The Facilitation Approach at USAID: A Discussion Paper

There is a growing call within the development community for interventions that promote country-led, context-specific efforts to address development problems. In alignment with this call, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Forward initiative includes local solutions as a key focus area. USAID also developed the collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) framework to strengthen its programming through adaptive learning and closer coordination and collaboration with partners. Facilitation is one approach USAID and others can use to encourage and support both local solutions and CLA.

The facilitation approach focuses on creating widespread, systemic change without direct intervention in a system. This can enable more resilient and sustainable outcomes as local actors are more likely to take ownership of development efforts and maintain long-term changes in behaviors. Adopting a facilitation approach requires all development stakeholders, including donors, implementers, and local partners, to shift their thinking about programming. Further inquiry is needed to understand the intricacies of this approach and to develop tools to help practitioners design, implement, and evaluate facilitation activities. USAID and other donors, such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), are helping to lead this research.[i]

This paper provides an overview of the facilitation approach with information drawn from its use in market systems development. It is not designed to include all the relevant issues and debates related to the approach. Instead, the goal is to prompt further discussion and contribute to ongoing learning to refine what it means to implement a facilitation approach to development and how it supports CLA. Examples from multiple sectors are highlighted to illustrate its potential relevance across USAID's programming.

What is CLA?

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) is the framework through which USAID integrates learning throughout its Program Cycle process. The integration of CLA into programming aims to improve results and facilitate country-led development by ensuring USAID's programming enhances knowledge sharing and collaboration among development actors, reflects evidence-based learning, and adapts to new learning and changing contexts. These principles are central to the facilitation approach and should be supported whenever possible.

Visit USAID Learning Lab to learn more about CLA: https://www.usaidlearninglab.org.

The Facilitation Approach

The facilitation approach focuses interventions at strategic leverage points within a system, such as economic or social structures and incentives,[ii] in order to optimize its functionality and inclusiveness for improved development results. An activity[iii] utilizing this approach might focus on strengthening relationships among different types of actors, realigning incentives for actors to change their behaviors, or introducing innovative models and approaches into the system. Implementers use a "light-touch" in activities, minimizing their presence in the system and reducing the direct provision of material goods or services. This allows local actors to more fully engage in development efforts through a process of "self-selection." With these actors taking a more central role, an activity can increase local ownership, enhance the likelihood of sustainable behavior change, and expand the potential for increased impact and scale of activities over time.

The facilitation approach has been used in several development sectors, particularly in the inclusive economic growth field, where it is commonly referred to as market systems facilitation. It is also closely related to value chain development, enterprise development, and the Making Markets Work for the Poor approach.[iv] Other sectors may see similarities with participatory development approaches, which focus on bringing stakeholders into the process but may not necessarily incorporate the same range of actors as a facilitated activity.[v] Some of the interventions used in facilitation may also seem familiar to those who have participated in more traditional approaches to development. For example, facilitated activities may provide training opportunities to relevant stakeholders. However, the key difference is the lighter touch used in facilitation and its overall goal of creating systemic change.[vi]

As mentioned in the Health Systems 20/20 example in the box below, a facilitation approach may not be appropriate for every context. It can be useful for activities in complex environments where outcomes are not always predictable. Interventions that stimulate social and behavioral changes may also lend themselves to the approach because they emphasize actors and relationships. However, for interventions that have more straightforward objectives with a clear, expected outcome, such as a health activity providing vaccinations, taking a more direct, service delivery approach may be preferable.[vii] In addition, emergency situations

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Health Systems Strengthening at USAID

USAID's Health Systems 20/20 activity (2006-2012) worked to improve the policies and structure of country health systems by building the capacity and skills of stakeholders working at all levels of the system. USAID's flagship health systems strengthening activity worked in 51 countries, adapting its approach to fit each specific country context.

Health Systems 20/20 differentiated between "supporting" and "strengthening" a health system. The former involved providing direct inputs, such as mosquito nets, to beneficiaries; the latter involved fostering change within policies, regulations, financing mechanisms, organizational structures, and relationships.

