

Implementation Research Series:

*Evaluating the Effectiveness of After-Action Reviews (AAR) for Adaptive Management in Selected Interventions of the USAID/Philippines Health Project*¹



In May 2020, the USAID/Philippines' Office of Health asked the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting for Improved Health (CLAimHealth) activity to evaluate how three of its implementing partners (IPs) have been using after-action reviews (AARs) for continuous improvement. CLAimHealth specifically assessed whether AARs are implemented through clear processes, whether they inform decisions for adaptive management, and whether they strengthen USAID/Philippine's ability to meet its Health Project goals.

What are after-action reviews?

AARs are a type of pause and reflect session, which in turn is a core element of USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework. Development practitioners conduct AARs after major events to discuss what happened and why. They enable leaders and team members to identify gaps, review lessons learned, and lay out steps for making needed adjustments. AARs can be conducted in different ways, but follow a basic analytical methodology that aims to answer four main questions:

1. What was supposed to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why was there a difference?
4. What can we learn from this?

Why are AARs important?

AARs are instrumental to formalizing and benefitting from what we have always done—continuously ask ourselves what went right and what went wrong after we do something. Getting people together over this process, documenting it, and acting on it turns it into an institutional practice that leads to continuous improvement and informs others doing similar work.

What are the key features of effective AAR practices?

Effective AAR practices comprise a range of interconnected elements. They should have clear processes that contribute to adaptive management, and align activities with long-term Project goals. To ensure these elements work together, leading organizations have developed frameworks to guide implementers through preparing and conducting AARs.

¹ USAID/Philippines Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting for Improved Health Activity. Evaluating the Effectiveness of After-Action Reviews for Adaptive Management in Selected USAID/Philippines Health Project Interventions. March 22, 2022. Available at:https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZBJZ.pdf

Objective

Document Processes: Did AAR processes generate learning loops and follow a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle?

Generate Evidence: Did AARs contribute to adaptive management? If so, how?

Assess effectiveness: Did AARs contribute to achieving long-term Health Project goals?

Framework

AAR Planning Roadmap (WHO, 2019):² Outlines concise steps for each phase of the AAR implementation process.

Seven P's Framework (adapted from Graves, 2017):³ Shows the interconnected elements that link AARs to adaptive management

AAR Effectiveness Evaluation Framework: Provides assessment guidance on conducting AARs based on widely-used implementation science outcomes.

The Seven P's Framework (adapted from Graves, 2017) describes the anatomy of an AAR. It illustrates how AARs connect teams and stakeholders to pursue continuous, sustainable adaptive management practices. The Seven P's include: people, preparation, process, performance, purpose, period, and place. They resemble the five W's and How (who, what, where, when, why, and how). CLAIMHealth used the Seven P's framework to develop a general description of each IP's AAR practices.



Seven P's Framework (Adapted from Graves, 2017)⁴

The research team developed the AAR Effectiveness Evaluation Framework in accordance with widely-used implementation science outcomes. In simple terms, it measures the extent to which activities achieve their goals, and the extent to which AARs enhance organizational learning and lead to actions that improve interventions. To assess the internal and external dimensions of AAR implementation, evaluators selected six widely-used implementation outcomes to examine: fidelity, adaptation, accountability, integration, inclusivity, and sustainability.

AAR Effectiveness Evaluation Framework Based on Widely-Used Implementation Outcomes

Outcomes	Definition
Fidelity	The intervention is implemented the way it was designed.
Adaptation	The intervention can be revised to suit new circumstances.
Accountability	The AAR process is able to generate a sense of responsibility and ownership among stakeholders, who then feel compelled to execute agreed-upon adaptive actions in a timely manner.
Integration	The AAR process is embedded in everyday operations or organizational structures.
Inclusivity	The process allows for the participation of relevant stakeholders.
Sustainability	The process can be executed over time with adequate resources, even when there is a change in leadership or personnel.

