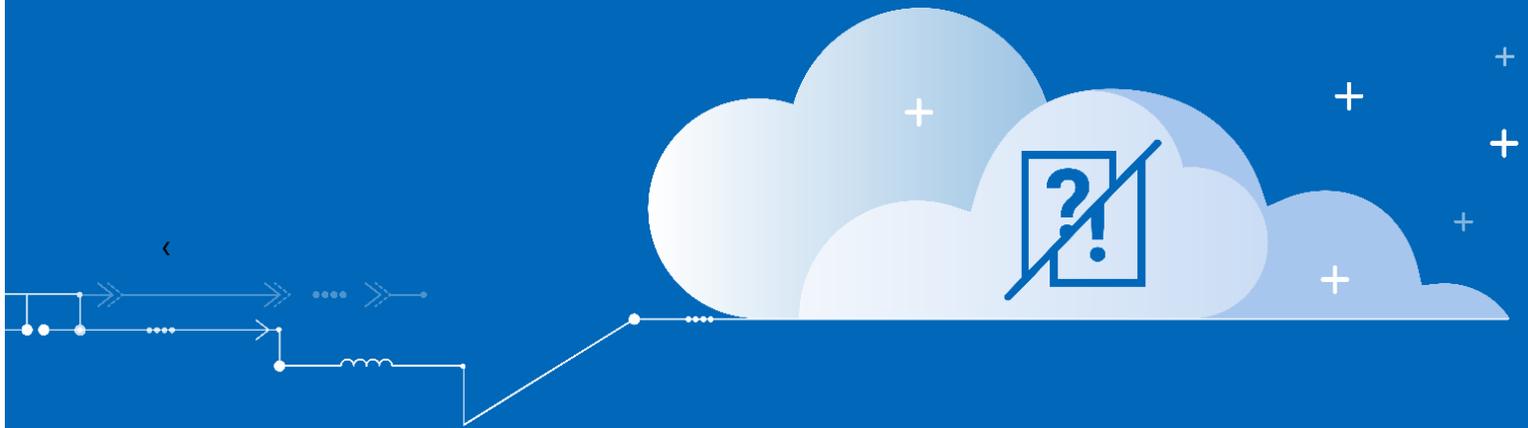




USAID
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GOOD PRACTICES GUIDE For Pause and Reflect in The Activity Cycle

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PREPARED BY

Kelsey Schueler, Environmental Incentives, LLC
Ashleigh Baker, Foundations of Success

SUBMITTED BY

Shelly Hicks, Chief of Party
Environmental Incentives, LLC

SUBMITTED TO

Sara Carlson, Contracting Officer's Representative
USAID Biodiversity Division
Center for Environment, Energy, and Infrastructure

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Environmental Incentives, LLC
725 15th Street NW, Floor 10
Washington, D.C. 20005
www.enviroincentives.com

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Pause and Reflect Workshop in Madagascar. Photo credit: Shawn Peabody

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ACRONYMS

MI2	Measuring Impact II
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

I. INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE PAUSE AND REFLECT PROCESS?

Pause and reflect is a broad term. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) defines pause and reflect as, “a component of learning and adaptive management, the act of taking time to think critically about ongoing activities and processes and plan for the best way forward.”¹ A pause and reflect process can be group-based, ranging from a portfolio review to a team meeting. It can also be individual-based, such as journaling.² At its core, the pause and reflect process is about turning our collective experiences into learning that can inform decision-making.

This guidance presents options for group-based activity-level pause and reflect processes to inform activity learning and annual work planning. Teams can, and should, reflect on a more frequent basis. This guide offers pause and reflect practices to help teams digest what has happened during a year of implementation and generate informed decisions to support adaptive management, which can be operationalized during annual planning processes. A pause and reflect process often includes in-person workshops or a series of virtual collaboration sessions. However, it is important to understand that taking time to think critically about activities and approaches needs to be ongoing and not a one-off workshop or event.

An annual pause and reflect process often includes:

- Revisiting the problem analysis (sometimes depicted in a situation model³) to identify any changes in the operating context.
- Revisiting the theory of change (sometimes depicted in a results chain⁴) to reflect changes in context, analyze progress to date, and update assumptions and other aspects of programming logic based on the team’s experience and evidence.
- Analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, including updates from activity monitoring, evaluation, and learning plans, third party evaluations, as well as stakeholder consultations and a series of in-person or virtual sessions, to reflect on the activity’s theory of change and learning questions.
- Incorporating adaptive management decisions in an updated annual work plan and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan, as needed.

¹ USAID Automated Directive System 201.3.7.2, 143.

² USAID (2018) [Facilitating Pause and Reflect](#). Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Toolkit.

³ For more information on situation models, see: [Biodiversity How-To Guide 1: Developing Situation Models in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).

⁴ For more information on results chains, see: [Biodiversity How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).

