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

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## CONTRACT INFORMATION

This program is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of its requisition number REQ-EGEE-18-000127 (Measuring Impact II) implemented by prime recipient Environmental Incentives, LLC in partnership with Foundations of Success, and ICF Macro, Inc. Measuring Impact II has been issued under contract number GS-00F-193DA Order No. 7200AA18M00013 and supports the same program objectives as described in RFQ number 7200AA18Q00020. Measuring Impact II is funded and managed by the USAID Office of Forestry and Biodiversity in the Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment.



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COVER PHOTO: A herd of elephants traveling at Makalali Game Reserve, South Africa.  
Elephant ivory is used to make jewelry and amulets. Photo by Kathleen Flower for Environmental Incentives.

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# ACRONYMS

<b>AOR</b>	Agreement Officer's Representative
<b>CLA</b>	Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting
<b>CO</b>	Contracting Officer
<b>COP</b>	Chief of Party
<b>COR</b>	Contracting Officer's Representative
<b>CWC</b>	Combating Wildlife Crime
<b>CWT</b>	Combating Wildlife Trafficking
<b>DFID</b>	United Kingdom Department for International Development
<b>GLAM</b>	Global Learning for Adaptive Management
<b>IP</b>	Implementing Partner
<b>KII</b>	Key Informant Interview
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation
<b>MEL</b>	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
<b>MI2</b>	Measuring Impact II
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OAA</b>	Office of Acquisition and Assistance
<b>PEA</b>	Political Economy Analysis
<b>RLO</b>	Regional Legal Officer
<b>SMART</b>	Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tools
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>USG</b>	United States Government



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wildlife trafficking is a large and growing challenge for conservation practitioners. Wildlife are frequently captured or 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 criminals. These factors converge to create a problem that is both local and global in scale, and that requires effective adaptive management of efforts to combat it. Since President Obama's 2013 Executive Order on Combating Wildlife Trafficking (CWT), the passage of the 2016 Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act (P.L. 114-231), and President Trump's Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has built a global portfolio of CWT programming, and the USAID Biodiversity Division in the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (hereafter the Biodiversity Division) has developed resources to guide CWT practitioners in adaptively managing their interventions.

As a subset of biodiversity programming in which multiple Missions apply a common set of strategic approaches in their portfolios, USAID's CWT portfolio offers an opportunity to understand how adaptive management is practiced and identify avenues for improving it. 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?

To complete this assessment, MI2 interviewed 36 key informants, including both USAID and implementing partner (IP) staff, across 12 operating units, and conducted one 12-person focus group discussion with IP staff.

## ***Findings: 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 are many commonalities across programs in how it is conceived and practiced.

1. **There is a shared understanding of what adaptive management is overall.** Practitioners rely on collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) guidance, the Conservation Standards, and engagement with adaptive management experts to shape their conceptualization and practice of adaptive management. All respondents generally defined adaptive management as a process that involves: 1) defining the intended outcomes of an activity and associated assumptions; 2) checking progress toward intended outcomes and testing assumptions as work proceeds and new information becomes available; 3) taking opportunities to reflect on what is or is not working; and 4) maintaining the flexibility to adapt approaches to better achieve the intended outcomes. However, practitioners do not have a consistent understanding of how to adapt activities and projects.

2. **Specific adaptive management practices vary.** Practitioners describe implementation of adaptive management as: 1) designing programs to enable effective adaptive management; 2) identifying and filling information gaps during design and throughout implementation; and 3) adapting programs both at regular points in the life of an activity or project, and when new information comes to light. Although these types of activities are undertaken across activities and projects, the specific practices employed vary due to differences in programming context, objectives, strategic approaches, and the rapidity with which the context changes.
3. **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 to inform their adaptive management, but the available information is often anecdotal or lacking analytical rigor. Throughout implementation, teams use a variety of MEL approaches to gather multiple types of data to inform decisions. There is wide variability in the scope and implementation of MEL plans; they tend to focus on performance monitoring, such as data collection for standard indicators, rather than on approach effectiveness, shifting threats, or other information to inform programming decisions.
4. **Adaptive management is mostly tactical and occurs at the activity level.** Practitioners adaptively manage both strategic (selection of focal interests, threats to address, and strategic approaches taken) and tactical (how to implement strategic approaches) aspects of CWT activities and projects, but mostly they adapt tactical aspects; in many IPs' experience, strategic adaptation falls to USAID. Teams adapt to changes in the operating environment, e.g., host country priorities, partner availability, or USAID constraints, more frequently than they adapt to new information on whether their actions and strategic approaches are achieving the intended results. IPs manage adaptively primarily at the activity-level, less so at the portfolio-level (cross-activity, cross-project, and cross-program) because they have the authority and mandate to make activity-level decisions.
5. **The high-profile and illegal nature of wildlife trafficking is a key challenge to adaptive management of CWT programming.** The illegal nature of wildlife trafficking hampers accurate data collection and sharing and involves varied transboundary actors. Responding to the threat of wildlife trafficking can raise political sensitivities and scrutiny. Data on criminal networks is hard to obtain, can be extremely sensitive, and is difficult to share within and between teams to inform adaptive management decisions and measure impact. Corruption may reduce the reliability of data that teams use to inform adaptive management, including information gathered from stakeholders, and reduces trust between partners. The urgency of the CWT response and the rapid influx of funding and actors into this space make it very difficult to track activities, responsibilities, and outcomes.

### ***Enabling Conditions: Setting the Stage for Adaptive Management of CWT Programming***

This assessment found four broad enabling conditions that support the adaptive management of CWT activities and portfolios:

1. **Culture of collaboration and learning.** Having an organizational culture and leadership that values, champions, and supports learning and adaptive management is critical to its effective practice. USAID and IP leaders that understand and value adaptive management establish it as an ongoing priority and create an environment for good practice. Strong communities at multiple levels, e.g., regionally, Agency-wide, support good practice and improve teams' learning of what works and does not work. Teams

need trust and collaborative relationships between IPs and multiple stakeholders, including USAID staff, the U.S. Government (USG) Interagency, other CWT practitioners, host government officials, and community members, to practice adaptive management well. Establishing a collaborative culture between partners within the IP consortium is also critically important, and allows teams to share lessons learned, evaluate incoming data from MEL systems and other information gathering efforts, and adaptively manage in a participatory way.

2. **Expertise and guidance on CWT and adaptive management.** USAID and IP leaders who have CWT expertise can provide teams with better information on threats and interventions, as well as connections with important stakeholders. Teams are better able to practice adaptive management when staff have skills in developing MEL processes and systems, conducting targeted assessments, or facilitating learning processes beyond performance monitoring. These skills are often new to the traditional set of monitoring and evaluation specialist skills.
3. **USAID and host government policies.** High-level USAID priorities, such as CLA, enable adaptive management by justifying resource allocation for it. USAID's Journey to Self-Reliance initiative creates a framework for adaptively managing over multiple iterations of the Program Cycle to achieve both local capacity building and CWT objectives. Teams are also better able to adaptively manage CWT programming when host government counterparts have the political will to tackle threats from wildlife trafficking.
4. **USAID business processes.** Navigating USAID business processes is crucial to a team's ability to practice adaptive management. Good adaptive management processes—including establishing MEL systems that measure what matters, synthesizing MEL outputs to report on CWT outcomes, and intentionally reflecting on lessons learned and adaptation—take time and resources. 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***

Although adaptive management is practiced widely across the USAID CWT portfolio, practitioners frequently encounter challenges, including 1) insufficient resources, training, skills, and funding to support adaptive management; 2) inadequate resources and frameworks for consistently using evidence to inform adaptive management; 3) an overemphasis on standard indicators for performance monitoring; and 4) inadequate frameworks or processes to conduct adaptive management at the portfolio-level. This assessment revealed four opportunities for USAID to overcome barriers to adaptive management and improve the practice of adaptive management in CWT activities and across the portfolio.

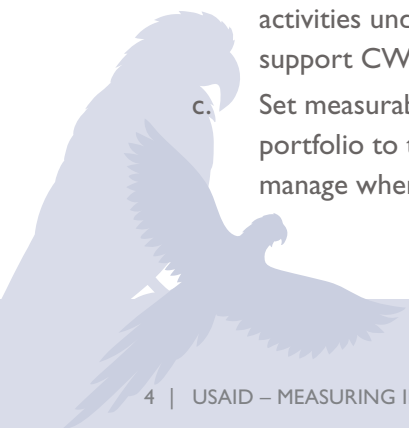
1. **Improve resources to conduct adaptive management.** Undertaking rigorous adaptive management requires that implementing teams, including IP and USAID staff, have a shared understanding of what adaptive management entails, a culture of learning that enables partners to openly share successes and failures, skills to operationalize the practices and processes involved in adaptive management, and an enabling procurement mechanism. Training for IP and USAID staff members involved in CWT programming could better emphasize the value of adaptive management in achieving CWT outcomes, expand guidance on implementing the “A” in CLA, and clarify the roles of all staff in the adaptive management process. Consistent language to describe adaptive management

norms and requirements in procurements, work plans, and other business processes would reduce misunderstandings between IPs and various USAID counterparts. Lastly, expanding funding available to support adaptive management could enable teams to hire additional specialists to spearhead adaptive management.

2. **Improve resources to guide teams in using evidence to inform adaptive management.** CWT programs face the dual challenges of obtaining data on illicit activities and the need to act quickly in response to rapidly adapting criminal activities. Teams across the portfolio may reach different conclusions on whether there is sufficient evidence to support adapting, or how to adapt based on the evidence on hand. To address this challenge, USAID could develop resources for teams to apply evidence-based decision-making consistently. One possibility would be to build upon the [Evidence in Action](#) guidance to include information on how to evaluate available evidence and determine whether additional evidence is needed, such as the decision tree developed by [Salafsky et al. \(2019, Figure 2\)](#), or associated facilitator toolkits.
3. **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 using standard indicators to satisfy required performance reporting. More and better resources to develop and share custom indicators could directly improve adaptive management. The Biodiversity Division could enhance the usefulness of [Measuring Efforts to Combat Wildlife Crime: A Toolkit for Improving Action and Accountability](#) by incorporating guidance on monitoring methodology for the activity- and portfolio-level indicators it defines, similar to the approach taken in the [Framework for Monitoring, Evaluating, and Learning from Conservation Enterprises](#).
4. **Improve frameworks for portfolio-level adaptive management.** Given the global nature of wildlife trafficking, it is critically important to coordinate and adaptively manage CWT interventions at the portfolio level—meaning across activities, projects, or programs. For example, to reduce wildlife trafficking along a specific supply chain, or to achieve other CWT objectives focused on explicit species, geographies, or type of intervention, all stakeholders working on that shared objective must be aware of what each is doing, and coordinate and adaptively manage. Respondents, especially IPs, felt they do not have enough opportunities to learn what others are doing in similar contexts, coordinate in implementation, and align monitoring systems to achieve collective impact.

