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When Theory Meets Practice: An Applied Approach and Tool for Adaptive Management

Inspiring Married Adolescents to Imagine New Empowered Futures (IMAGINE): Implementation Learning Approach

Introduction

The nature of development work has always required attention to context, flexibility in the mechanisms we may use and change pathways through which we might achieve our intended outcomes, objectives and impact. However, with increasingly complex political, environmental, and social contexts, the need to abandon the linear design-do-evaluate pathway has become even more apparent. From the Doing Development Differently movement to the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Cycle, the development community has acknowledged that intentional approaches to decision making and adjustment in response to new information, often about what is working and what is not, and changes in context is needed. What continues to be a roadblock is often the operationalization of such an approach. This brief shares information on how CARE implemented an adaptive management approach, Implementation Learning, in one program.

The IMAGINE Project

Ninety percent of adolescent pregnancies in the developing world are to married girls for whom

complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death.[1] Despite the unacceptable risks to married girls' lives, sexual and reproductive health and other development initiatives often fail to reach them, leaving these extremely marginalized girls without the services and support they need.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CARE launched a project to test a holistic intervention package that holds promise for delaying the timing of first birth among married adolescents in Niger and Bangladesh.

IMAGINE's approach aims to build married girls' capacity and agency to exercise their rights and make decisions about their life courses, address social and structural barriers that prevent delaying, and presents alternative economic opportunities for girls so that early motherhood is not their only option.

IMAGINE's foundational component is its Girls' Collective Groups which serve as a platform to share reproductive health information, create social support and build critical life skills among adolescent girls. Participants are also linked to vocational and entrepreneurship training and

> ## The IMAGINE Project
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> **Implementation Timeframe**: October 2018 – November 2020
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> **Participants:** The project will reach approximately 2,600 married and unmarried adolescent girls ages 15-19, their husbands, families and communities, as well as health workers.
>
> **Location**: Kurigram District, Bangladesh and Zinder Province, Niger.
>
> **Donor**: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

mentorship, as well as collective savings, offering income generating opportunities for these girls. To ensure that surrounding environment is supportive, IMAGINE is also working with husbands and mothers-in-laws, health care workers, and influential community members.[2]

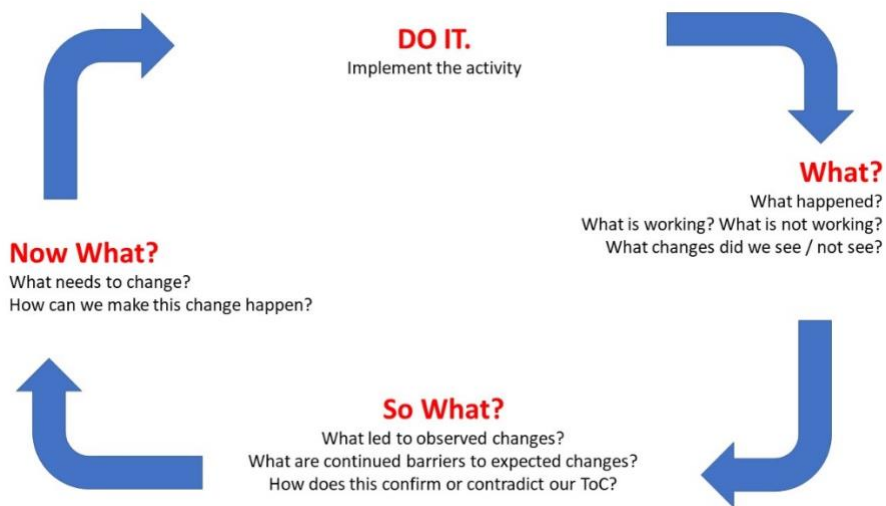## Our Implementation Learning Approach

Figure 1.IMAGINE's Implementation Learning Cycle

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[1] United Nations Children's Fund (2014). Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects. UNICEF, New York 2014.
[2] More information on the IMAGINE project can be found here: www.care.org/srhr/IMAGINE

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In order to systematically learn, reflect, and adapt this complex and holistic programming, IMAGINE developed an implementation learning approach that builds on Kolb's experiential learning cycle[3] and is loosely divided into four stages (Figure 1). The first is the action stage where activities are implemented. The second includes a reflection on the activity or action, describing what happened and what changes were observed or which expected changes were missing. The third, asks participants to analyze the information explored during the reflection. The fourth, and final, stage involves making decisions and identifying changes to implementation based on the findings observed and analyzed during the previous phases. The cycle then starts over again with adapted actions or program activities.