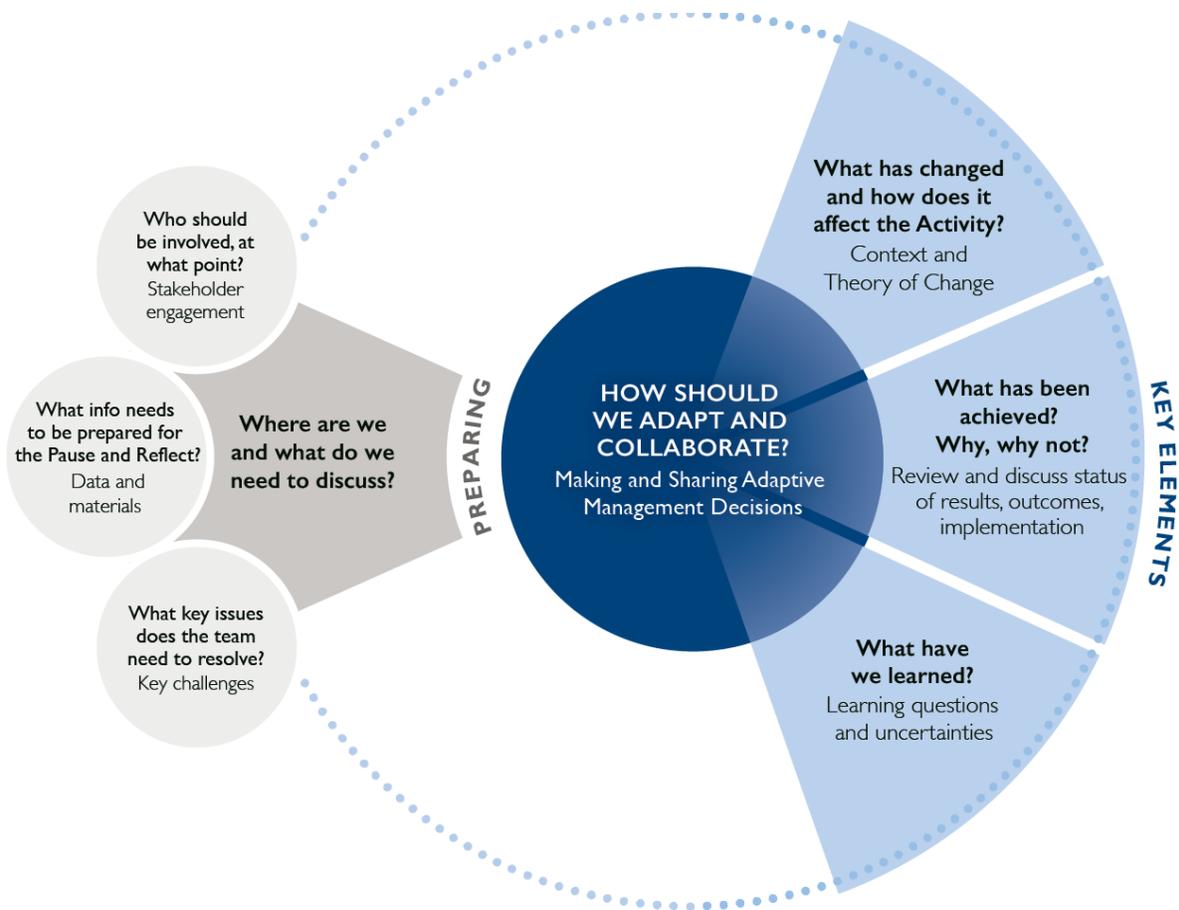


Figure 1: Pause and Reflect Process Summary Visual

Teams should adapt the annual pause and reflect process to the specific activity context. These adaptations should consider:

- **Sequence:** While there is an overall logic to the sequencing of elements, they may co-occur throughout the process (especially discussions related to learning questions, successes, and challenges). Teams can and should adjust the sequence or flow to what makes sense in the activity context (see Figure 1).
- **Organization:** There are many different ways to organize a pause and reflect process, which may range from a rapid MEL data review to a more intensive and participatory process. Teams can also adapt this guide’s suggestions to a pause and reflect triggered at other times during activity implementation.
- **Localization:** The annual activity pause and reflect process will look different across activities, related to size, level of funding, number of strategic approaches, number of partners, and familiarity across partners and consortium members.
- **Activity Life Cycle:** The annual activity pause and reflect process will look different across implementation years (see Table 2). The first year may focus on socializing activity goals and team building for a recently formed group or reviewing analysis and studies from an inception

phase. At midcourse of activity implementation, the process can help address key themes impacting work, assess reduction of biodiversity threats, and gauge overall activity progress at the goal or sub-purpose level. A final year pause and reflect may focus more on sustainability, scaling up, or generating information for the next phase of programming.