Respondents highlighted three opportunities to improve portfolio-level CWT adaptive management:

- a. Continue emphasizing learning with IPs in USAID’s activities so that practitioners working on the ground can share knowledge directly with one another and with USAID.
- b. Communicate USAID’s vision and goals for CWT across the portfolio so teams implementing activities understand how their work contributes to the global goal and see opportunities to support CWT elsewhere.
- c. Set measurable targets to track USAID’s overall impact and progress across the entire CWT portfolio to thoroughly evaluate USAID’s overall impact on CWT outcomes, and adaptively manage where and how USAID invests in CWT actions to maximize impact.







USAID convened a learning exchange for CWT activities across Asia in November 2019. Participants shared successes, challenges, and lessons learned from their work to reduce consumer demand for wildlife products and build law enforcement capacity. Photo by USAID.

*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.*



# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. OVERVIEW

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.

Galvanized by President Obama's Executive Order on Combating Wildlife Trafficking (CWT),<sup>1</sup> the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016,<sup>2</sup> and President Trump's Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking,<sup>3</sup> the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) spends approximately 20-30 percent of the biodiversity directive annually to combat the global wildlife trade. USAID's CWT portfolio includes national, regional, and global programming to engage communities in reducing poaching, build capacity for host country law enforcement to crack down on wildlife trafficking, and reduce consumer demand for wildlife products. However, CWT practitioners, including USAID staff and implementing partners (IPs), face the perennial challenge of adapting strategic approaches to rapidly changing conditions, including which species are under threat, which groups are smuggling wildlife through which trade routes, and which consumers are driving market demand for wildlife products. As a result, effective adaptive management is critical to CWT success.

In the years since USAID launched its portfolio of CWT programming, the USAID Biodiversity Division in the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (hereafter the Biodiversity Division) has developed resources to inform adaptive management of CWT activities. In 2015 (last updated in 2017), the Biodiversity Division developed [Measuring Efforts to Combat Wildlife Crime: A Toolkit for Improving Action and Accountability](#) (CWC Toolkit) with generalized theories of change and custom indicators to track outcomes for the 10 strategic approaches that are most commonly implemented by USAID. Additionally, the Biodiversity Division initiated and continues to support a CWT Cross-Mission Collaborative Learning Group to facilitate the sharing and application of lessons learned in CWT interventions.

As a subset of biodiversity programs that often apply a common set of strategic approaches across multiple different Mission portfolios, USAID's CWT programming provides a unique opportunity to learn from and improve adaptive management practices. In 2019, USAID Measuring Impact II (MI2) and Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM), an initiative jointly funded by USAID and the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), launched a collaborative effort to explore the current practice of adaptive management in the USAID CWT portfolio, how it could be improved, and what guidance and tools are needed to implement improved adaptive management.

<sup>1</sup> Executive Order—Combating Wildlife Trafficking

<sup>2</sup> H.R.2494 - Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Presidential Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking.

## 1.2. ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

This assessment aims to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Understand CWT program managers' needs and opportunities for rigorous adaptive management;
2. Learn from USAID's use of evidence-related tools and processes to glean lessons and examples of what works, what does not, and why in the adaptive management of CWT activities, projects, and portfolios;
3. Identify practices and principles for improved adaptive management of CWT activities, projects, and portfolios;
4. Identify needs for new or enhanced tools and guidance to support improved adaptive management; and
5. Identify opportunities to align USAID's CWT learning efforts and monitoring frameworks.

The assessment team conducted interviews and a focus group discussion with USAID and IP staff, and synthesized key informant perspectives to answer the following assessment 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?



The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) symbolically burns 1.35 tons of elephant tusks and rhino horns seized from poachers and wildlife trafficking syndicates. USAID works with KWS to support management of national parks and enforcement. Photo by Eric Onyiego.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

The assessment is informed by semi-structured key informant interviews and one focus group discussion. The team conducted interviews between August and December 2019, and held the focus group discussion in November 2019. The team then qualitatively coded notes taken during interviews for particular themes, and compiled key informant perspectives across themes to provide insight on the research questions. In this report, the term “informant” or “interviewee” is used when referring to individuals that participated in key informant interviews, while “focus group participant” is used when referring to individuals that participated in the focus group discussion. The term “respondent” is used when referring to both groups collectively.

### 2.2. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The assessment team conducted interviews with 36 informants, representing 12 CWT activities, 11 Missions, and the Biodiversity Division. Two of these informants provided a more global view of the USAID CWT portfolio. The informants consisted of USAID staff, including Foreign Service Officers and Foreign Service Nationals, as well as staff from the IPs of CWT activities, including Chiefs of Party (COPs) and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Specialists. The Biodiversity Division selected the operating units and activities. Table 1 provides a table of the number of informants interviewed per region. Informants are described by role and region throughout the report—i.e., Activity MEL Specialist from Africa, or USAID Contracting Officer’s Representative (COR) from a Mission in Asia—to ensure confidentiality.

The assessment team conducted confidential 60 to 90-minute interviews (which often included multiple informants) over remote meeting software such as Skype or GoToMeeting. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in all but one case, and the research team also took synchronous notes during interviews. Informants provided informed consent to be interviewed and had the opportunity to edit their interview notes to ensure accuracy.

**TABLE 1:** A LIST OF KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS PER REGION AND POSITION.

*Chiefs of Party, CWT Technical Leads, and MEL Specialists and Learning Specialists are all implementing partner staff.*

Region	# USAID Staff	# Chiefs of Party and CWT Technical Leads	# MEL Specialists and Learning Specialists	TOTAL
Asia	5	6	3	14
East Africa	3	1	1	5
West Africa	1	2	0	3
Southern Africa	4	5	1	10
Global	2	1	1	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>36</b>

Interviewers used semi-structured interview methods. This means they used a topic guide to frame the interviews with predetermined but open-ended questions that included discussion prompts or sub-questions that could be explored opportunistically.

### 2.3. ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

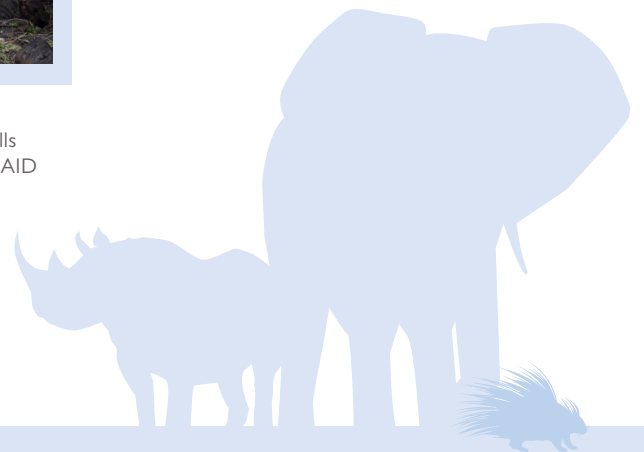
The assessment team analyzed interview notes and used Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software to tag emergent concepts related to the research questions and sub-questions, a process called inductive analysis (Patton 2002). The assessment team then synthesized the data from all interview notes related to a specific assessment question or associated sub-topic in a memo and compared and consolidated the memo data into this report. The Biodiversity Division activity manager for this assessment has access to the memos for review and triangulation.

### 2.4. VALIDATION OF FINDINGS WITH FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

After completing most key informant interviews, the assessment team conducted one focus group discussion with 12 IP staff, four of whom had previously participated in interviews, to reflect on initial findings and validate and expand on those findings. The focus group discussion included flash polls to measure the degree to which participants agreed or disagreed with statements about adaptive management practices and the enablers and barriers to practicing adaptive management. The focus group discussion results and insights are included with the interview findings to validate and add nuance.



USAID trained enforcement officers, government personnel, and community-based frontliners in Palawan, Philippines on practical skills on wildlife crime scene forensics and investigation as part of the USAID Protect Wildlife activity. Photo by USAID.



## 3. FINDINGS: KI PERSPECTIVES ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE USAID CWT PORTFOLIO

### 3.1. ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN THEORY

***Finding: There is a shared understanding of what adaptive management is overall.***

Across interviews and the focus group discussion, respondents defined adaptive management as a process that involves 1) defining the intended outcomes of an activity and associated assumptions; 2) checking progress toward intended outcomes and testing assumptions as work proceeds and new information becomes available; 3) taking opportunities to reflect on what is or is not working; and 4) maintaining the flexibility to adapt approaches to better achieve the intended outcomes. All focus group participants strongly agreed with the statement that adaptive management is “making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of activities and projects.”<sup>4</sup> Some informants described this process succinctly as “learning by doing” and as one technical expert phrased it, adaptive management is about “being more focused on what we’re trying to achieve, rather than how.” Importantly, informants noted that they not only sought to learn from their experiences but also from external sources.

Respondents described what they felt were important characteristics and principles of good adaptive management. The most frequently mentioned principles are testing assumptions to learn what works or does not work, and involving the right stakeholders at the right times to make adaptive management a collaborative process. Respondents repeatedly used the following words or phrases to characterize good adaptive management: “results oriented,” “evidence based,” and “participatory.” Respondents also said that good adaptive management must be deliberate and regular – there must be dedicated times for the implementing team to reflect on what it has learned and consider adapting. Flexibility is also a key characteristic of good adaptive management. Informants said that for good adaptive management to take place, they must be flexible in what interventions are implemented and in how, where, and with whom they implement interventions.