² WHO. (2019). Guidance for After Action Review (AAR). Copenhagen: WHO Europe. <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1212880/retrieve>

³ Graves, T. (2017). How to build continuous-learning into architecture-practice. <https://www.slideshare.net/tetradian/how-to-build-continuouslearning-into-architecturepractice>

⁴ Ibid.

What are the results of the evaluation?

CLAIMHealth evaluated three IPs:



Improved Health for Underserved Filipinos: Family Planning and Maternal and Neonatal Health Innovations and Capacity Building Platforms (ReachHealth)

ReachHealth embedded AAR components in CLA activities like the Mid-Term Technical Review and Program Implementation Review. It also conducted dedicated pause and reflect sessions in groups and one-on-one. Senior management reviewed the status of family planning in a hospital program and the postpartum family planning performance of hospitals. These AAR practices allowed the team to identify enabling factors, gaps, and challenges in implementation, and agree on priority actions to address them.

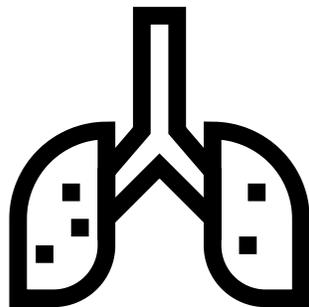
Expanding Access to Community-based Drug Rehabilitation in the Philippines (RenewHealth)

AARs are part of RenewHealth's processes for learning and developing collaborative solutions. They enable the activity to realign its interventions with changing circumstances and improve rapidly. RenewHealth conducts AARs in the form of post-session debriefings that include: collecting post-intervention feedback through a questionnaire with participants; discussing feedback internally; holding an internal post-session debriefing to share viewpoints on what went well and what could be improved; and sharing progress and outcomes with external stakeholders. This process provides an opportunity for the staff, its partners, and communities to critically assess whether interventions or innovations are implemented properly, and whether they are impacting the activity's performance indicators.



TB Innovations & Health Systems Strengthening Project [TBIHSS]

TBIHSS embeds AAR processes in its entire project life cycle, including topic- or theme-based pause and reflect sessions, and periodic pause and reflect sessions that are held as part of routine internal team meetings. A topic-based AAR could be triggered when the government introduces a new policy. For instance, TBIHSS organized pause and reflect sessions in 2019 to ensure that its agenda and interventions would be aligned with the Philippines' Universal Health Care Law. By comparison, pause and review sessions are a standard part of TBIHSS' internal review meetings as a way to assess progress, achievements, and challenges. In this case, the purpose of AARs is to brainstorm strategies to further strengthen progress already achieved while also planning and executing course correction strategies to manage emerging challenges.



Recommendations

- Adopt existing AAR design templates to ensure quality, enhance repeatability, and ease documentation and reporting.
- Consider the use of existing tools for prioritization (e.g., the Eisenhower Decision Matrix), tracking progress (e.g., the Responsibility Matrix), and building accountability.
- Improve documentation of AAR practices, agreements, and outcomes, including through case study development and implementation research.
- Share good practices on conducting AARs with other IPs.
- Examine similar IPs/organizations/interventions, but with different exposures to AAR practices; and consider including a control that does not practice AAR at all.
- Conduct more quantitative investigations to build evidence on the causal impacts of AAR practices on the ultimate outcomes of projects and interventions.
- Gather the perspective of external stakeholders on how important and useful to them are the AARs conducted by the IPs (especially external AARs).

Contact us to learn more about AAR for Adaptive Management

AAR for Adoptive Management is an implementation research study of USAID, that systematically documented and assessed the USAID implementing partners' (IPs) adaptations in ensuring continuity of quality program delivery while reflecting on what's working, sharing lessons learned, and making timely adjustments and adaptations, to achieve USAID Health Project goals.

This Implementation Research study was identified and directed by CLImHealth in close collaboration with with the consultants, particularly Dr. Ramon Lorenzo Luis Guinto, Project Lead, Rafael Jairah Jr., D. Matoy, and Michael B. Salise from St. Luke's Medical Center (SLMC), College of Medicine Quasha Memorial.



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