The recommendations in this guide focus on key elements of an annual pause and reflect process to inform activity learning and annual work planning. There are many other ways to design and carry out this process. Refer to the [Pause and Reflect Design Worksheet](#) for options beyond those described in this guide and find further resources and tools in [Section 4](#).

WHY IS THE PAUSE AND REFLECT PROCESS VALUABLE?

Conservation and development challenges are complex and it might be difficult for implementing teams to assess the extent to which an activity achieves its objectives. Consequently, conservation and development activities require adaptive approaches.⁵ When teams design activities to address complex challenges, they rarely do so with perfect or complete information and are often working in continuously changing contexts. The pause and reflect process provides a mechanism to promote dynamic planning and adaptive management, which is responsive to changing contexts and uncertainty. This process creates a forum to dig deeper and understand, not just what happened, but why it happened and what it means for upcoming implementation decisions. By asking these questions, teams can improve activity efficiency, efficacy, relevance, and sustainability.⁶

The pause and reflect process also provides a valuable opportunity to strengthen relationships critical to activity success and sustainability. Teams can think and work politically using this process to build trust among key actors and build or strengthen networks and collective action. Within the activity team, pausing and reflecting in a structured way offers the chance to step back from day-to-day tasks and bring all team members up to speed on each other's work and promote ownership of actions and results among the team and its partners.

While teams should analyze information and adapt periodically throughout the year, the end of a one-year implementation cycle represents an important decision-making juncture. Teams often review and approve activity work plans and MEL plans on an annual basis, including decisions about what actions to invest in and how to best monitor and learn about progress.

⁵ Khang, D. B., & Moe, T. L. (2008). Success Criteria and Factors for International Development Projects: A Life-Cycle-Based Framework. *Project Management Journal*, 39(1), 72–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pmj.20034>

⁶ For more information, see: [Stopping to Think: Why it Pays to Pause and Reflect](#).

2. PREPARING FOR THE ANNUAL PAUSE AND REFLECT PROCESS

Several factors contribute to a meaningful pause and reflect process, many of which can be addressed during the preparation phase. It is critical to create an environment of trust where it is safe to discuss failure. Trust among participants, good facilitation, good timing of the pause and reflect session, and different organizational cultures and procedures can all impact the success of the process. Consider these factors and others you identify as relevant to your context as you review the following elements of the pause and reflect process planning:

- Planning team
- Objectives and goals
- Key challenges
- Stakeholder and participant engagement
- Evidence and data
- Fostering an open meeting environment

TIP: Consider using the [Pause and Reflect Design Worksheet](#) to think through these planning and scoping decisions, such as:

- Where is the activity in implementation and work planning? What changes are possible under the current agreement/contract?
- Are the activity team and the participants familiar with the [Biodiversity Policy](#) and the [Conservation Standards](#) (especially if the activity is in the first year of implementation or there have been staff changes)?
- Are the activity team and the participants familiar with the theory of change and situation model of their activity (especially if the activity is in the first year or there is a lack of clarity on versions)?

2.1 PLANNING TEAM

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED, AT WHAT POINT?

One of the first steps to prepare for a pause and reflect is to identify the planning team, process lead(s), and others needed for effective planning. It may help to document these roles in a [team charter](#) or other planning tool. This team typically includes:

- Activity leadership (i.e., Chief of Party, Contract/Agreement Officer's Representative)
- MEL specialist(s)
- Team leads (this may be by strategic approach, component, or site)

- The facilitation team (may include USAID or partner staff from within or beyond the activity, as well as external consultants)⁷
- Sectoral (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and social inclusion; and democracy, rights, and governance) or local experts
- Support staff for logistics (for more information on roles, see the team charter linked above)

Teams may also consider designating a pause and reflect process lead, often a member of the facilitation team. This position convenes and facilitates scoping and planning meetings to ensure the team meets important milestones.

In reviewing the planning team, consider:

- Differing needs for prep work, session design and facilitation, and homework/follow-up.
- People with political insight about participants and participant dynamics.⁸
- Actors who will implement decisions from the process (or have a major influence on their implementation). This may include organizations involved in activity implementation, and different USAID offices (e.g., Program Office). Defining a role for these actors can generate buy-in to the process and ownership of the results.

Table 1: Individuals and Their Roles in the Pause and Reflect Process

INDIVIDUAL	ROLE
Activity Chief of Party	Define objectives of the convening Communicate expectations to the activity team Make decisions
Activity MEL Specialist(s)	Analyze and share activity MEL data Implement recommended changes to MEL systems
Objective/Workstream/Strategic Approach/Team Lead(s)	Analyze and share activity progress Implement recommended changes to activity actions
USAID Agreement/Contract Officer's Representative	Define objectives of the convening Set the tone of open and honest sharing Clarify the scope for adaptive management Recommend approvals to the A/CO
USAID Technical Specialists(s)	Contribute sectoral or other technical expertise
Facilitators	Provide neutral facilitation to discussion and decision-making processes Design the meeting and develop agendas and supporting materials

⁷ For more information on defining the right facilitation team for your context, see this [resource](#).