Informants draw upon diverse resources to understand adaptive management. In most cases, the set of tools and resources the Biodiversity Division developed from the Conservation Standards have guided informants’ understanding of adaptive management. Across the board, IP and USAID staff talk about the importance of using situation models to understand threats, and then using theories of change to build shared visions for implementing and monitoring strategic approaches. One informant, a COR in an African Mission, said that USAID’s Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Framework is the foremost guide to her practice of adaptive management. Numerous informants mention drawing on the CWC Toolkit to develop results chains and custom indicators for their activities’ unique contexts. Some USAID informants further learned about adaptive management concepts and practices through USAID University courses, and learning groups on CWT convened by USAID and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Informants have also learned about adaptive management practices and concepts through engagements with technical experts on adaptive management from the Biodiversity Division and MI2.

<sup>4</sup> This is how the ADS 201 defines adaptive management but was not identified as such when shown to the focus group.

Although there is broad consensus among respondents in their conceptual understanding of adaptive management, there is more variability in their practice of adaptive management due to differences in program context, objectives, strategic approaches, and the rapidity with which the program context changes.

## 3.2. ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

***Finding: Specific adaptive management practices vary.***

According to most informants, practicing adaptive management is part of the fabric of implementing a CWT program. Throughout the lifecycle of a CWT program, both USAID and IP respondents test the assumptions underlying their strategic approaches and adapt their actions accordingly. They see adaptive management not simply as a handbook that is dusted off during annual pause-and-reflect sessions to draft clauses in the next year's work plan, but rather as a state of mind and set of practices that practitioners bring with them to inform every aspect of their work. As one USAID informant phrased it, "in the context of [the CWT] component of [the activity]...every part of it has had to be an adaptation." Respondents use the following sets of adaptive management practices: 1) designing programs to enable effective adaptive management; 2) identifying and filling information gaps to inform adaptive management; and 3) adapting activities at strategic points.

### 3.2.1. DESIGNING PROGRAMS TO ENABLE EFFECTIVE ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

During the design of new CWT activities and projects, respondents conduct evidence-based problem analyses and use situation models to build a shared understanding across the design team of the program context and the priorities for intervention. They also express theories of change for their selected interventions as results chains to explicitly identify the assumptions that need to be tested during implementation. Sometimes, respondents bring in facilitators and technical experts to make the design process more collaborative.

USAID staff also lay the foundations for their activities and portfolios to practice adaptive management over the course of implementation through their choice of procurement mechanisms and the content of contracts and agreements. Some informants include requirements in contracts and agreements that commit the IP to certain adaptive management practices. Sometimes, the Biodiversity Division and other Washington-based technical assistance providers and support mechanisms provide guidance on procurement language to support adaptive management.

### 3.2.2. IDENTIFYING AND FILLING INFORMATION GAPS TO INFORM ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

***Finding: Rigorous data is frequently unavailable, and many MEL plans are focused on performance reporting.***

Numerous respondents discussed needing reliable and current information to identify and respond to changes in context that arise at all stages in the Program Cycle; USAID and IP staff assess information gaps and take actions to fill them when they can. During strategy and activity design, USAID staff often

commission assessments to map threats to wildlife and potential intervention points in the situation model. For example, teams use Political Economy Analyses (PEAs) when they need to uncover how power and political will are distributed among stakeholders. Informants incorporate assessment results in decisions around which interventions they will use, particularly for policy or law enforcement-related strategic approaches, depending on the stakeholders with whom they anticipate working. According to one informant in an African Mission, the Environment Office conducted a PEA, gender analysis, and landscape and private sector assessments, among others, to inform the CWT component of its biodiversity portfolio, identifying which CWT interventions would achieve the greatest impacts.

Early in the implementation of numerous activities, USAID and IP staff identified priority evidence gaps to fill in order to guide the activity through implementation. Demand reduction strategic approaches often begin with a period of formative research to understand consumer behavior for wildlife and wildlife products. Staff use research data to define target audiences, develop and test messages, and track behavior change over time. An early focus on evidence generation helped one regional activity in Africa identify the wildlife trafficking issues on which to focus, according to both USAID and IP informants working on the activity. USAID had previously implemented few CWT interventions at the regional level; by starting with a series of threats assessments, the team was able to understand what wildlife threats were most pressing and how to strategically deploy resources.

USAID and IP staff generate evidence to inform adaptive management throughout activity and project implementation. An activity in Asia conducted a PEA after an election to determine if the time was right to work with the new government on revising a policy. One Mission in Africa, seeing that many alleged wildlife criminals were caught but not imprisoned, conducted an assessment of where breakdowns occur in the steps between arrest, prosecution, conviction, and imprisonment. That team used the findings to inform a large initiative to train prosecutors and judges to correctly implement the law in prosecuting cases. Another Mission in Africa commissioned a whole-of-project evaluation to assess the effectiveness of all their programming and examine opportunities to increase impact, which led to substantial changes in their portfolio. Some activities leverage other planned assessments such as mid-term reviews and learning question assessments to fill information gaps. One activity in Asia attempted to partner with local universities to carry out these assessments but ended up hiring outside contractors when the universities did not have capacity. In still another case, an activity welcomed and shared publicly available data and information about their work with independent researchers working on questions relevant to their context.

Throughout implementation, USAID and IP staff use the Activity MEL Plan and other monitoring tools to collect data to test approaches. MEL plans typically include a mix of standard and custom indicators aligned to the activity's theory of change. Most USAID and IP staff agree that standard indicators are more oriented toward tracking activity outputs, and custom indicators can be much more useful for measuring progress toward outcomes and thus adaptively managing the program. However, many MEL plans focus on collecting performance indicator data rather than impact indicator data. When teams do use custom indicators, numerous informants reported having adapted indicators from those provided in the CWC Toolkit.





A white rhino grazing at Makalali Game Reserve, South Africa. Rhino horn is considered a valuable cure for ailments in traditional Chinese medicine, contributing to heightened poaching rates. Photo by Kathleen Flower for Environmental Incentives.

In addition to the MEL plan indicators, many activities develop learning questions to explore the assumptions, methods of implementation, and overall impacts of their work, and either collect data or commission others to collect data throughout implementation to answer the questions. One activity in Asia investigated the outcomes of their capacity building approach by creating a scorecard to measure the capacity of law enforcement units that received technical assistance, and regularly tracking and assessing if and how that technical assistance resulted in changes in law enforcement operations. Site-level law enforcement activities often generate and use data through Spatial Monitoring And Reporting Tools (SMART)<sup>5</sup> and other geospatial tools to track wildlife habitat use and trends in poaching behavior and to inform patrols. This data is usually aggregated to track MEL indicators or answer learning questions.

Data that activities generate through their MEL efforts can also be used after the activity ends. When CWT activities end and USAID staff design the next iteration, most teams draw on lessons learned and MEL data generated by the previous activity to identify and refine CWT focal interests and strategic approaches.

In bringing an evidence-based approach to their decision-making, respondents acknowledge there is a wide range in the rigor of the information that is available to them at a given moment. All want to use the most rigorous information available. Some activities have peer-reviewed literature, considered among the most rigorous information sources, to inform their work. However, when evidence is urgently needed to inform a decision and assessments and MEL data are taking too long, informants often need to use less-rigorous anecdotal data that is gathered through stakeholder networks.

### 3.2.3. ADAPTIVELY MANAGING ACTIVITIES AND PORTFOLIOS

***Finding: Adaptive management is mostly tactical and occurs at the activity level.***

Teams adaptively manage their activities and portfolios using the full range of information at their disposal. They adaptively manage both strategic (selection of focal interests, threats to address, and strategic

<sup>4</sup> SMART is a suite of tools developed by a partnership between several NGOs that carry out anti-poaching and protected area management work globally.

approaches taken) and tactical (how to implement strategic approaches) aspects of CWT activities and projects. However, in many IPs' experience, they adaptively manage tactical aspects while strategic adaptation falls more to USAID staff. Additionally, many teams make tactical adaptations more frequently than strategic shifts because, despite conducting targeted assessments and MEL, they have better access to regular information on the changing operating environment (i.e., host country priorities, USAID constraints) than information on new threats or whether their actions and strategic approaches are achieving intended results.

Teams adaptively manage at multiple organizational levels and timescales. Many informants report that for their activities, in particular for law enforcement-related components, the team adapts their interventions throughout the fiscal year as needed according to the conditions in the specific site. In the case of the law enforcement capacity-building effort in Asia that used scorecards to assess the capacity of the law enforcement units with whom they worked, the team adapted its training approach to each unit's needs. In another activity focusing on wildlife product supply chains, the entire activity staff, including finance and operations staff, review MEL data on weekly all-hands calls so the whole team can better coordinate when adaptations are made. The COP for this activity said, "admin and finance are the lifeblood of the project, right? If you're going to do adaptive management...you need to have your financial management, your operational team, having a very firm understanding of not only what you're doing but why you're changing what you're doing as you go." This informant also noted that site-level staff are encouraged to implement pilots at strategic points during a planning year so they can test the approach and share lessons during the annual pause and reflect session.

For many activities, IPs work with USAID to adapt their tactics as well as their overall strategic approaches on both quarterly and annual bases. Implementing teams use quarterly MEL reviews and check-ins between USAID and IPs to make sure that the activity is meeting targets. The COR for one activity in Africa referred to the need to invite additional staff across the Environment Office to review quarterly data and join "adaptive management checkpoint" quarterly meetings with the IP. Most informants use the annual work plan as an opportunity to consider outcomes and reflect on what adaptations may be needed across the entire activity. As one IP staff from a global CWT program phrased it, the purpose of the quarterly review is to "review the implementation against the work plan and [ask] whether things are being delivered on time or not" while the central question of the annual MEL review is "are we meeting our targets that we had set out for each year?" Most activities surveyed for this assessment hold an annual pause and reflect session to review MEL data and other information, distill lessons, and discuss how the activity should move forward. Both USAID and IP staff come together to discuss making changes to foundational project documents to operationalize adaptations, such as:

- Updating the situation model to more accurately reflect the CWT threats and drivers based on new learning or evidence;
- Making changes to how strategic approaches are implemented and what intermediate results to expect based on lessons learned, and reflecting these changes in the results chain;
- Shifting resource allocation across the portfolio of approaches to focus investments on the most impactful strategic approaches; and
- Updating MEL indicators and targets to track outputs and outcomes based on adaptations that have been made.

