

BHA EMERGENCY M&E GUIDELINES: Rapid Review Findings and Recommendations

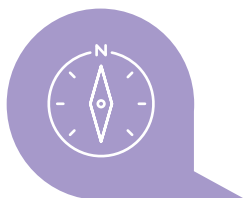
USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is the lead funder and coordinator for the United States Government's international humanitarian and disaster assistance. BHA's M&E team is responsible for providing guidelines to implementing partners (IPs) on the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of their BHA-funded emergency activities.

In response to a request by BHA's M&E team, IDEAL engaged the Right-Fit Evidence Unit of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) to conduct a rapid review of BHA's M&E emergency guidelines, focusing on the extent to which the guidelines promoted accountability and enabled learning among BHA and IPs.¹ IPA reviewed M&E-relevant BHA documents,² conducted interviews with BHA and IP staff, and held workshops with members of the BHA M&E team. This brief highlights common themes emerging from this review. While findings may not comprehensively represent the experience of all IPs working with BHA, they indicate where further analysis and support may be needed.



Photo credit: Guy Hubbard / Save the Children

Key Strengths



BHA provides comprehensive guidance on M&E. IPs mentioned that BHA's detailed and specific technical guidance reduces uncertainty and provides IPs with important information on how to collect, analyze, and report M&E data.



BHA sets a high-quality benchmark for IPs' M&E. IPs highlighted that in comparison to other donors, BHA sets high standards for M&E activities. M&E staff leverage these standards internally to advocate for high-quality data collection and analysis within their organizations and field teams.



BHA gives valuable feedback to IPs. When BHA provides feedback on implementers' M&E work, it helps IPs to improve their proposal and M&E approach. At the same time, feedback by BHA encourages IPs to deliver high-quality M&E work.

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Key Challenges and Areas for Exploration

CHALLENGE 1

Some indicator requirements create a significant burden for IPs and it is unclear how they inform programming decisions.

BHA requires various indicators for inputs, outputs, and different levels of outcomes. Some of the outcome indicators capture intermediate outcomes, which describe “changes in knowledge or attitudes, mastery of skills, and adoption of new methods,”³ while others measure final outcomes (or *sub-purposes*). IPs find the number of required indicators burdensome to collect, especially when the data is not always actionable. Final outcome indicators, for instance, are just a small share of total indicators, but can require a disproportionate amount of time and effort to collect and analyze. By the time this happens, IPs report the information is often too late to influence program planning or applications for future awards.

Areas for Exploration

Review current indicator requirements to focus only on the most insightful data. BHA should assess the list of indicators with each sector team to identify the most insightful indicators, optimizing the balance of required output and outcome indicators, and moving many “required” final outcomes to “optional” to allow IPs to track them only if they are meaningful for their work. Recalibrating the overall requirements for data collection could reduce the total burden on IPs, especially for smaller, local IPs.

Ensure remaining reporting requirements are aligned with BHA needs. BHA requires IPs to collect and report data to better understand program participant needs, target support, and determine program effectiveness. BHA should assess whether there are more effective ways to achieve these aims—for instance, regional needs assessments could provide a more equitable and efficient way to determine participant needs, and requirements for data on participants could be streamlined so that it is available early enough to inform targeting. These alternative approaches could be tested through pilot projects before scaling up.

BHA could encourage IPs to make better use of existing exceptions in data collection requirements. While several exceptions to data collection requirements already exist, IPs are rarely aware of them or don’t feel empowered to use them. Encouraging their use could help alleviate some of the burden on IPs. Increasing flexibility could give IPs more agency in determining whether it is worthwhile collecting specific final outcome indicators, or instead focus on output or intermediate outcome indicators that might be timelier and more relevant to their program activities.

CHALLENGE 2

Guidelines are challenging for IPs to read and navigate.

IPs indicated that the length and complexity of current M&E guidelines are “intimidating,” especially for new IPs. At the same time, it is difficult for BHA to provide comprehensive M&E guidance that is brief and concise. To address this challenge, BHA could structure guidelines to clearly emphasize key points and make requirements more user-friendly for IPs to navigate.

Areas for Exploration

Make it easier to understand and navigate the guidelines. BHA could integrate supplemental visual elements to make guidelines more user-friendly, such as flowcharts and checklists to highlight critical elements and explain important nuances. BHA could also structure the guidelines to distinguish key requirements (“*must-knows*”) from supplemental guidance, drawing inspiration from the [M&E Guide](#) provided by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). BHA’s publication of the “[Checklist of Reporting Elements](#),” in October 2022 represents progress towards this goal.

Create additional supplementary tools for IPs. To make IPs’ M&E work more standardized and efficient, BHA can provide additional templates and tools, such as adapting BHA’s [M&E Toolkit for Multipurpose Cash Assistance](#) for other sectors. BHA could also produce “2-pagers” on key issues or short videos to strengthen IPs’ understanding of the guidelines.

CHALLENGE 3

Evaluations focus on accountability, but rarely contribute to internal and sector-wide learning.

BHA's current requirements aim to ensure accountability through evaluations that are based on length of grant award (or period since previous award in the same country). *IPs frequently choose to conduct performance evaluations to fulfill this evaluation requirement.* BHA could explore ways to tailor evaluation requirements both to answer key learning questions about the implementation of humanitarian programs, as well as to fill sectoral evidence gaps related to impact.

Areas for Exploration

When possible, evaluations of emergency awards should seek to address key questions and sectoral evidence gaps.

BHA should further prioritize evaluation questions that can strengthen sectoral learning to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian responses. BHA should proactively co-create lists of key learning questions with IPs that reflect both sectoral learning gaps and local learning priorities. BHA could also work with IPs to determine the most appropriate evaluation methods for each learning question, including varied methods such as qualitative case studies, performance evaluations, and impact evaluations.

Revisit current criteria for emergency evaluations. As BHA considers expanding the role of evaluations to generate more and better evidence, it may make sense to reexamine the current triggers for evaluations based on duration of award and previous award. Loosening these requirements could help ensure that evaluation resources focus on the areas that are most impactful for IPs' and BHA's learning, while also remaining a tool for serving accountability goals.

CHALLENGE 4

IPs report substantial amounts of data to BHA, but they are not shared back with IPs or the wider humanitarian community.

BHA requires IPs to report significant volumes of indicator data and narrative reports to ensure accountability to the agency's mission and stakeholders. This creates a huge repository of data on the humanitarian responses that BHA funds, but IPs report that they rarely see any data or synthesized insights shared back to them, describing BHA's M&E as a "black box." Different teams within BHA extensively use the data they obtain from IPs, but this is often not shared beyond BHA, missing an opportunity to improve humanitarian responses across the wider sector.

Areas for Exploration

Increase external visibility of IPs' M&E findings. BHA has a significant opportunity to invest in the synthesis, analysis, and external publication of high-quality data that could help inform IP best practices, external research, and other humanitarian stakeholders. BHA could create a strategy for determining which data is suitable for external sharing, and produce lessons learned documents or evaluation summaries which could benefit the sector without compromising sensitive participant information. BHA could also explore sharing sources of learning with the wider community, such as through internal research newsletters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) team also supported this initiative with coordination and funding
- 2 Documents included the [Emergency Application Guidelines](#), [BHA Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Emergency Activities](#), [BHA Checklist of Required Elements](#), and the [BHA EAG Indicator Handbook](#).
- 3 BHA. (2022). Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Emergency Activities. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/BHA_Emergency_ME_Guidance_February_2022.pdf



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