⁸ From Schuttenberg, H.Z., J. Stark, and K. Schueler. 2020. [Technically Strong and Politically Savvy: Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically when Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID](#). USAID: Washington, D.C. 72pp.

2.2 OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

After establishing the planning team, the next step in the preparation phase is to identify the objectives for the pause and reflect process. The planning team should take into account the decisions the activity team needs to make when defining goals and expectations, and design the process to support this decision-making. There may be critical issues for the activity team to discuss, including activity management and collaboration with partners, significant shifts in context such as the outbreak of a global pandemic, or opportunities to meet USAID requirements for beneficiary feedback.⁹ This is also an opportunity to align the pause and reflect process design with the activity team structure. For example, the process may require reflection at the local site level, the national or regional level, the strategic approach level, or across different partners and organizations. Where the team is in the overall implementation timeline is likely to influence the goals and objectives (see Table 2).

Table 2: Illustrative Objectives and Considerations for Pause and Reflect Process by Implementation Year

YEAR 1 ILLUSTRATIVE OBJECTIVES	YEAR 2-4 ILLUSTRATIVE OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage and get input from key activity partners, allies, and beneficiaries Reinforce agreement on the situation (threats & drivers) the activity addresses Solidify vision and theory of change Finalize, review, or improve learning questions Revise implementation and course correct based on Year 1 results Strengthen coordination and collaboration efforts between staff and partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage and get input from key activity partners, allies, and beneficiaries Review context shifts, strategic approaches, and underlying assumptions Identify necessary course corrections Discuss plan for sustainability and scaling Discuss learning questions Identify additional information needs
YEAR 1 CONSIDERATIONS	YEAR 2-4 CONSIDERATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation data may be limited, but ideally baselines have been collected Decisions may be more tactical or operational in nature Differing familiarity with the activity Theory of Change across the team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often tackle bigger picture reflection Informed by and used to generate and disseminate data for formal midterm or final evaluations Important to clarify that pause and reflect is not a formal evaluation

When establishing goals and objectives, another important consideration is understanding the adaptive management boundaries of the process (i.e., what type of adaptations are possible). The purpose of this is to build mutual understanding and consensus around implementing partner comfort and hesitation in making changes, as well as USAID's understanding of the rules (i.e., what is possible for a contract or agreement; what can be changed in the work plan, MEL plan, or budget). The planning team should align the objectives and goals to the enabling conditions for adaptive management.

⁹ For more information on USAID requirements for beneficiary feedback at the activity-level, see Automated Directives System, Chapter 201, Section 3.4.10.A (Activity MEL Plans).

2.3 KEY CHALLENGES

WHAT KEY ISSUES DOES THE TEAM NEED TO RESOLVE?

Key challenges refer to issues that may arise at any time during activity implementation, but especially by the time a team is at the midpoint of implementation or year three. Teams may want to adapt the pause and reflect format, focusing on the specific key challenges that have arisen during implementation. In other cases, the team may want to include other agenda points, while weaving key challenges throughout as a highlighted theme or a series of dedicated sessions during a workshop. Some examples of key challenges may include improving coordination and collaboration among partners or responding to major system shocks (e.g., global pandemic, political coup, changes in political leadership, droughts, floods).

2.4 STAKEHOLDER AND PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED, AT WHAT POINT?

Answering the question, “Who should be invited?” is critical for a successful pause and reflect process. Effective reflection requires involving the right stakeholders and rights holders. The team should first determine if the audience for the pause and reflect is the project team or the project team plus stakeholders. It may be efficient and effective to hold a larger stakeholder gathering to learn what is working and what is not from the community perspective, then hold a smaller workshop with the project team to focus on details of the work plan and monitoring, evaluation, and learning plan. Depending on the context, government representatives may also be interested in joining for part of a pause and reflect session.

Once the audience is determined, the planning team should identify participants and design engagements to encourage meaningful sharing from diverse perspectives, considering whether they want stakeholder input before, during, or after the process. The planning team should also ensure an environment where participants feel safe holding open and honest discussions, including the discussion of failures. Specific goals will help guide the planning team in selecting participants. [Technically Strong and Politically Savvy: Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically when Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID](#) provides several practical recommendations for identifying stakeholders, including:¹⁰

- Empowered local staff and partners, including the implementation team
- Influential leaders and civil society groups not often included in development and donor engagement¹¹ (youth, religious leaders, etc.) or typical conservation partners
- Non-traditional government leaders interested in reform
- Perspectives beyond natural sciences (e.g., gender, anti-corruption, private-sector engagement)
- Diversity in gender, age, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity
- Local and international experts

¹⁰ See footnote 8, pages 11, 14, 20.