Teams adaptively manage most at the activity-level, though there are examples of USAID and IP staff adaptively managing portfolios of USAID CWT interventions. In the case of a complex regional activity with many interweaving CWT strategic approaches, the IP built and maintained collaborative relationships within their consortium to foster learning and adaptive management across the entire portfolio. In another case, a mechanism was designed to enable CLA across a region with many CWT activities. The IP is in the process of building trusting relationships with the other regional activities to harmonize MEL systems and harvest lessons learned; this will better enable the regional Mission to oversee portfolio-wide adaptive management. USAID staff sometimes adaptively manage portfolios of activities without central mechanisms. One African Mission conducted a whole-of-project evaluation and used the results to rescope activities in the portfolio and release new procurements. Many USAID staff, however, discuss making portfolio-level adaptations most often when they design new projects and activities; they often use evidence generated by activities, such as lessons learned, MEL data, and assessments or evaluations, to inform their new designs.

In addition to USAID-wide or Mission-wide portfolio-level adaptive management, some implementing teams adapt to coordinate with or complement the CWT work carried out by other stakeholders in the U.S. Government (USG) Interagency, the community of practice in the region, and host government agencies. Similar to portfolio-level adaptive management within USAID activities and projects, the key practice underpinning this is effective relationship-building with stakeholders. Coordinating effectively with the USG Interagency ensures that USAID and other agencies are pulling in the same direction and aligning their interventions. This is especially critical when multiple USG agencies are coordinating with the same host government ministry, as may be the case with law enforcement activities.

### 3.3. ENABLING CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES TO THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

***Finding: Four enabling conditions support adaptive management of CWT activities and portfolios: 1) culture of collaboration and learning; 2) expertise and guidance on CWT and adaptive management; 3) USAID and host government policies; and 4) USAID business processes.***

As USAID and IP teams implement and adaptively manage CWT programming, they frequently encounter conditions that enable or challenge their ability to practice adaptive management. Often, informants describe specific factors as both enabling and inhibiting their ability to practice adaptive management, depending on the conditions. Assessing how informants describe the enabling conditions and barriers can elucidate gaps between how teams practice adaptive management and how they would practice adaptive management in ideal conditions. This analysis revealed four categories of factors that influence the practice of adaptive management in CWT programs: 1) organizational dynamics and stakeholder relationships; 2) staff capacity and technical expertise; 3) USAID and host government policies and strategic initiatives; and 4) USAID business processes and resources; and also revealed the enablers and barriers within each category that are specific to the CWT context.

### 3.3.1. ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

#### 3.3.1.1. DYNAMIC BETWEEN USAID AND THE IP

Adaptive management is only possible when USAID and IP teams have flexible, collaborative, trusting, and supportive relationships. The COP for a regional activity in Asia described an instance when trust is important for adaptive management by saying, “If a project has major adaptive management needs, which might require amending the contract, a good relationship with USAID becomes very important from the contractor side to ensure USAID also understands and agrees with the adaptive management approach and trusts that the contractor is not just trying to deliver less.” If the process is not collaborative, decisions may be seen as biased or poorly informed. However, when the working relationship is founded on trust, USAID and IP teams can more quickly navigate the business processes necessary to adapt interventions, as the COR advocates for needed changes with the Contracting Officer (CO) and Regional Legal Officer (RLO).

Additionally, Mission leadership, Office of Acquisition and Assistance (OAA), and Agreement Officer’s Representative (AOR)/COR support for adaptive management can create a better environment for collaborative action. When USAID and IP leaders have collaborative relationships, the IP can leverage COR connections within USAID, the Interagency, the Mission broadly, and the host government. In one case, an activity’s progress was hampered when the team could not gain traction with a key industry partner. The COR was able to pass a message to the Ambassador through colleagues in the Mission, who leveraged his relationship with the industry partner to enable forward movement with the partnership. However, the USAID practice of rotating Foreign Service Officers frequently between Missions can make it difficult for implementing teams to foster secure and long-standing relationships with important stakeholders in-country to work toward the same goal.

#### 3.3.1.2. DYNAMICS WITHIN THE IP CONSORTIUM

The dynamics within the IP consortium affect the practice of adaptive management. Consortium partners that communicate and share information on changes in field conditions and market demand for wildlife products enable adaptive management. However, when consortium partners have different objectives, or compete for space, resources, and credit for work, they may selectively report outcomes or avoid openly sharing lessons learned, hindering the entire activity’s ability to practice adaptive management and achieve objectives. One COP noted that at the time of the interview, he was working to shift the dynamics within his consortium. Teams leading implementation of different strategic approaches were “functioning completely separately” and had become “balkanized.” The consortium leadership team “would meet only to discuss contractual issues. Now we’re starting to meet more about the technical side and how to coordinate better, and people are hungry for it.” In another activity, senior technical staff and other senior management staff were based in multiple offices, which, as the COP reported, “was not effective for communications and coordination, and led to confusion and time delays.” The COP had all these staff co-locate, which enabled real-time and more systematic management decision-making.

#### 3.3.1.3. CULTURE OF LEARNING

A culture of learning and commitment to adaptive management by both USAID and IPs greatly enables adaptive management. Activity leadership by the COR and consortium leadership by the COP can play a

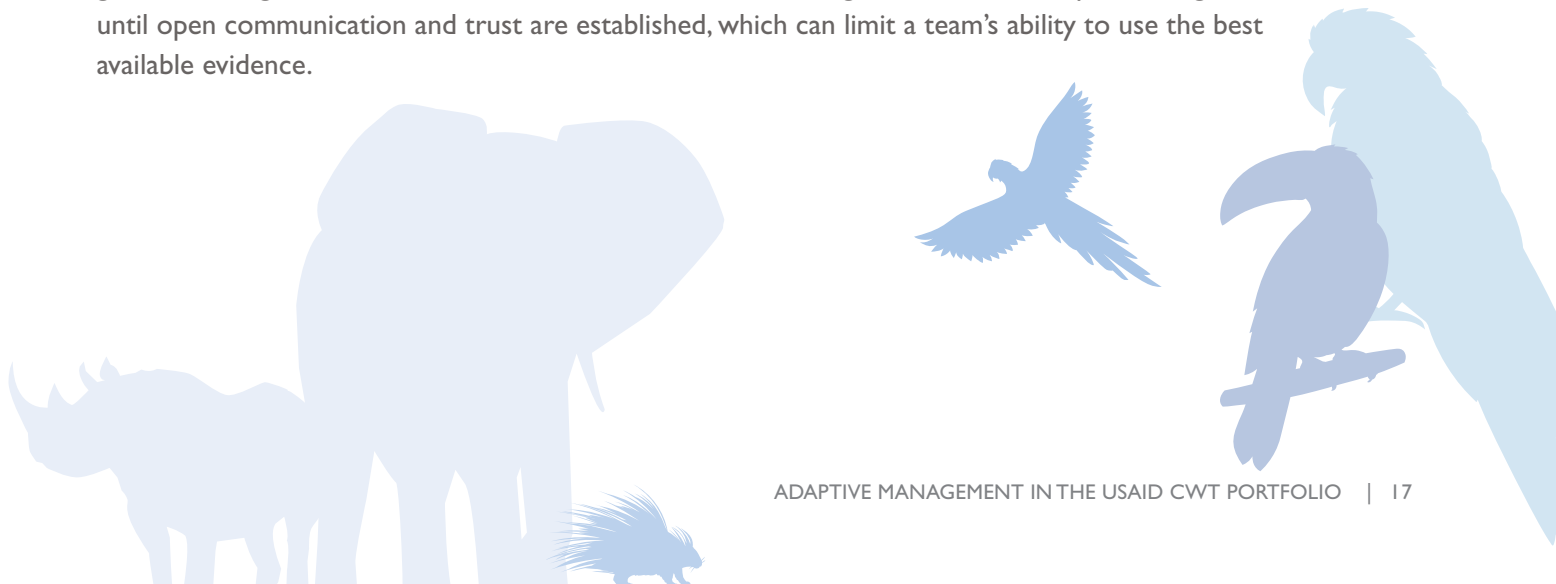
pivotal role in fostering this culture. The COP for a regional activity in Asia said, “USAID is not just talking about adaptive management but has a genuine practitioner commitment to it, coupled with the new model... where you have a [pause and reflect] with USAID personnel... who have a deep appreciation and understanding of M&E and the Open Standards and how to use them... You’re able to talk immediately and deeply about what’s happening... and analyze and critically review and tighten the results chains and the underlying assumptions and therefore the learning questions. And that has been hugely beneficial to our team.” This sentiment was reflected by other respondents.

The culture of the IP organization can enable or hinder adaptive management as well. Some IP organizations recognize the importance of learning through the course of implementation, and dedicate resources toward non-USAID assessments such as mid-term reviews. In one case, when the activity needed to conduct a PEA, the contract prime had staff on hand in the home office who could support the team in conducting the assessment. However, one IP informant expressed that some IP organizations do not prioritize adaptive management processes, presenting challenges to practicing adaptive management.

Multiple IP respondents expressed a desire to participate in more of USAID’s learning programs, such as the CWT Cross-Mission Learning Program, and to learn about what has worked elsewhere in USAID’s portfolio. One MEL Specialist also noted that although they are the team member monitoring impact most closely, they have little influence over final adaptation decisions. Additionally, community stakeholders may have useful insights to CWT successes, failures, and opportunities, but are often not included in activity learning and adaptive management processes. When learning and adapting is not collaborative between IP and USAID, within the IP team, or with important in-country stakeholders, teams miss opportunities to base their decisions on the best available information.

#### 3.3.1.4. DYNAMICS BETWEEN IMPLEMENTING TEAMS AND IN-COUNTRY PARTNERS

Respondents reported that dynamics between implementing teams and in-country partners such as host government counterparts and activity participants also affect adaptive management practice. Host country governments determine which interventions may be undertaken by USAID and how they will be implemented. Host government officials that provide USAID and IPs updates on changing contexts for government priorities and the CWT landscape and then accommodate flexibility in programming based on USAID and IP recommendations greatly enable adaptive management. On the other hand, when there are too many host government ministries with mandates in the same regions, it becomes difficult to bring all the voices together and get consensus on approaches. Multiple respondents noted that host government agencies are often reluctant to share data across agencies and with implementing teams until open communication and trust are established, which can limit a team’s ability to use the best available evidence.