While the activity focused much of its work on strengthening health systems, it acknowledged that there was a role and place for each approach, and that understanding the country context was crucial to identifying appropriate times and places for each.[1]

requiring an immediate response may not allow time for an activity to focus on strengthening local systems. However, implementers of these activities should plan for eventually shifting back to working with the local systems.[viii]

Analysis conducted through the design phase of an activity and continued throughout implementation will help determine whether a facilitation approach is viable within a system. Even when a system is primed for the facilitation approach, there may be times during the activity when a more direct intervention is needed. For example, within market systems facilitation, a strategically timed direct intervention could help initiate change or ensure inclusion of vulnerable populations.[ix]

An implementer's level of involvement and the role it may take during an intervention is called "appropriate intensity." To help determine the appropriate intensity for an intervention, it might be helpful to picture a system existing along a spectrum.

> **USAID's Nature, Wealth, and Power Framework**
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> USAID's Nature, Wealth, and Power Framework is one example of a development framework that could align with the facilitation approach. This framework targets sustainable rural development by taking a systems approach to integrating natural resources management, economic growth, and governance. The framework acknowledges the complex and interrelated relationship that ecosystems, natural resources, and rural production systems play within social, economic, and political systems, highlighting that a change in one system will impact another. The framework focuses on building resilience within systems and incorporating "do no harm" principles, experiential learning, and adaptive management into programming.[2]

If analysis of the political, social, and economic characteristics within a system determines that there is a weak context, an intervention may require a heavier hand from implementers. As the context shifts to become stronger, the activity can take a lighter, more facilitative touch.[x] Regardless of the intensity of an intervention, it is important that the overall activity work toward its intended objectives and that the implementer develop exit strategies for each intervention, especially when starting with a heavier hand.

Enabling Conditions

The success of an activity implementing a facilitation approach depends on several enabling conditions, including:

Emphasis on stimulating systemic change.
Donors and implementers should aim to catalyze widespread, sustainable change within a particular system. However, defining a system is challenging; in fact, there is no commonly agreed upon definition of a system in the development community.[xi] This highlights the fact that systems are complex, dynamic spaces in which each actor's actions can impact and influence the actions of others. The actors and relationships are constantly in flux, and the system's parameters may not be easy to define. Multiple sub-systems may also exist in an overarching system—and actors and relationships in one system can affect those in another.

In USAID, "local systems" are viewed as a key path toward sustainable development results. USAID defines a local system as "those interconnected sets of actors—governments, civil society, the private sector, universities, individual citizens, and others—that jointly produce a particular development

outcome." This focus on the "local" encompasses anyone who is involved in influencing a particular development outcome at the national, provincial, or community level.[xii]

The emphasis from the beginning of an activity should be understanding and working through local actors and existing processes. Donors and implementers must have an understanding of a system to effectively work within it. Undertaking a systems analysis can help them gain greater clarity about the system. (See the systems analysis box below.)

A systems analysis may also be helpful in activity design, as it provides key information for developing a "pathway to change" (or "theory of change") and identifying "manageable steps" to changing behaviors and building relationships. This pathway should be flexible enough for activity staff to implement a variety of interventions and adapt to new learning and systemic shifts. It is important to note that the appropriate next step might not be apparent until the preceding step is completed, particularly if activity staff identify that the system has undergone a fundamental shift.[xiii]

Systems Analysis as an Important Tool in Facilitation

Defining the parameters of a system, while challenging, is a key task throughout the life of an activity. To help donors and implementers gain an understanding of a system and better design and implement interventions, a systems analysis is a fundamental tool for anyone working with a facilitation approach.

A systems analysis can help with articulating the interactions occurring within a system and identifying the system's strengths and weaknesses.[3] A system map can provide a visual representation of the information collected during the research period.[4]

USAID's work in complexity-aware monitoring highlights three interconnected components that are useful for thinking about systems: relationships, perspectives, and boundaries.[5] Similarly, USAID's Local Systems Framework (2014) uses "The Five Rs," another approach for understanding systems that analyzes their resources, roles, relationships, rules, and results.[6]