¹¹ For more information, see: [Thinking and Working Politically Through Applied Political Economy Analysis: A Guide for Practitioners](#).

A diverse participant base is important to enable rich discussions that reflect local realities and a broad set of perspectives. It is also an opportunity to engage key actors who have a role in the activity's theory of change. It is important to remain aware of the balance between which participants are invited and the ability to maintain open and honest discussions. Teams should keep in mind that, "Adaptive management is often a political process, not just a technical one. The influence of learning often depends more on how it was facilitated and who was involved than the empirical rightness of the findings."¹²

If needed, teams can use stakeholder analysis and mapping or other tools to identify important stakeholders. They may also consider which stakeholders have already shared their perspectives. Finally, teams may need to differentiate their pause and reflect process from other processes focused exclusively on beneficiary feedback and stakeholder engagement. The pause and reflect process will focus on the implementing team and work planning and have a different meeting design than processes designed to inform stakeholders or those best accomplished through one-on-one consultations.

2.5 DATA AND INFORMATION

WHAT INFORMATION NEEDS TO BE PREPARED?

The planning team should explore the question, "What information or data does the team have to address their information needs?" Staff from the activity team will need to identify relevant supporting information and lessons learned. This might include existing activity data such as MEL data, relevant data from external sources, synthesis from other learning activities, scientific research, and assessments. It might also include identifying new information, such as information sources and a plan for who will collect what information.

In addition to identifying information in advance of the pause and reflect process, the planning team should also consider (1) what information the pause and reflect will generate (e.g., during participatory discussion), (2) how to present information to participants, and (3) how participants can interact with it. If teams do not have an existing tool for organizing their monitoring data according to key results, they can consider using the [Adaptive Management Workbook](#).¹³

As recommended in Evidence in Action, "an evidence-based approach integrates the team's expertise with the best available evidence from internal and external sources".¹⁴ A pause and reflect is an opportunity for teams to use and generate a sound evidence base that recognizes bias. It is also an opportunity to review data management practices and, if necessary, plan for better data collection moving forward. Teams can ensure their data is high-quality by using the USAID Recommended Data Quality Assessment Checklist to assess the five aspects of data quality. The planning team should use data responsibly by balancing the data's quality, security, and transparency.¹⁵ As stewards of the data collected, teams should take measures to minimize the risk to individuals by protecting their privacy and managing proper information technology security. Lastly, as part of USAID's commitment to open data

¹² See footnote 8, page 43.

¹³ See [Outcomes & Indicators](#) tab.

¹⁴ USAID. 2018. [Evidence in Action, Unit 1: Understanding an Evidence-based Approach](#).

¹⁵ USAID. 2022. Considerations for Using Data Responsibly at USAID.

and data-driven decision making, all activities are required to submit de-identified data to the Data Development Library (DDL). When submitting data sets to the DDL, teams should respect the privacy of data subjects, national security, and host-country laws.

2.6 FOSTERING AN OPEN MEETING ENVIRONMENT

Finally, the planning team should determine the appropriate mechanisms for convening given an activity's context, varying learning styles and access to technology, and language needs. Teams should keep in mind that, "Because political information can be sensitive and subtle, it may not organically arise in workshops unless facilitators have given special consideration."¹⁶ In addition, sometimes decision-makers are hesitant to make changes without prior USAID approval. Consider creating space for direct discussions with decision-makers (e.g., implementing partner leadership) to understand their hesitations and needs.

Key questions the planning team should explore include:¹⁷

- How many participants does the team expect?
- Is it an in-person, virtual or hybrid convening?
- Are there language needs to consider? If translation would be beneficial, is it possible to secure translation for the entire P&R or should it be prioritized for certain sessions?
- Are there team dynamics that need to be addressed (e.g., a few participants who may dominate the conversation)? How will the facilitators ensure that everyone feels comfortable participating (e.g., providing opportunities for participants to reflect and write; small group discussions)?
- Will learning activities be synchronous or asynchronous? How might mixed approaches be appropriate at different moments of the process?
- Which adaptive management tools are the team most comfortable using (i.e., does the team use and update results chains¹⁸ or another tool to document their theory of change?)
- How can the process be more participant-friendly for both virtual and in-person activities?
 - For virtual convenings, consider time zones, length of sessions, and break times, and ask participants which virtual tools and technologies they are most comfortable with.
 - For in-person convenings, consider the length of days and food and drink breaks, and ensure you have the necessary interactive materials (e.g., index cards in multiple colors, sticky tarps, markers).
- What facilitation tools will the facilitation team use to meet the different needs of the various participants, especially with consideration to USAID's Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?
- Who should facilitate which parts of the agenda? Consider which facilitator on the team will be best suited for each session so as to ensure diversity of participation, build relationships, and foster a trusting environment.

¹⁶ See footnote 8, page 20.

¹⁷ Adapted from the [Pause and Reflect Design Worksheet](#).