### 3.3.2. STAFF CAPACITY AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

#### 3.3.2.1. CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT GOOD ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Adaptive management is driven by USAID and IP managers who have a strong understanding of adaptive management principles and incorporate adaptive management in the CWT activities they lead. IP respondents noted that they practice adaptive management when the COR is a good facilitator and sets clear expectations for adaptive management. In addition to leaders, technical staff also need strong adaptive management capacity. A few USAID staff expressed that USAID seeks to prioritize adaptive management, but it is not implemented consistently at the activity level. Nonetheless, although informants working in Asia noted that adaptive management and CLA are well established in their programming due to the high capacity of their team in these areas, 90 percent of focus group participants found the task of implementing decisions to adapt activity/project design and implementation either moderately or very challenging (Figure I, Task E).

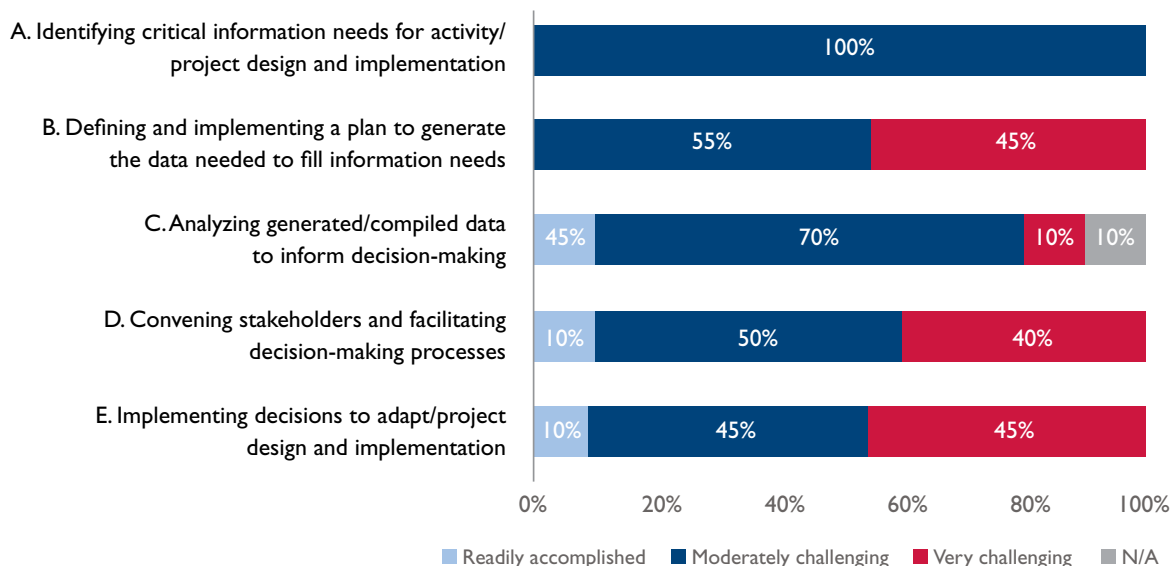
Host government agencies’ technical capacity can also enable adaptive management. Informants mentioned that officials in one African host government practice their own adaptive management, looking at successes, challenges, and where they diverged from strategies to inform their next generation

**FIGURE I. CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS IN USING EVIDENCE TO INFORM ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT.**

During the focus group, participants were asked to indicate the level of difficulty they have had with implementing various adaptive management tasks related to evidence use. They were given the options “readily accomplished,” “moderately challenging,” and “very challenging.” Participants answered “N/A” if they had not encountered that task in their work.

### CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS IN USING EVIDENCE TO INFORM ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

**Polling question:** *please indicate the level of difficulty you have had (with existing staff, expertise, other resources, etc.) in implementing the following tasks in your practice of adaptive management:*



of strategies. Host governments are the ultimate decision-maker on what actions can be taken when implementing law enforcement capacity building strategic approaches, but slow approval processes, or lack of capacity and resources to carry out change can present challenges.

### 3.3.2.2. CWT EXPERTISE

A strong grounding in CWT is critical to an activity's ability to effectively navigate challenges and opportunities that emerge during implementation. Numerous USAID informants spoke very highly about the CWT expertise of the COP on the IP team. One COR in Asia said, "The COP... was not just someone... who could run a project, he was a dedicated CWT specialist with 30 years of experience in the field....I think that was a real asset to the project, to have someone with the technical expertise as the COP." According to a USAID informant, an IP COP who can consider a suite of strategic approaches employed together to best leverage each other is important for adaptive management. Likewise, IP respondents report that it is easier to adapt when they are working with USAID CORs that have many connections in the field and can interpret the contract realistically for the field context. However, one USAID informant noted that sometimes USAID staff do not have technical expertise in CWT, and instead rely on the IP to provide that, underscoring the importance of a trusting relationship between USAID and IPs.

### 3.3.2.3. MEL CAPACITY

The MEL Specialist is a critical member of the IP team. Given the importance of reliable data and learning processes for practicing adaptive management, the skills of the MEL Specialist can enable or hinder an activity's ability to practice adaptive management. Traditionally, MEL Specialists were expected to develop quality indicators and methodologies, manage and harmonize data coming from multiple sources, and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data to report on activity progress. This skillset is highly beneficial, and not only for the MEL Specialist—teams are better able to use evidence to inform their decision-making when the rest of the IP team, USAID staff, and host government counterparts are also data literate. However, with an added emphasis on CLA, MEL Specialists are often tasked with preparing data specifically to inform adaptive management processes. One MEL Specialist said they are expected to facilitate learning and adaptive management processes with their teams, saying, "[Monitoring and evaluation] people are now expected to be data nerds, but at the same time, be a facilitator, be a collaborator, and it's overwhelming... Counting beans is still taking place and that's part of the job. But convening people, it's not everyone's forte... it's intimidating." Further validating this perspective, 70 percent of focus group participants found the task of analyzing data to inform decision-making moderately challenging (Figure I, Task C on page I8), and 90 percent of participants said that convening stakeholders and facilitating decision-making processes was either moderately or very challenging (Figure I, Task D on page I8). When teams do not have expertise in adaptive management on hand or the resources to hire learning specialists, they often rely on outside facilitators from the Biodiversity Division, MI2, or other support mechanisms who may not be as intimately familiar with their operating context.

### 3.3.3. USAID AND HOST GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

#### 3.3.3.1. USAID STRATEGIC INITIATIVES AND FRAMEWORKS

Changing high-level USAID priorities can enable adaptation when new priorities support approaches that are found to improve CWT outcomes, but can pose a barrier when shifting priorities inhibit adaptation to new information. A few informants from Africa noted the USAID Journey to Self-Reliance initiative to support local partners, who sometimes struggle with MEL, can initially set back adaptive management within a 5-year program cycle. However, the long-term goal of the Journey to Self-Reliance—to build local capacity to sustain impacts beyond the life of a project—can be a framework through which to think about adaptation across iterations of the program cycle. In the case of one activity in Asia, the Mission specifically chose to partner with a small organization that was ill-equipped to take on a major contract because, even though it lacked the capacity, it had achieved excellent outcomes on a smaller scale. Over the course of the contract, the Mission used the principles of the Journey to Self-Reliance to build the organization’s capacity to manage a large CWT program.

USAID’s Agency-wide focus on CLA is generally seen to enable adaptive management. A number of informants mentioned that they relied on resources developed by the Learning Lab to inform their practice of adaptive management. However, a few USAID staff expressed that CLA is not implemented consistently at the activity level, indicating that more work is needed to socialize the CLA toolkit, build capacity for using the tools, and provide resources for teams to operationalize them.



Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) rangers at Bwindi National Park, Uganda. USAID works with UWA to build ranger capacity to combat wildlife crime in the country’s national parks. Photo by Helen Mason, USAID.





### 3.3.3.2. HOST GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND POLITICAL WILL

Host government policies and political will influence the degree to which CWT activities can implement their work and achieve intended outcomes. The NGO Act in one African country restricts the operation of NGOs, limiting potential partners and work. Additionally, martial law in some parts of Asia slows activity implementation and affects project performance and adaptation. The Statistics Act in one African country hinders access to data and thus evidence to inform adaptive management by only allowing governmental data to be published. A few informants also mentioned that limited political will among key host government stakeholders to address the root causes of CWT limits the degree to which CWT programs can adapt and achieve their intended outcomes.

### 3.3.4. USAID BUSINESS PROCESSES AND RESOURCES

USAID business processes also present enablers and barriers to the practice of adaptive management. The most common business processes respondents mention are procurement mechanisms, the work planning process, and MEL plans and indicator selection, as well as funding.

#### 3.3.4.1. PROCUREMENT MECHANISMS

In general, informants report that procurement mechanism modifications and approvals can be lengthy processes that prevent timely adaptation. One USAID informant said that contracts are useful for large-scale budget modifications and shifting priorities. Multiple respondents noted that cooperative agreements, pay-for-performance, grants under contract, activity funds, and Global Development Alliances are procurement formats that enable adaptive management more than others. A supportive and flexible CO, RLO, or Office of Acquisitions and Assistance colleague can suggest the appropriate mechanism for the activity objectives and set the stage for successful adaptive management. Additionally, building adaptive management into the procurement documents, such as contract or scope of work, can reduce the inflexibility of some mechanisms.

#### 3.3.4.2. WORK PLANNING

Using work planning processes to adapt is common, but still challenging. Slow approval processes make it hard to adapt in real time and can hinder staff willingness to make changes in the future. Some informants mentioned that there is a significant lag between action and impact, making yearly pause and reflect workshops too short a timescale to see progress and properly reflect on what adaptations are needed; however, the five-year program cycle enables USAID informants to harvest lessons from one project to inform the direction of future programming. Despite these challenges, both USAID and IP respondents have a growing level of tolerance and flexibility for making annual or even mid-year adaptations to the work plan when warranted. At the activity level, the pause and reflect process is tremendously beneficial for adaptive management. By reviewing MEL indicator data, and gathering stakeholder input on lessons learned and future directions on individual strategic approaches and the activity at large, teams can determine which strategic approaches to prioritize and how to shift resources for the next year's work plan. One informant mentioned that the pause and reflect process helps the team keep its sights on the high-level objectives, saying, "we're not changing our goals every year, it's just updating how we're going to get there."