> **Conducting a Systems Analysis of the Water and Energy Sectors in Jordan**
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> USAID's Public Action for Water, Energy, and Environment (PAP) activity (2009-2014) aimed to improve Jordan's overall management of its scarce natural resources through targeted education and behavior change campaigns in the water and energy sectors and through improved solid waste management.[7]
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> Prior to a nationwide strategic communications and social marketing campaign designed to promote efficiency and conservation among Jordanians, the activity conducted a systems analysis to determine the key actors and behaviors in the communications channels in these sectors. Central to this strategy was the emphasis on understanding consumers' needs and knowledge. Using a systems analysis approach helped PAP outline a roadmap for behavior change for different audiences in each of the three sectors, and identified coordination efforts among stakeholders.[8]

Identification of effective incentives for behavior change and self-selection.
An activity taking a facilitation approach will want to find leverage points within a system that incentivize behavior change and mobilize actors to participate through a process of self-selection. The self-selection process requires actors to invest their own resources in order to participate, with minimal direct subsidization from the activity. This process helps identify actors who are willing to commit to the activity and are more inclined to maintain a change in behavior. The conditions for self-selection must be directly tied to the behavior change the activity is seeking.[xiv] There are three types of behavior change that an activity may want to see: undertaking a new behavior, performing an existing behavior, or stopping a behavior.[xv]

Behavior change is challenging and requires patience, time, and reinforcement. To help encourage participation, implementers must understand the underlying motivations of local actors and identify leverage points that will be effective in encouraging them to participate in and gain value from the activity.[xvi]

Figure 1: Example of Key Phases in Facilitating Behavior Change
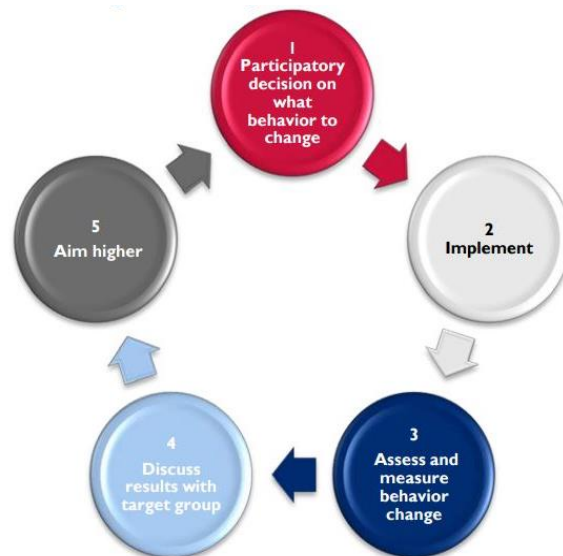
Source: SDCAsia (2011). "Tracking Behavior Change and Iterative Planning: Tools for Implementers." USAID microREPORT #182. USAID Microlinks website, pg. 2.

Implementers should also understand potential barriers to change (e.g., cost, inaccessibility, trepidation, inaccurate perceptions) and incorporate strategies to help overcome them.[xvii] Activities should collect feedback to analyze behaviors and adjust interventions as needed throughout an activity's life cycle. Some options for collecting feedback include direct observation, self-reporting, and peer observation.[xviii]

Identifying and attracting early adopters is critical to success. Implementers must have a high level of engagement with stakeholders to understand what the incentives for change may be and how they can be used.[xix] It is important for implementers to remember that incentives must be embedded within the system in order for a behavior change to be maintained after an activity ends.[xx] An activity should have a rolling exit strategy that allows testing for whether an actor will maintain the behavior change after activity support ends.[xxi] Similarly, an implementer can say "no" to any actor who is not willing to work toward a desired change. However, implementers must be flexible and keep dialogue open in case an actor wants to return to the activity.[xxii] The impact these early adopters experience will then be amplified and brought to scale when other actors copy or adapt the new approaches they have endorsed, or if outside actors are encouraged or forced to change due to shifts in a system's supporting structures.[xxiii]

Incentivizing Behavior Change and Self-Selection in Cambodia

Phases I and II of USAID's Strengthening Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises activity in Cambodia took a facilitation approach to improving the competitiveness of the private sector and the enabling business environment across nine value chains. Implemented from 2005 to 2012, the activity helped identify "lead firms" to work within each system by outlining a set of five characteristics each actor was required to possess:

1. Willingness to invest time to learn more about what markets need and how to meet those needs.
2. Desire to acquire technical and business skills, and apply those skills immediately to improve business performance.
3. Ability to understand how to invest limited resources in the most cost-efficient manner.
4. Confidence to compete in a market with many participants.
5. Devotion to sharing information and building relationships with others.

