

Translating Learning into Action

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These days “learning” is in vogue in the development community. Buzzwords and phrases, like “learning objectives,” “knowledge generation,” and “lessons learned” are bandied about in meetings, and there are whole events devoted to knowledge exchange and learning— and for good reason. Learning is a noteworthy end in itself, and when applied, it can be transformative. Applied learning can make development practitioners more effective in their work and allow projects to have a greater impact.

Capturing and Applying Learning

The Annual Results and Impact Evaluation Workshop for RBF in March 2014 was planned with this premise in mind. Sponsored by the Health Results and Innovation Trust Fund (HRITF), the workshop brought together 155 participants for eight days of learning on a diverse set of topics related to results-based financing (RBF). Participants included government officials accompanied by Bank staff supporting the country— donor representatives, and academics. Organized into country teams, the participants reviewed the ever-growing evidence on RBF, listened to their peers’ successes and challenges in implementing results-based financing programs, and shared their own knowledge and lessons learned.



Having attended similar events in the past, country teams knew that an immense amount of learning would occur over the course of the eight days. They understood, too, that this learning would be more powerful if they could apply it directly to their respective RBF programs and impact evaluations (IEs). To facilitate an applied learning experience, the workshop’s organizers developed the Action Plan.

The Action Plan

The Action Plan, which country teams completed in dedicated group sessions over the course of the workshop, provided a framework to capture and organize learning. Importantly, the framework also outlined steps to turn this learning into action.

In the first section of the Action Plan, teams were tasked with identifying the three lessons most relevant to their RBF programs and their IEs. Sierra Leone, for example, noted that lessons about verification, financial management, and drug supply were most pertinent to their RBF program. The team from Brazil highlighted

lessons on using a rigorous evaluation methodology, incorporating qualitative data, and targeting intervention groups as particularly important to their IE.

The Action Plan next had the country teams carry out an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of their RBF programs and IEs. This “SWOT” analysis allowed the teams to pinpoint the bottlenecks and challenges they faced in implementing their programs and IEs, and building on the highlighted strengths and opportunities, devise strategies to overcome them.

Country teams concretely outlined their strategies in the final section of the Action Plan. Specifically, they listed a set of next-step activities and identified the actors responsible for them. For each activity, the teams also defined the financial and human resource inputs required and developed a timeline.

Taking Ownership

Inspired to share the results of their learning, a few country teams broadly disseminated their Action Plans. The teams from Burundi and Zimbabwe, for example, organized their official trip reports around their Action Plans. Moulay Driss Zine Eddine El Idrissi, the Bank’s team lead for RBF in Burundi, related that “The structure of Action Plan provided a systematic way to share the learning that occurred in Argentina with different stakeholders, and to detail how that learning would be directly translated to Burundi’s program.”

The report from the Zimbabwe team included a comprehensive summary of the workshop and a discussion of the key lessons learned from Argentina’s RBF program, Plan Sumar. It also emphasized program sustainability and quality as two priority areas for action. Closely following the Action Plan’s framework, the report featured SWOT analyses of the country’s RBF program and IE and defined a set of activities to address challenges and bottlenecks.

The Zimbabwe team distributed the report to officials at the Ministry of Health and Child Care, representatives from Cordaid (the purchaser in the RBF program), and other stakeholders on the ground. Ronald Mutasa, a Senior Health Specialist and the manager of the Bank’s health portfolio in Zimbabwe, said that in sharing the report, “The team continued the learning that occurred at the workshop, and signaled its ownership of the Action Plan and the activities included in it.”

Action Plan in Action

Six months after the close of the workshop, the organizers were curious to see how country teams had applied what they had learned, and how they had used their Action Plans. To evaluate this, the organizers created an online survey, which they sent to all of the workshop participants.





One survey question specifically asked about the Action Plans: “At the end of the workshop, all country teams were asked to submit an Action Plan highlighting lessons learned during the workshop and elaborating on a strategy to overcome weaknesses and bottlenecks country teams identified in the RBF program and/or impact evaluation. Was the Action Plan useful?”

The responses to this question were almost uniformly positive, and they illustrated the different ways in which teams have applied their Action Plans.

Most teams have used their Action Plans to systematically identify the critical next steps related to their RBF programs. For countries just beginning their RBF journeys or for those initiating a new phase, these next steps were related to program design. One country team noted that the Action Plan had provided excellent direction during the design process, and another mentioned that it was helpful for designing the next phase of the RBF program. Next steps for country teams with more established RBF programs concerned program implementation, and these next steps included: the formation of a management team, the revision of quality indicators, and the strengthening of verification.

A number of teams in different stages of their programs agreed that the Action Plan had helped them to identify program bottlenecks and to devise timely solutions. One team, for example, used the Action Plan to anticipate a bottleneck related to matching funds.

Some teams have used the Action Plan to structure their dialogue with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health. One task team leader (TTL)—a Bank staff member responsible for leading and managing a project or team—noted that the Action Plan had been especially useful during supervision missions because it facilitated efficient but thorough discussions with the PBF technical unit on how to best address program weaknesses. Another TTL noted that the team’s Action Plan has served as a guide for engaging program stakeholders in conversations about their different roles.

Applied Learning Continues

Since the close of the workshop, the organizers and country teams have continued their engagement using the Action Plans as a guide. In addition to helping organizers see if country teams have implemented their planned activities, the Action Plans have made it easier to anticipate and tailor any technical assistance needed to support ongoing program implementation. From their engagement, the organizers will also get a sense of the RBF lessons that the country teams would like to learn more about—and then apply—at the next workshop.