### 3.3.4.3. MEL PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND INDICATOR SELECTION

MEL plan development is a particularly important business process that establishes the framework for monitoring progress toward intended outcomes and for the practice of adaptive management. Implementing teams use MEL indicators and targets to monitor their progress and test whether or not their approaches are achieving desired impacts. The Environment Office Director from a Mission in Africa said, "You cannot manage what you cannot measure." However, using indicators to track progress and inform timely adaptive management requires sufficient and quality data. All respondents struggle to obtain accurate data on the status and trends of wildlife trafficking in their context. Two informants from Africa noted the utility of SMART data, patrol and scout data, and briefing meetings that give real time insight to adapt. Real-time data is especially important in the CWT context to keep pace with changes in wildlife crime.

Multiple respondents felt there is a need for common indicators across USAID's CWT portfolio so that site-based data can be rolled-up for activity-level learning, and data from multiple activities can be rolled-up for learning at the project or portfolio level. USAID currently uses standard indicators to track progress across activities, but informants argue that they are too output-oriented to inform adaptive management decisions. Custom indicators, on the other hand, can enable a team to track activity and project outcomes, as well as the social and political context in which they are working. While these indicators can provide data to make adaptive management decisions, they must be shared across an activity or project to inform high-level decisions.

Many respondents expressed the need to diversify MEL approaches and move beyond a focus on standard indicator reporting for performance monitoring. Respondents advocated to use diverse experimental approaches to combine quantitative and qualitative data, and to engage communities in developing learning agendas to understand broader project impacts. However, some USAID informants felt that IPs fail to look beyond standard indicators because they fear that honestly appraising their activity will show failures. Others felt that the emphasis on monitoring performance, particularly by focusing on achieving specific output targets, can inhibit their activity's ability to adapt actions when new opportunities arise. While a new action might have considerable impact on wildlife trafficking, if it doesn't align to the specific outputs, the IP might feel unable to shift. Finally, several informants noted that developing learning agendas or leveraging project- or regional-level learning contracts can build the collaborative atmosphere needed for learning and adapting regional programming. IP organizations committed to conducting internal midline reviews and evaluations can provide an added avenue to collect data on context indicators and learning questions.

### 3.3.4.4. FUNDING

Respondents highlighted funding as another factor that can hinder adaptive management. Adaptive management processes require time and resources for activities such as extensive MEL data collection and pause and reflect activities, but budgets do not always include funding for these processes. Additionally, when MEL plans are overloaded with standard indicators, time spent collecting and reporting on these indicators detracts from other MEL activities and adaptive management processes. In the case of one regional CWT portfolio, landscape-level activities lost faith in the CLA process and were less collaborative when the Mission allocated its CLA funds primarily to a central learning mechanism. That mechanism's IP was rebuilding trust with the landscape-level activities at the time of the interviews.

Flexibility in funding allocation can enable a team to better make strategic adaptations. For one regional activity, the implementing team found that its law enforcement capacity building activities were achieving fewer impacts than its demand reduction activities. After highlighting this lesson at the annual pause and reflect, the team shifted funds away from the law enforcement capacity building and toward the demand reduction.

### 3.3.5. CWT-SPECIFIC ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

***Finding: The high-profile and illegal nature of wildlife trafficking is a key challenge to adaptive management of CWT programming.***

The high-profile and illegal nature of wildlife trafficking is a key challenge to adaptive management of CWT programming because it hampers accurate data collection and sharing and because it involves many varied transboundary actors.

Criminal syndicates that are the greatest perpetrators of wildlife trafficking rapidly adapt to law enforcement; thus CWT activities need accurate and timely information to combat the threat. However, practitioners encounter numerous challenges accessing and sharing key data. Given the high-profile and sensitive nature of the issue, governments can be unwilling to share data on criminal activities. Furthermore, commonplace corruption among government officials tasked with enforcing wildlife laws can threaten the integrity of the available data. Wildlife trafficking also crosses national boundaries, and practitioners that manage regional activities face the added challenge of harmonizing misaligned datasets from multiple jurisdictions. As a consequence of inadequate data and data sharing, law enforcement efforts frequently focus on smaller-scale wildlife traffickers, and adaptive management of CWT programming often is informed by less-than robust anecdotal information.

A second challenge to adaptive management in CWT programming that is made significant by the high-profile nature of wildlife trafficking is the many actors and stakeholders carrying out CWT interventions, with little coordination among them. Local and national law enforcement agencies struggle to adapt not only due to data sharing challenges as noted above, but also due to challenges in cross-agency and cross-national collaboration, as well as a lack of trust generated by the possibility of corruption. Even USG CWT efforts can be challenging to navigate. USAID has strict constraints on the types of law enforcement activities it can fund, requiring activities to be careful to avoid violating policies as they implement and adapt law enforcement capacity building approaches. Many other USG agencies, especially the Department of State, and international organizations such as United Nations offices, work directly with host government law enforcement ministries on curbing wildlife crime. One informant reflected that coordination and partnerships within the USG Interagency helped the activity stay nimble in identifying threats and partners for addressing transboundary wildlife trafficking and corruption. However, multiple informants reported that this coordination is rarely smooth, due to competing objectives and communication breakdowns between various agencies. Among IPs and some USAID staff, there is a perceived lack of articulated USG-wide CWT goals, priority interventions, and definition of clear roles of different agencies or actors. With so many actors involved at so many operational levels, these informants felt that a more clearly articulated vision for CWT outcomes across all the USAID CWT activities and projects would allow the Agency to align evidence and learning to enable adaptive management across the entire portfolio.

### **3.4. KEY INFORMANT INSIGHTS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT**

Informants and focus group participants provided insight on how to improve adaptive management practices and advance uptake of adaptive management in both CWT activities and portfolios. These insights indicated that adaptive management could be improved through: 1) improved training and resources to guide USAID and IP staff to practice adaptive management in CWT activities; 2) expanded access to learning networks and evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and adaptive management for activities; and 3) improved portfolio-level adaptive management by establishing a framework linking individual activity outcomes to measurable goals for the entire USAID and USG-wide CWT portfolio.

#### **3.4.1. IMPROVED TRAINING AND RESOURCES TO GUIDE THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN CWT ACTIVITIES**

Respondents most frequently mentioned their need for support and guidance on operationalizing good adaptive management practices in their CWT activities. Most respondents have used USAID resources, such as the CLA and CWC toolkits, to guide MEL planning and adaptive management processes. However, respondents lack guidance on how to operationalize the “A” portion of CLA. Thus, respondents asked for training on adaptive management processes, practices, and principles for both IP and USAID staff, as well as in COR/AOR training, to emphasize the value of adaptive management and how to do it well.

Given that wildlife trafficking poses significant challenges to adaptive management, and many USAID staff lack expertise in CWT, USAID informants reported that they would appreciate training and guidance on how to apply adaptive management in CWT activities specifically. Additionally, IP staff advocated for USAID expanding the CWC Toolkit to include guidance on how adaptive management should be practiced in specific CWT strategic approaches and contexts.

Teams not only need additional resources and training on how to practice adaptive management, but they need the resources and skills to practice adaptive management. With an increased focus on CLA, IP respondents want to ensure that activity budgets provide enough resources to undertake extensive data reviews and pause and reflect workshops. They need more MEL staff with robust data collection and analysis skills, as well as more sophisticated data management systems. IP teams also need funding to hire adaptive management specialists who can facilitate adaptive management processes, keeping MEL specialists from becoming overburdened.

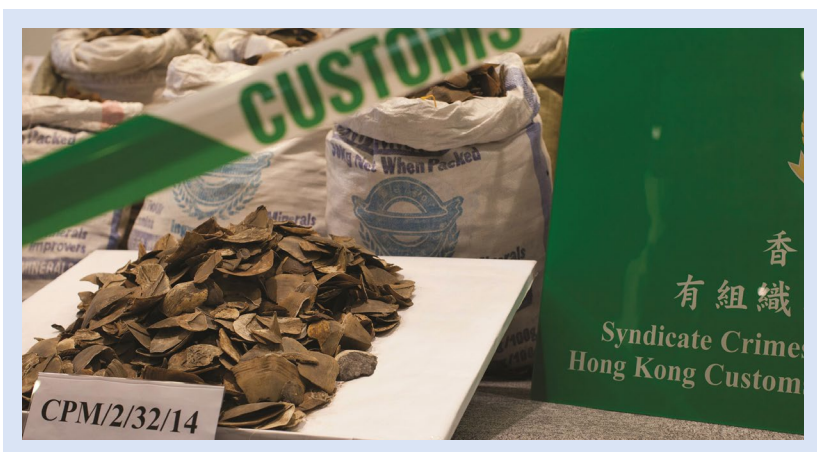
Lastly, respondents suggest that activity procurement mechanisms should identify the adaptive management practices required throughout the activity, as well as allocate more resources for adaptive management processes. USAID staff frequently identify a need for contracts and agreements to include adaptive management guidelines and practices to ensure that IPs understand expectations. Several IP respondents mentioned the importance of defining adaptive management expectations in foundational project documents such as the first year’s work plan and MEL plan. Additionally, IP staff from multiple activities linked their ability to practice adaptive management to the degree of flexibility in their mechanisms and the quality of their relationship with their CO. Informants suggested that COs be included in CWT programming teams to understand the unique challenges CWT activities face and to develop mechanisms that ensure activities can adapt when needed.