¹⁸ For more information on results chains, see [Biodiversity How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).

3. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ANNUAL PAUSE AND REFLECT PROCESS

An annual pause and reflect process has several key elements. The coordinating team may choose to use all or a combination of the key elements below, depending on the needs of the activity and where they are in implementation. While there is an overall logic to the sequencing of elements, they may co-occur throughout the process (especially discussions related to learning questions, successes, and challenges). The sequence or flow can and should be adjusted to what makes sense in the activity context.

The key elements are:

- Changes in context and theory of change
- Achievement of results
- Implementation progress (if needed)
- Learning questions and addressing uncertainties
- Making adaptive management decisions
- Sharing adaptive management decisions

3.1 CHANGES IN CONTEXT AND THEORY OF CHANGE

HOW HAS THE CONTEXT CHANGED?

HOW DOES THAT AFFECT THE ACTIVITY'S THEORY OF CHANGE?

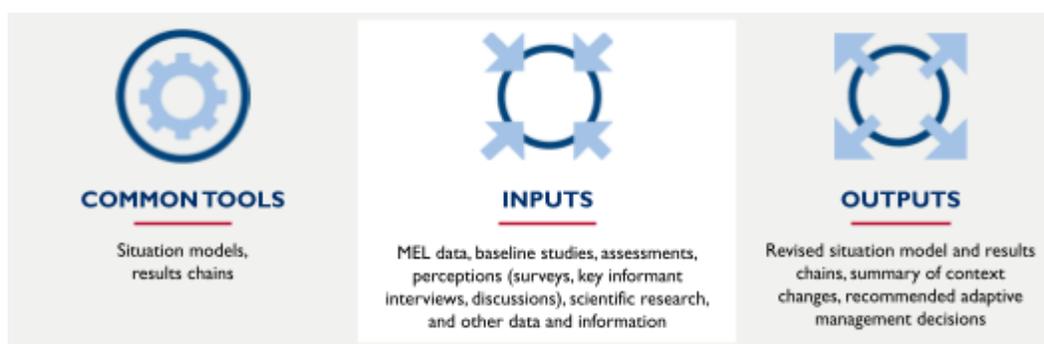


Figure 2: Common Tools, Inputs, and Outputs for Changes in Context and Understanding of the Theory of Change

The pause and reflect process provides an opportunity to reexamine the expected conditions and solutions reflected in the situation model (i.e., understanding of the problems) and the theory of change, respectively. Teams should ask, “How has the context changed?” and may identify changes using either the situation model or results chain. In either case, the objective of the exercise is to explore core assumptions and see if they still hold true to better understand activity success or challenges.

As noted in [Technically Strong and Politically Savvy: Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically when Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID](#),¹⁹ “Reflection processes should include broader questions about how accurately the results chain seems to describe what the team is observing in practice and whether the team’s theory of change remains attuned to the local situation... In addition to informing adaptive management, these inquiries may identify areas of political uncertainty that might be helpful to explore further through a politically oriented analysis.”

The reflection process should result in adaptations and actions that respond to the team’s understanding of how contextual changes are influencing activity results. Teams should identify responses to those context changes and develop recommendations for necessary adaptations to the results chains and theories of change for appropriate strategic approaches. Based on the analysis of changes and adjustments to results chains and theories of change, teams may also propose other adaptive management decisions.

Rich and meaningful discussions about the context and theory of change depend on having the right voices in the room. For more information on participants, see [Section 2.4](#).

3.2 ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED, AND WHY?

WHAT HAS NOT BEEN ACHIEVED, AND WHY NOT?

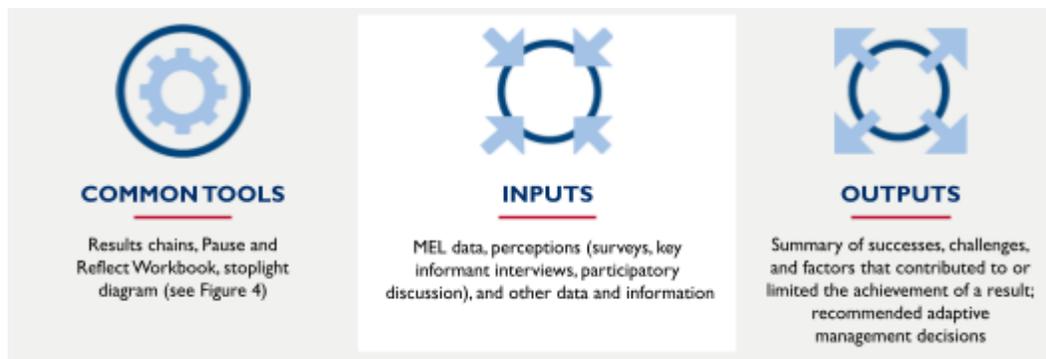


Figure 3: Common Tools, Inputs, and Outputs for Achievement of Results

The next element of a pause and reflect process is to assess progress toward intermediate results and whether the team is on track to achieve its overall goals and objectives. Based on an analysis of MEL data or other sources of evidence, teams will assess progress to make decisions about adaptive management. This is also an opportunity to present advances in a team’s monitoring framework.

