Learning from Ebola and Other Health Crises to Inform Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response and Recovery: Moving from Data Collection to Creating Practical Lessons

Summary of Lessons from the Joint Independent Evaluation Group–United States Agency for International Development Learning Event

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This is a summary of a joint knowledge sharing webinar by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group and United States Agency for International Development's Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning team. The webinar highlighted cross-institutional lessons and evaluative knowledge from World Bank and United States Agency for International Development responses to health and nutrition-related interventions during Ebola and other crises. The main lessons from the discussion are captured below.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COORDINATION

- Community engagement and empowerment should not be a stand-alone activity but should be a focus of crisis response, ensuring that communities are engaged in the design of solutions and throughout all of the response phases. For example, the evaluation of World Bank's nutrition interventions showed that addressing nutrition was best done by intensifying community interventions and engagement of nongovernment groups. In crises, countries used community platforms (health, agriculture, or nutrition groups) to intensify interventions by involving beneficiaries and strengthening existing local structures. In Ebola, it was critical to link surveillance and testing activities to community case identification and messaging.
- Engaging local actors and communities to understand where they are in their process of digital transformation can help align investments in digital development.
- Trust, especially at the country level, is one of the best predictors of a successful response. However, this requires investment in building and maintaining trust among organizations and country actors as an intrinsic element of constructive relationships that can be drawn on when crisis strikes.
- Coordination among all stakeholders is complex, and it is important to build on existing lessons and strengthen capacity of multisector coordination structures that can engage a range of actors and reach local levels.

COMMUNICATION: MISINFORMATION AND CHANGING BEHAVIOR

- It is critical to use data for "pulse checks" of the response to identify emergent changes in behavior and where the response may be falling short. Data for pulse checks can be generated from short SMS polls, information coming in from hotlines or call-in radio and television shows, and communication with local actors and communities.
- Adapting recommendations for behaviors to what is practical in communities is also important. For example, the approach of shielding the elderly from potential transmission opportunities versus imposing more universal social distancing was the more practical approach for many communities in the early stages of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Monitoring behaviors and collecting data in the field should inform adaptive management during implementation. Evaluation of World Bank projects shows that in crises, measuring beneficiary feedback has helped improve the quality of services, to understand needs, and to inform the expansion of program activities. During the Ebola crisis, for example, smartphones were used for real-time reporting and data tracking in the community and for patient feedback.

STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS AND DATA COLLECTION

- Investments in local systems before a crisis is an important building block that can help support crisis responses. Investments in data and information, community networks, and laboratories, for example, help to build country readiness for crisis response.
- There are still issues with countries' digital readiness, but to avoid data silos and make digital investment sustainable, donors need to align their plans not just to country capacities but also to country plans.
- As donors prepare countries to undergo a digital transformation process, they should invest in digital systems that are already in use to scale them up, to the extent possible, and make them more sustainable. It is critical that as donors invest in systems, they also invest in capacity building.
- There are examples of the usefulness of technology solutions to coordinate better during responses and to change behaviors in communities. For example, technology can provide low-cost tools to monitor community reactions and needs, which in turn can contribute to better emergency response.
- Investments in digital infrastructure in countries are essential to sustainably expand monitoring and evaluation, communication, and reporting systems. This requires careful strategizing.
- Continued systematic collection and analysis of data is needed, even if the collected data are imperfect or informal. Having some data is better than having no data, and it can help communities adapt during an emergency response.

CAPTURING AND USING LESSONS

- Meaningful capture of useful lessons is important, even though it may not be easy. The key is to look at lessons across sectors and convey what is meaningful during crisis response and recovery.
- Although institutions have found efficient ways to document lessons, there are still opportunities for improvement when it comes to understanding how target audiences learn from the lessons to inform and adapt future approaches and implementation. This includes understanding both the incentives and counterincentives for learning and adapting.
- COVID-19 has affected work in all sectors and affected not only what donors do but how they work across countries and within countries. The all-encompassing nature of the pandemic emphasizes the importance of having an infrastructure for gathering and sharing lessons that spans an organization and its array of in-country partners.

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