Rather than enticing these actors to join by providing subsidies, the activity offered to help facilitate introductions to partners, suppliers, and clients that could help enable growth, and to provide advice throughout the growth period. It was able to encourage scaling by leveraging cultural norms whereby lead firms could increase their social profile through knowledge-sharing efforts.[9]

Commitment of donors and implementers to adaptive management principles, and to integrating learning throughout the life of an activity.

Facilitated activities are non-linear, and systemic changes are not always predictable. Implementers can incorporate the CLA approach into activities by continuously shifting their work to adjust to activity learning and changes in the system. To do this, they should incorporate non-traditional management approaches. This requires an understanding of and commitment to adaptive management principles, especially among leadership, and a willingness to test new innovations and approaches, even if there is a possibility of failure.

The changeable nature of activities while implementing a facilitation approach necessitates a trusting relationship between donors and implementers. The donor should understand the nature of a facilitation activity and be ready and willing to adapt as needed.[xxiv]

An understanding of CLA principles by both donors and implementers will also help foster this adaptive approach and encourage strategic learning.
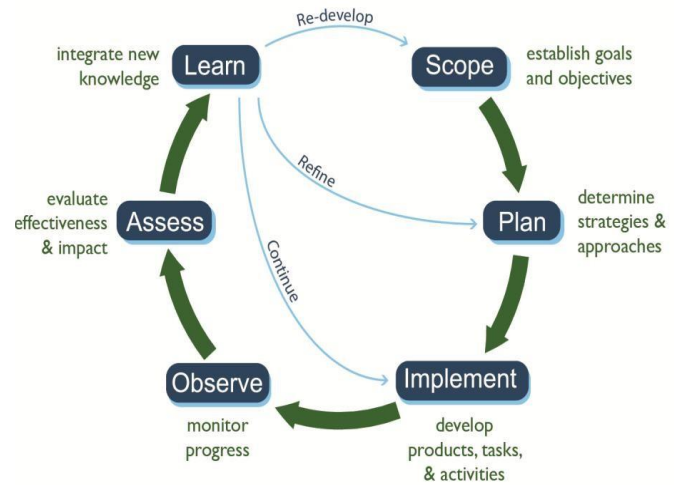
Incorporating Adaptive Management in Uganda

The Northern Karamoja Growth, Health, and Governance (GHG) activity in Uganda (2012-2017), which is focused on strengthening economic growth, health systems, and conflict mitigation and governance in its namesake area of Uganda, uses an adaptive management approach in its pursuit of creating systemic change.

The activity has identified some key lessons learned that enabled the success of its adaptive management approach, particularly the importance of an office culture that supports learning, consistent messaging from management to support innovation, and an understanding that key drivers for learning included clearly defined roles for GHG team members, staff interest and commitment, and coaching and mentoring opportunities. Beyond these broad cultural factors, certain tools and processes also helped to support learning. These included after-action reviews and results chains.[10]

Challenges to Implementing a Facilitation Approach

Implementing a facilitation approach comes with its own set of unique challenges. It is important to consider these during the design and implementation of an activity. Potential challenges include:

Addressing risk among system actors by building trust.
One challenge that facilitated activities may encounter is that local actors may be reluctant to trust their fellow stakeholders. Each actor has perceptions and interests that may conflict with those of other stakeholders. Building trust among such actors can be difficult and should be accounted for throughout an activity's life cycle. It is critically important in the early stages of a facilitated activity for early adopters to self-select and develop a common understanding of objectives, and for implementers to carefully plan interventions that will expand collaboration and trust among actors. Implementers should reinforce the benefits of "win-win" relationships. Strategies to help overcome mistrust include using trusted intermediaries, establishing standards and increasing transparency, shifting the balance of power, and providing risk-sharing mechanisms. Undertaking smaller, pilot initiatives can also provide a good opportunity to show the benefits of collaboration.[xxv]

Building Trust to Strengthen Markets in Zambia

USAID's Zambia Production, Finance, and Improved Technology (PROFIT) activity (2005-2011) worked to improve agricultural production and increase household incomes within select value chains. Prior to implementation, fear and mistrust were prevalent between smallholder farmers and commercial firms. Farmers had concerns about not getting fair prices or high-quality inputs, and firms were hesitant to trust that the farmers would be profitable consumers, especially when they often lived far away from firms in urban areas.