Several key principles guided the development of IMAGINE's approach and tools. The project wanted to ensure the approach was:

- **Pragmatic:** The approach needed to be feasible to implement with limited resources and competing priorities.
- **Grounded in a culture of learning**: To succeed, the project needed to create a team culture that valued learning and experiences as much as a quick achievement of results and impact.
- **Intentional**: While the learning cycle is largely intuitive, it is not automatic. Without relatively clear steps, tools and decision points it would not succeed.
- **Participatory and inclusive**: Having many voices at the table, including those of participants in the project activities and other stakeholders, would make the learning and adaptation stronger and more relevant.

Tools and process

The foundation of IMAGINE's approach is its' Implementation Learning Workshops. These one-day meetings occur roughly each quarter throughout the implementation period. To allow for full participation of project staff and objective reflection on the successes and weakness of the project approach, these meetings are facilitated by a team member external to the project. Participants include project staff, field facilitators, and a cross-section of project beneficiaries and other stakeholders. The facilitator leads these participants through a reflective discussion using IMAGINE's Implementation Learning Discussion Guide which draws heavily on the Strategy Testing approach and on the principles of implementation learning.[4] A designated note taker documents the discussion and agreed upon next steps and adaptations using the IMAGINE Implementation Learning Documentation (all tools can be found online here).

The approach in action

After the initial Implementation Learning Workshops, project staff reported that they find the activity valuable and helpful and that involvement of project participants adds a new dimension to the analysis of and adaptation of program strategy and improves buy-in and engagement in the work. To date the process has helped surface and document operational and behavior change success and challenges

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[3] Kolb, David. (1984). Experiential Learning: Experience As the Source of Learning and Development
[4] The Asia Foundation. (2015). Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach to Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs.

and surface specific, often creative, recommendations for how to through the Implementation Learning Workshop, participants shared that unmarried girls were making it difficult for their married peers to feel included in the Girls' Collective groups despite the fact that these groups were designed to include both married and unmarried girls. Workshop participants felt that at the core of this issue was that married girls were viewed as 'different' by unmarried girls, and they felt they didn't have anything in common. To address this, workshop participants identified solutions to test, including ensuring mixed groups for games and quiz competitions, assigning a more mixed seating

Girls' Collective participant reporting out during an Implementation Learning workshop in Bangladesh

strategy, focusing on drawing out participation from married girls to showcase their perspectives, and conducting get-to-know you exercises designed to illustrate commonalities above differences. The team also committed to re-assessing this issue, and the success of the approaches identified to address them at the next workshop. Without an intentional Implementation Learning approach that included the voice of participants themselves, we may have never recognized this problem nor identified creative solutions to address it.

Lessons learned

- This was a new way of working and thinking for the project team and we were learning as we executed. This required some 'runway' to get going and flexibility to iterate on the methodology and tools between the Implementation Learning Workshops.
- This does take time and resources despite our attempts to make the process as light as possible.
- Ideally, projects will have flexible budget and design, and time to test, iterate and adapt upon identified solutions.
- In most projects, there will be adaptations proposed that aren't feasible due to resource constraints or parameters around the scope of the project, being clear about these upfront and again when decisions are made about what adaptations to take onboard is critical.
- Drilling down on why change is/is not happening as well as surfacing behavior change successes and challenges (not just implementation ones) only comes with strong facilitation.

Conclusion

CARE's IMAGINE project has developed a pragmatic, applied approach to adaptive management which has allowed project staff to identify what is and is not working, and collectively develop solutions to course correct during the implementation process. Given the increasing appreciation that regular, informed adaptation of complex programs is required, we hope that this applied approach offers an example of how to build a participatory process into regular programmatic activities.