### 3.4.2. EXPANDED ACCESS TO LEARNING NETWORKS AND EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT FOR ACTIVITIES

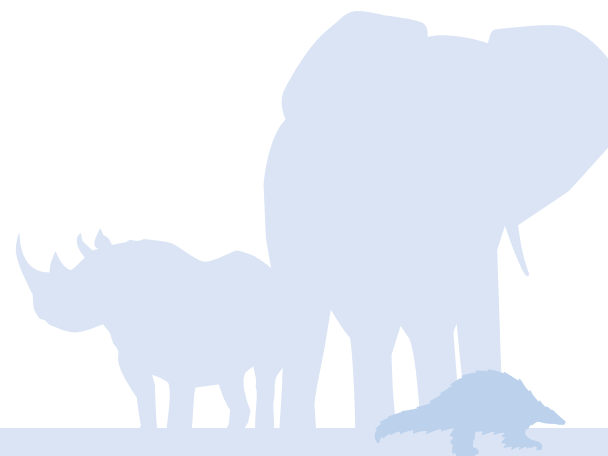
Given the high-profile and urgent nature of wildlife crime, CWT activities need access to high quality data and lessons on what interventions are likely to work or not work in a given context. Respondents, especially IPs, indicated a strong desire to participate in more USAID CWT learning activities to improve adaptive management. As the people implementing CWT work on the ground, IPs are uniquely positioned to share lessons learned through implementation, as well as take action based on what they have learned from others. To advance broader uptake of adaptive management within activity teams, USAID operating units, and the CWT portfolio broadly, CWT practitioners also need evidence on the effectiveness of adaptive management to improve CWT outcomes. Respondents suggested USAID develop products such as case studies that showcase how practicing adaptive management has led to better CWT outcomes, and simultaneously demonstrate how to implement good adaptive management.

### 3.4.3. IMPROVED PORTFOLIO-WIDE ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Practitioners are passionate about CWT work and want to contribute to ending the threats that the illegal global wildlife trade pose to biodiversity. To better contribute to the bigger-picture objectives, informants and focus group participants want to understand how their work fits within USAID and the USG's broader CWT strategies. Informants suggest that USAID can work within the Interagency to set measurable goals for USG's CWT interventions and share them with implementing partners. Additionally, USAID can develop specific global objectives and targets for reducing illegal wildlife trade of different species and in different geographies, and support the use of a centralized system for tracking associated indicators across activities to show contributions and progress toward shared objectives. USAID can also provide guidance on implementing good practice of portfolio-level adaptive management such as data sharing, coordinated stakeholder identification and engagement, and collaborative decision-making, to improve the degree to which CWT contributes to a broader global good.



Pangolin scales, pictured here after a seizure in Hong Kong, are one of the world's most trafficked wildlife goods. Though all pangolin species are protected under international trade agreements, the illegal trade for use in traditional medicine and for meat is contributing to their near extinction. Photo by Alex Hofford.



## 4. DISCUSSION

This assessment represents a comprehensive analysis of how adaptive management is practiced across USAID’s CWT portfolio, the conditions that enable or hinder the practice of adaptive management, and opportunities to improve it. Overall, respondents report that practicing adaptive management is not only critical to the success of their activity, but is an inherent component of implementing the activity itself. Informants encounter a host of factors that enable or hinder their ability to practice adaptive management. They see opportunities to advance uptake of the practice of adaptive management through improving resources and staff training and setting clear expectations for how adaptive management should be practiced. Lastly, informants suggest that by establishing and sharing a global vision for CWT programming and creating more frequent opportunities for USAID and IP staff to share lessons across activities and regions, USAID can improve its practice of adaptive management across its entire CWT portfolio.

Concurrently with this assessment, MI2 conducted a Needs Assessment, which explored how USAID technical staff adaptively manage biodiversity programs, key barriers and enablers to practicing adaptive management, and actors that influence the practice of adaptive management by amplifying enablers and barriers. This assessment’s findings on how adaptive management is practiced in the CWT portfolio align with some of the Needs Assessment’s findings on adaptive management in biodiversity programming at large, and also brings in IP perspectives. While the discussion focuses on synthesizing current practices, enabling conditions and barriers, and opportunities for adaptive management in CWT programming, it also highlights specific areas of alignment with the Needs Assessment findings, as well as some previous literature on adaptive management.

### 4.1 ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

This assessment found five key findings related to the practice of adaptive management in USAID CWT programming:

1. There is a shared understanding of what adaptive management is, overall.
2. However, specific adaptive management practices vary.
3. Rigorous data is frequently unavailable and many MEL plans are focused on performance reporting.
4. Adaptive management mostly is tactical and occurs at the activity level.
5. The high-profile and illegal nature of wildlife trafficking makes sharing data and building trusting partnerships difficult, presenting a key challenge to adaptive management of CWT programming

This assessment found that adaptive management is practiced widely in the USAID CWT portfolio. Practitioners rely on CLA guidance, the Conservation Standards, and engagement with adaptive management experts to shape their conceptualization and practice of adaptive management. Respondents repeatedly characterized good adaptive management as being “evidence-based,” “results-oriented,” “intentional,” “regularly occurring,” and “participatory.” In alignment with the concepts and guidance on operationalization of CLA and the Conservation Standards, Ramalingam et al. (2019) argue that for programs to be able to practice rigorous adaptive management, they must be designed with evidence-based problem analyses, must invest in strong MEL systems through the life of the program, and must undertake or encourage practices for using evidence generated through MEL systems in decision-making processes. These practices are

consistently undertaken in adaptive management of USAID CWT programs. In design and start-up, teams lay the groundwork for adaptive management by using evidence-based problem analyses to select strategic approaches, build results chains and MEL plans, and identify evidence gaps. Throughout implementation, teams use a variety of MEL approaches to gather multiple types of data to inform decisions, and come together at regular intervals to review what they have learned and decide how to adapt to best meet objectives. Some teams also reported practicing double-loop learning by using knowledge generated through the implementation of completed activities to inform the design of new CWT activities and portfolios.

## 4.2 ENABLING CONDITIONS

This assessment identified four enabling conditions that support good adaptive management practices: 1) a culture of collaboration and learning; 2) staff expertise and guidance on CWT and adaptive management; 3) USAID and host government policies that support adaptive management; and 4) USAID business processes.

**Culture of collaboration and learning.** Teams need collaborative relationships between IPs and multiple stakeholders to practice most aspects of adaptive management well. In design and start-up, building consensus around the factors influencing wildlife trafficking, the most effective strategic approaches to address them, and assumed intermediate results can set an activity or project off on the right path. During implementation, establishing a culture of collaboration allows teams to share lessons learned, evaluate incoming data from MEL systems and other information gathering efforts, and adaptively manage in a participatory way. Respondents note that at the activity level, teams need trusting relationships within the IP consortium, as well as between USAID and IPs to form an implementing team that can collaboratively manage. The implementing team also coordinates better with other strategic approaches carried out by other actors when it builds good relationships with host government counterparts, other actors in the USG Interagency, and community stakeholders. These findings align with Ramalingam et al.'s (2019) finding that a culture of learning is a critical component of what they call “adaptive rigour.”

**Expertise and guidance on CWT and adaptive management.** Teams need the right mix of skills and Agency support to practice good adaptive management. USAID and IP leaders who have CWT expertise can provide teams with better information on threats and interventions, as well as connections with important stakeholders. Additionally, various CWT interventions need different MEL approaches to adaptively manage, highlighting the importance of MEL Specialists with expertise in experimental design who can efficiently compile, organize, and synthesize data from multiple sources and formats. Teams often need data from host government agencies for MEL and adaptive management, so data literacy and a collaborative relationship with host government counterparts can better enable adaptive management. To use lessons learned and MEL data to inform adaptation, teams need adaptive management expertise, either by using Agency guidance on CLA processes, working with adaptive management facilitators, or leveraging resources to hire adaptive management specialists onto the team directly.

**USAID and host government policies.** USAID informants noted that the Agency’s Journey to Self-Reliance initiative creates a framework for adaptively managing over multiple iterations of the Program Cycle to achieve both local capacity building and CWT objectives. The Needs Assessment also found that leadership priorities influence adaptive management of programming. Teams are also better able to adaptively manage CWT programming when the host government counterparts have the political will to tackle threats from wildlife trafficking.

**USAID business processes.** Good adaptive management processes—including establishing MEL systems, synthesizing MEL outputs to report on CWT outcomes, and intentionally reflecting on lessons learned and adaptation—take time and resources. Teams are best able to practice good adaptive management when they have the flexibility to include custom indicators in their MEL plans, and when procurements and work plans specify norms and resources for adaptive management processes. As also found in the Needs Assessment, operating unit leadership can be a determining factor in whether teams get the resources they need to practice good adaptive management. These findings align with Wild and Ramalingam (2018), who also found that leadership, and time allocated to reflection are key enablers of adaptive management.

### 4.3 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although adaptive management is practiced widely across the USAID CWT portfolio, practitioners frequently encounter challenges, including 1) insufficient resources, training, skills, and funding to support adaptive management; 2) inadequate resources and frameworks for consistently using evidence to inform adaptive management; 3) an overemphasis on standard indicators for performance monitoring; and 4) and inadequate frameworks or processes to conduct adaptive management at the portfolio-level. However, this assessment considered informant and focus group participant findings, insights from the literature on adaptive management, and the MI2 Needs Assessment to identify four opportunities for enhancing adaptive management practice in CWT activities and portfolios.

**Opportunity 1: Improve resources to conduct adaptive management.** One of the most frequent challenges teams encounter in practicing adaptive management is insufficient skills or other resources for adaptive management. Undertaking rigorous adaptive management requires that implementing teams, including IP and USAID staff, have a shared understanding of what adaptive management entails, have a culture of learning that enables partners to openly share successes and failures, and have skills on hand to operationalize the practices and processes involved in adaptive management. However, teams often lack one or more of these important factors. For example, even when the IP consortium and COR have established a culture of learning and collaboration, adaptive management can be hampered if the CO is not on the same page on the importance of adaptive management, and there is a contractual issue preventing a particular adaptation. In fact, inflexibility of procurement mechanisms was a key barrier to adaptive management in the Needs Assessment as well. Similarly, MEL specialists are now often asked to facilitate learning processes in addition to carrying out robust data collection and knowledge management, yet these roles require specialized skills, as well as time, that a single MEL Specialist rarely has.