PROFIT's introduction of the in-community service provider, also known as the agent network model, helped to demonstrate that win-win solutions existed. Agents were often local farmers who were selected by their own communities and then approved by firms. These agents would collect pre-paid orders from farmers in their community and place a collective order with input suppliers. The agents would then bring the inputs back to the farmers who placed the order.

In addition to building trust, these agents improved smallholder farmers' knowledge of new agricultural products and practices, which helped stoke demand for a high-quality supply of inputs from firms. These efforts increased competition within communities, which contributed to lower prices and encouraged the government to invest in infrastructure improvements. The relationships endured after PROFIT exited the value chain, with firms continuing to oversee the agent network—and agents themselves beginning to develop their own networks of sub-agents.[11]

Demonstrating results.

With a facilitation approach, tracking results using traditional monitoring and evaluation approaches can be complicated and even misleading. As interventions shift alongside changes in the system, indicators and targets identified at the start of the activity may become irrelevant.[xxvi] Indirect impacts of an intervention within a system make it challenging to identify and track all beneficiaries. And measuring change early in an activity is difficult because it can take more time to realize the results of facilitation activities than it does for traditional interventions. However, these results are often greater and more sustainable in the long term, as can be seen in the figure to the right.[xxvii]

To overcome these challenges, donors and implementers may need to explore alternative methods for showing progress, such as results chains, measuring change at a portfolio level, and including qualitative data.[xxviii] Some activities even complement their official reporting efforts with a parallel, non-official monitoring system focused on aiding decision-making throughout implementation.[xxix]

Figure 3: Example Results Trajectories for Facilitation and Direct Delivery Approaches
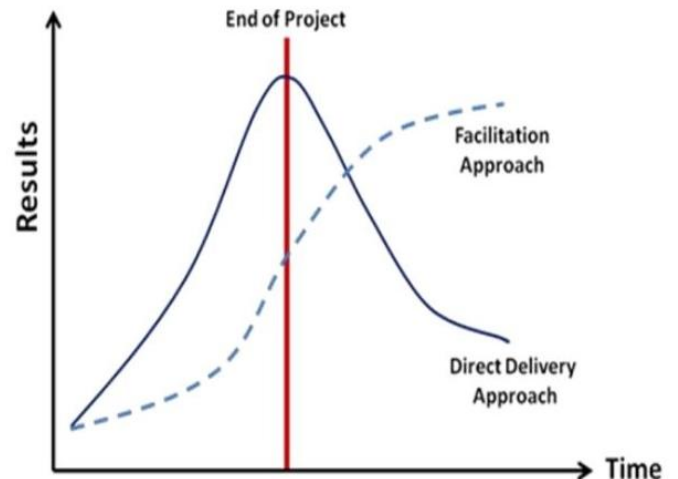
Source: Dunn, Elizabeth; Gomes, Raquel; and Pulido, Tatiana (2014). "Monitoring Facilitation Activities: Report to USAID/Uganda on LEO/MPEP/BFS TDY, 24 February – 6 March, 2014." USAID Microlinks website, pg. 7.

GHG Monitors Change to Support Adaptive Learning

Uganda's GHG activity uses both complexity-aware monitoring and results chains to collect information and monitor impact throughout implementation. With a results chain, GHG identifies the higher-level systemic change it is seeking to achieve, accompanied by an extensive causal logic that maps out a pathway of anticipated change. Interventions and indicators are then attached to steps within this pathway. Each causal logic is adjusted every 3-6 months as new learning emerges. Interventions that are not having the intended effect may be removed and new interventions added. All GHG staff participates in this effort as review periods allow for learning to unfold across the activity.[12]

For an example of a results chain from the GHG activity, see USAID's "Monitoring Facilitation Activities: Report to USAID/Uganda on LEO/MPEP/BFS TDY 24 February – 6 March 2014": http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PBAAC328.pdf.

