ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE USAID CWT PORTFOLIO: CURRENT PRACTICE AND OPPORTUNITIES

Assessment Summary

COMBATING WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Wildlife trafficking poses a daunting challenge to conservation practitioners. Wildlife are frequently captured and killed on one continent and smuggled to markets across the world by criminal syndicates that quickly adapt to law enforcement strategies. Meanwhile, high demand for wildlife products ensures that the wildlife trade stays profitable for syndicates. These factors converge to create an urgent and multi-pronged environmental problem that is both local and global in scale.

ASSESSING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE CWT PORTFOLIO

USAID's CWT portfolio offers an opportunity to understand how adaptive management is practiced across a discrete portfolio. To this end, Measuring Impact II (MI2) collaborated with the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) partnership between UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and USAID to assess adaptive management in USAID's CWT programming. The assessment answers the following questions:

1. How is adaptive management currently practiced within and across the USAID CWT portfolio?

2. What factors influence the practice of adaptive management in CWT programming?

3. What opportunities are there to improve uptake of better adaptive management practices?

CWT ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Across the USAID CWT portfolio, adaptive management is practiced widely and perceived as integral to implementing a CWT program.

There is a shared understanding of what adaptive management is. Practitioners rely on collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) guidance, the Conservation Standards, and engagement with experts to shape their practice of adaptive management. However, practitioners do not have a consistent understanding of how to adapt activities and projects.

Specific adaptive management practices vary due to differences in programming context, objectives, strategic approaches, and the rapidity with which the contexts change.

Rigorous data is frequently unavailable, and many monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL) plans are focused on performance reporting. Teams use the most reliable information they can find, but the available information is often anecdotal or lacking analytical rigor.

Adaptive management is mostly tactical and occurs at the activity level. Most often, practitioners manage activities' tactics, revising targets in light of new information. Strategic adaptation, which shifts approaches, overall goals, or focal areas in response to new evidence, is more rare and falls to USAID staff rather than to implementing partners.
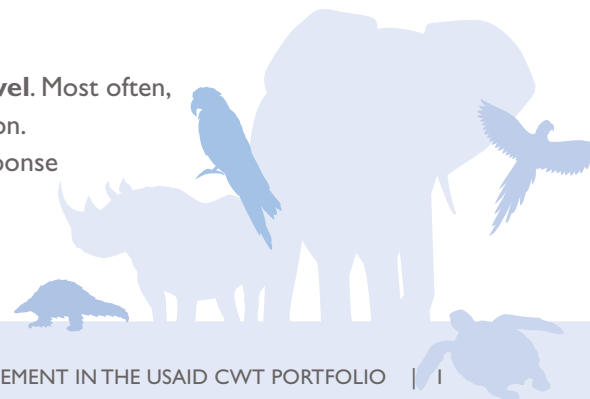
The illegal nature of wildlife trafficking is a key challenge to adaptive management of CWT programming. Data to inform adaptive decision making, especially related to law enforcement, are hard to obtain and share, and can be extremely sensitive.

FOUR ENABLING CONDITIONS THAT SET THE STAGE

Culture of collaboration and learning. USAID and implementing partner leaders that understand and value adaptive management establish it as an ongoing priority and create an environment for good practice.

Expertise and guidance on CWT and adaptive management. Teams are better able to practice adaptive management when staff have skills in developing MEL processes and systems, conducting targeted assessments, and facilitating learning processes beyond performance monitoring.

USAID and host government policies. High-level USAID priorities, such as CLA, enable adaptive management by justifying resource allocation for it. Teams are also better able to adaptively manage CWT programming when host government counterparts have the political will to tackle wildlife trafficking threats.

USAID business processes. Navigating USAID business processes is crucial to a team's ability to practice adaptive management. Teams are best able to practice good adaptive management when procurements and work plans specify norms and resources for adaptive management processes.

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT OF CWT PROGRAMMING

AT THE ACTIVITY LEVEL

- **Improve resources to conduct adaptive management**. Although adaptive management is practiced widely across the USAID CWT portfolio, practitioners frequently encounter challenges, including insufficient resources, training, skills, and funding. Training could better emphasize the value of adaptive management in achieving CWT outcomes, expand guidance on implementation, and clarify the roles of staff. Consistent language to describe adaptive management norms and requirements would reduce misunderstandings. Expanded funding could enable teams to hire additional specialists to spearhead adaptive management.

- **Improve evidence to inform adaptive management**. Teams may reach different conclusions on whether there is sufficient evidence to support adapting or how to adapt based on the evidence. To address this challenge, USAID could develop resources for teams to apply evidence-based decision-making consistently and to synthesize and create evidence products for teams to use.

- **Reduce emphasis on standard indicators for performance monitoring**. USAID encourages teams to test assumptions and learn during implementation, yet many activity MEL plans focus only on standard indicators to satisfy required performance reporting. Developing and sharing custom indicators and increasing emphasis on learning to inform adaptation would directly improve adaptive management.

AT THE PORTFOLIO LEVEL

Given the global nature of wildlife trafficking, it is critically important that USAID coordinate and adaptively manage CWT interventions at the portfolio level—meaning across activities, projects, or programs. The Agency could:

- Continue emphasizing **learning** with implementing partners in USAID's activities so practitioners can share knowledge directly with one another and with USAID.

- Communicate USAID's **vision and goals** for CWT so teams implementing activities understand how their work contributes and see opportunities to support CWT elsewhere, including by sharing conceptual models and results chains.

- Set **measurable targets** to track USAID's impact and progress across the portfolio to thoroughly evaluate overall impact and to adaptively manage where and how USAID invests in CWT actions to maximize impact, such as by developing common MEL frameworks and cross-Agency learning agendas.