Respondents frequently mentioned opportunities to improve teams' skills and increase resources for adaptive management. For example, training for IP and USAID staff members involved in CWT programming, including COs and RLOs, could emphasize how their roles in adaptive management affect CWT outcomes. The MI2 Needs Assessment confirmed that focusing training on Foreign Service Nationals who can maintain relationships with host country partners over the long-term is critical to adaptive management across the Agency, not just in CWT programming. Respondents noted that consistent use of language to describe adaptive management norms and requirements in procurements, work plans, and other business processes would reduce misunderstandings between IPs and various USAID counterparts. Lastly, respondents raised the opportunity to expand funding available to support adaptive management, so teams can hire additional specialists to carry out adaptive management processes, reducing reliance on outside facilitators.



**Opportunity 2: Improve resources to guide teams in using evidence to inform adaptive management.** Another challenge teams frequently face is in consistently generating and accessing strong evidence to inform adaptation. CWT programs face the dual challenges of obtaining data on illicit activities and the need to act quickly in response to rapidly adapting criminal syndicates. While there were numerous examples of teams undertaking targeted assessments, teams often must resort to using anecdotal information to inform adaptive management since more rigorous data are not available in time to make key decisions. Given that using anecdotal evidence is often necessary in CWT programming, respondents noted differences in how they assess the rigor of evidence and use it to make adaptation decisions. Mukherjee et al. (2018) argue that stakeholders bring their values into processes of evaluating evidence and making decisions. To the extent that individual values influence decision-making in the context of CWT programming, where much of the available evidence lacks analytical rigor, teams across the portfolio may reach different conclusions on whether there is sufficient evidence to support adapting, or how to adapt based on the evidence on hand.

To address these challenges, respondents and others propose opportunities to improve the consistency of how teams collect and interpret data, as well as adapt based on evidence. Salafsky et al. (2019) propose a decision-tree for teams to use to evaluate available evidence or determine whether additional evidence is needed. The Biodiversity Division's [Evidence in Action](#) guides teams in generating and using evidence to improve conservation programming. Additionally, Mukherjee et al. (2018) review approaches used to build consensus in decision-making processes and propose that various techniques are more effective than others depending on the dynamics within the group of stakeholders making the decision. These resources may be combined to create facilitation toolkits or training resources to help USAID's CWT teams consistently evaluate available evidence, assess the tradeoffs and risks of using empirical or anecdotal evidence, and take intentional and transparent approaches to deciding when to generate new evidence and how to move forward with their projects and activities.

A Chinese pangolin forages for food. Pangolins are considered to be one of the most trafficked non-human animals, due to the use of their keratin scales in traditional Chinese medicine. Photo by Michael Pitts, Nature Picture Library.



**Opportunity 3: Reduce emphasis on standard indicators for performance monitoring.** Many activity MEL plans focus only on using standard indicators to satisfy required performance reporting, yet the Agency does encourage testing of assumptions and learning from implementation including through using custom indicators, developing activity and project learning agendas, etc., to provide insights into USAID’s CWT programming effectiveness. With MEL plans often overburdened by standard indicators, respondents asked for more and better resources to develop and share custom indicators to directly improve adaptive management. Most implementing teams reported using the CWC Toolkit to inform their selection of strategic approaches and development of results chains, and in many cases, the selection of project and activity indicators. The Biodiversity Division could build on these successes by continuing to socialize the CWC Toolkit with operating units and implementing teams, as well as considering updating the Toolkit to respond to changing global wildlife trade or new approaches. Furthermore, the Biodiversity Division could enhance the usefulness of the CWC Toolkit specifically for MEL by incorporating guidance on monitoring methods<sup>6</sup> for the activity- and portfolio-level indicators it defines, similar to the approach taken to develop the recent Conservation Enterprises MEL Framework.

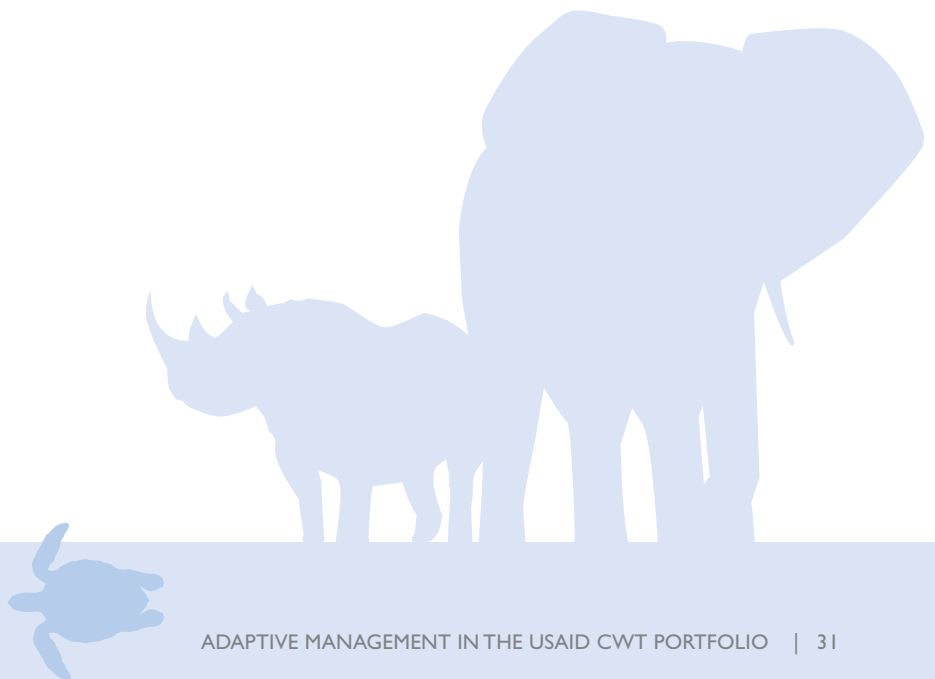
**Opportunity 4: Improve frameworks for portfolio-level adaptive management.** Given the global nature of wildlife trafficking, it is critically important to coordinate and adaptively manage CWT interventions at the portfolio or cross-activity, cross-project, and cross-program levels. To reduce wildlife trafficking along a specific supply chain or to achieve other CWT objectives focused on explicit species, geographies, or type of intervention at the scale needed for sustained viability of trafficked species, the assemblage of activities, projects, and programs, regardless of donor or implementing organization, that are working on that shared objective must be aware of what each is doing and must be willing and able to mutually adjust what they are doing and how they are doing it. Key practices for portfolio-level monitoring and adapting include creating opportunities for teams to learn from what others are doing in similar contexts, coordinating and collaborating in implementation, aligning monitoring systems to track shared outcomes, and building processes to mutually adapt interventions in response to changing contexts (Buffardi et al., 2019). Multiple respondents, especially among IPs, felt they do not have enough opportunities to engage in portfolio-wide learning and information sharing, aligning with Wild & Ramalingam’s (2018) finding that many complex portfolios often struggle with facilitating knowledge sharing between those implementing individual components. Moreover, respondents were unclear on how to align their work to broader USAID and USG CWT efforts to both leverage those efforts and magnify collective impact.

Respondents highlighted three opportunities to improve portfolio-level CWT adaptive management. First, continuing to emphasize learning in activities with IPs can enable practitioners working on the ground to share knowledge about what has and has not worked in similar contexts, thus improving their own access to evidence that can inform adaptive management. Second, by communicating USAID’s vision and goals for CWT across the portfolio, the teams implementing individual activities can understand how their work contributes to the global goal, and see opportunities for how their actions—can support CWT elsewhere. In one example of two activities implemented by the same organization—one activity in Africa, another in Asia—the activities coordinated a journalist exchange between the two countries because the teams saw needs and opportunities across the world. Third, in setting and communicating its global CWT goals, USAID can set measurable targets to track its overall impact and progress across the entire portfolio. With improved portfolio-level learning and impact tracking, USAID can 1) more thoroughly evaluate its overall

<sup>6</sup> Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS) include detailed indicator definitions and guidance on data collection have been developed for 13 selected indicators in the CWC Toolkit.

impact on CWT outcomes; 2) adaptively manage where and how it invests in CWT actions to maximize impact; and 3) create the enabling conditions for activities across the portfolio to leverage the best available knowledge.

This assessment shows that across USAID's CWT portfolio, IP and USAID staff have a strong understanding of how to adaptively manage their activities and practice adaptive management as a routine part of implementation. Though they encounter many challenges, and implementation of adaptive management varies by local context, IPs have many ideas for how to improve adaptive management practice and are eager to learn from successes and failures. USAID has developed numerous resources to support teams' abilities to practice adaptive management, though these resources should be expanded and aligned in order for teams to ensure a more consistent practice of adaptive management across the CWT portfolio and improve the Agency's agility and effectiveness in combating the global wildlife trade.



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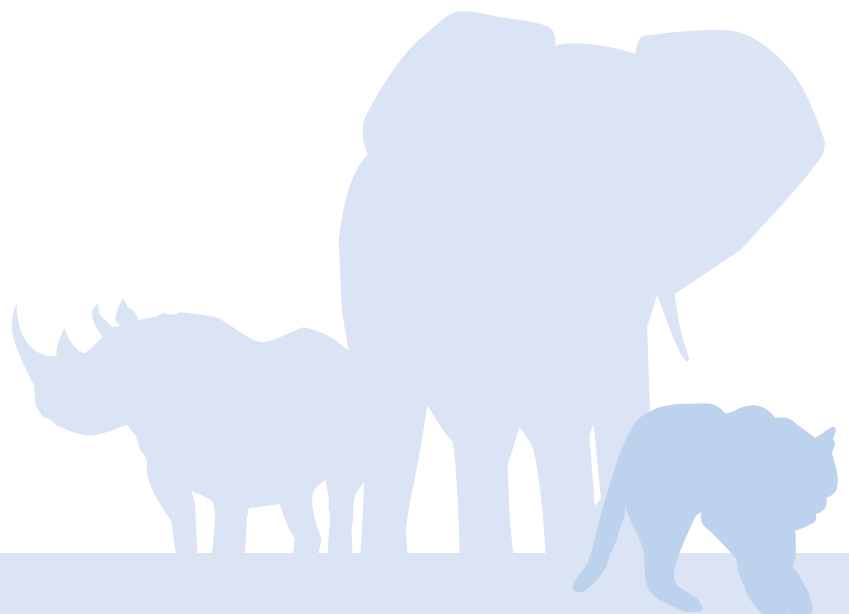
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