included coaching the M&E and project teams on collecting beneficiary feedback, sampling and quality controls, data use and approaches to enable ongoing program learning, among other topics. During this process, the RFE team engaged extensively with the BRAC Liberia team, but also with key BRAC International stakeholders at regional and global levels to ensure wide visibility and ownership of the lessons that were being learned. The RFE team also reviewed and proposed amendments to BRAC International's MEL protocols, which were piloted on the Liberia project, refined, and then formally adopted for the organization as a whole.

RFE's engagement then expanded to a third phase to assess the MEL practices of BRAC International as an organization, rather than in the context of one specific project. The RFE team conducted three more light-touch MEL diagnostics on different projects and in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including staff from management, M&E, research, program operations, and fundraising departments. RFE also performed an analysis of the MEL-related technology needs and capabilities of both BRAC International and peer organizations. Finally, the team facilitated a series of workshops where leaders at BRAC International developed a concrete action plan for system-level improvements on the foundational aspects of MEL at BRAC International (e.g learning agendas, approach to evaluations, budgeting practices, capacity, staffing structures, interactions with fundraising, etc.) and selected the best-fit technology solutions to enable some of those improvements through MEL digitization.

The Results

By the end of 2020, BRAC International had implemented many tangible improvements to its MEL systems and routines. BRAC International had formally updated its MEL standard operating procedures to reflect the best practices and had launched the updated procedures for all programs and M&E teams, leading to stronger MEL practices across the organization.

In mid-2021, the MEL strengthening and digitization roadmap was adopted by

senior BRAC International leadership. This roadmap will inform the organization's continual strengthening of their MEL systems and practices over the coming years. We expect that this engagement will contribute significantly to improving program quality by facilitating data-driven decision-making. In the long run, the knowledge and learning generated through better monitoring and evaluation will support the development of more ground-breaking programs like Ultra-Poor Graduation and Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents, ultimately benefiting the poor reached across BRAC International's operations and beyond.