Assembling an implementation team with the right skills for facilitation.

A facilitation approach requires internal team structures and interactions that may be unfamiliar to donors and implementers and may require new skills. Staff must become communicators, relationship builders, systems analysts, coaches, and innovators rather than agents of service delivery.[xxx] To facilitate this, activities should clearly define job descriptions and provide staff with the appropriate tools and training opportunities. Establishing a less hierarchical organizational structure and formalizing processes to promote knowledge sharing is also helpful.[xxxi]

Managing for a Facilitation Activity in Uganda

USAID's Uganda Livelihoods and Enterprises for Agricultural Development activity (2008-2013) used a facilitation approach to improve agricultural productivity and economic growth in three of the country's key value chains: maize, coffee, and beans.[13] In order to achieve this, it supported greater collaboration and innovation among its staff by creating a flattened hierarchical organizational structure and instituting a policy tolerating failure—as long as it contributed to the learning process. However, the activity encountered a number of change management problems when staff were first granted greater autonomy under these new policies and structures. It overcame these problems by emphasizing greater daily coordination, ensuring messages from management were consistent, and introducing role-modeling initiatives among staff. Working through these challenges took time and required delicate handling by management.[14]

Working within existing contracting mechanisms.

USAID's Local Systems Framework (2014) calls for donors and implementers to "embed flexibility" into activities so that they can adapt to shocks and adjust interventions based on new learning. This may require a different approach to contracting and management. Unpredictable shifts may require interventions and budgets designed to shift along with these changes. Striking a balance between existing accountability structures and more flexible options is an important compromise when managing facilitated activities.[xxxii]

Budget Flexibility Allows for Adaptation in Ethiopia

USAID's Revitalizing Agricultural/Pastoral Incomes and New Markets activity (2009-2012) and its follow-on, the Revitalizing Agricultural/Pastoral Incomes and New Markets for Enhanced Resilience and Recovery activity (2012-2014), focused on improving resiliency for communities throughout the Oromia and Somali regions of Ethiopia. Both worked to bridge the gap between emergency and development interventions, switching between implementing facilitation and traditional approaches as needed. For example, the more traditional interventions, such as cash-for-work programs, were implemented to provide quick relief to vulnerable households while market facilitation activities were used to foster more long-term systemic changes. The activities cited budget flexibility as a key factor in enabling interventions to adapt to circumstances on the ground and meet its development goals.[15]

Conclusion

Using a facilitation approach can help ensure that development efforts align with local priorities, foster local ownership, and support sustainable, systemic change. Understanding the system and identifying incentives that will increase local actors' willingness to self-select and change their behaviors can help an activity determine when a facilitation approach might be appropriate. A CLA framework can then help implementers continuously monitor the systemic changes and adapt to any shifts in the environment.

As with all development efforts, the facilitation approach comes with its own set of challenges, many of which have been described in this paper. Through further discussion and testing on the part of donors and implementers, the true potential of the facilitation approach can be better explored and its applicability across development programming can be known. USAID encourages staff and partners who are interested in contributing to this effort to email the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Team at learning@usaid.gov.

Key Resources

Local Systems
- USAID (2014). "Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development." USAID website.
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Endnotes

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iii Previous definitions of an activity are no longer valid. An activity is a sub-component of a project that contributes to a project purpose. It typically refers to an award (such as a contract or cooperative agreement), or a component of a project such as policy dialogue that may be undertaken directly by Mission staff. For more information, see ADS Chapters 200-203.

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vi USAID Microlinks. "3.4.7 Facilitation." Value Chain Development Wiki. USAID Microlinks website.

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[5] USAID (2013). "Discussion Note: Complexity-Aware Monitoring, Version 2.0." USAID Learning Lab website. For more information on this concept, visit the "Attending to Interrelationships, Perspectives, and Boundaries: A Complexity-Aware Monitoring Principle" page on USAID's Learning Lab website.

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