Teams should rate progress toward their results and explain those ratings, particularly where results are not being achieved despite successful actions. One helpful tool to organize and visualize this data is a

¹⁹ See footnote 8, page 41.

stoplight diagram (see [Figure 5](#) and this [Stoplight Diagram Overview](#)), which can be constructed using the [Adaptive Management Workbook](#) (see [Figure 6](#)). It is more productive if teams complete this assessment during the preparation phase and before participatory sessions or workshops. Completing this prework can focus discussions and allocate more time to learning. Teams may use MEL data to assess progress, or rate progress through participatory processes where participants interact directly with stoplight diagrams by coloring in bubbles or using stickers or virtual tools to assign ratings (see [Figure 4](#)).

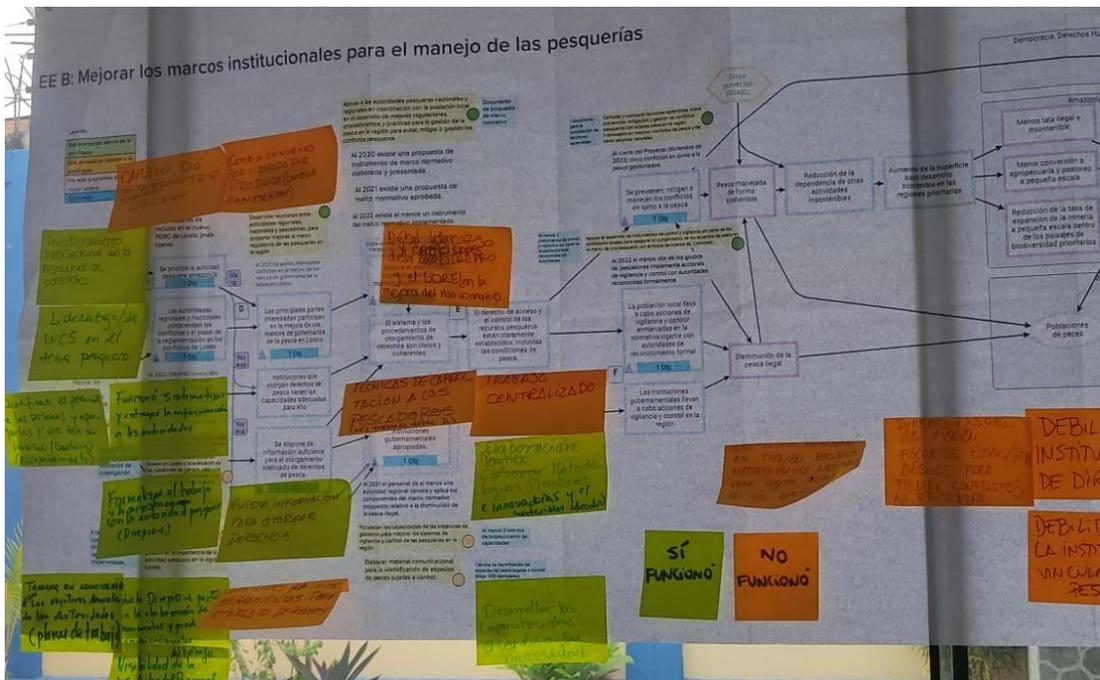


Figure 4: Participatory Rating Using Diagrams and Colored Stickers

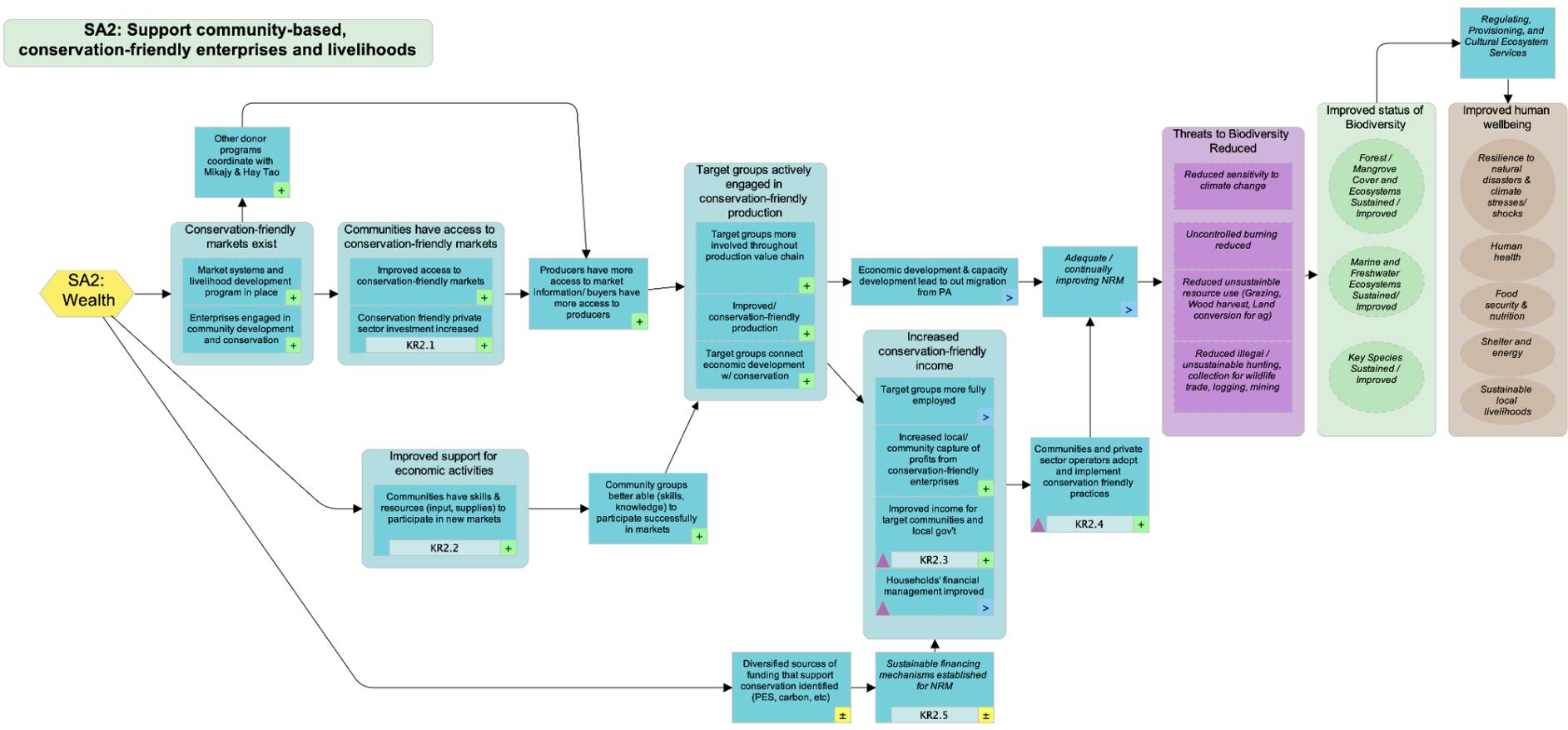


Figure 5: Stoplight diagram showing many results are on track (green +), two are partially achieved (yellow ±), and three results are not yet achieved (>).

Key Result (Blue Box)	Outcome Statement	Knowledge gaps related to the Outcome Statement	Performance Indicator	Disaggregation	Related Standard Indicator (if applicable)	Method(s) of data acquisition	Frequency	Monitoring Status	YR 1 Target	YR 2 Target	YR 3 Target	YR 4 Target	Activity level LOP target	LOP Achievement	Progress towards Outcome
Healthy river fish populations	Sub-purpose 1. By 2021, more than 80% of the sub-watersheds of the Grand River have self-sustaining populations of key native river fish.* (* See list of identified priority native river fish by sub-watershed)		% of the sub-watersheds of the Grand River have self-sustaining populations of key native river fish.*	Fish populations by species by sub-watersheds	EG.10.2-1. Number of hectares of biologically significant areas showing improved biophysical conditions as a result of USG assistance		Annually	On track	10	20	40	60	80		3 – a lot of progress - complete or nearly complete
Fishers use new practice	Outcome 1.3. By 2018, at least 60% of the fishers in identified sub-watersheds of the Grand River are using only new freshwater fishing practices	Uncertain if fishers will use new practices	% of the fishers in identified sub-watersheds of the Grand River who are using only sustainable freshwater fishing practices	# of fishers disaggregated by sex & geographic location	EG.10.2-2 Number of hectares of biologically significant areas under improved natural resource management as a result of USG assistance.	Review registry of fishing gear on boats before they leave on fishing expeditions	Annually	Minor issues	40	60	60	70	80		0 – no progress - unlikely to achieve by LOP

Figure 6: Color-Coded Spreadsheet Tool for Tracking Progress

TIP: Many elements of existing MEL data can be used to help a team track results, including:

- Status toward achieving outcome statements
- Status toward achieving indicator targets
- Assessments/surveys conducted by the activity team or third parties

Qualitative information is also key to results tracking. Teams should consider implementation experience in addition to MEL data.

Based on assessment, teams should summarize and agree on factors that contributed to or constrained the achievement of results and use that information to develop adaptive management decisions (see Figure 7). It is important to highlight the significance of capturing not only successes and challenges, but also contributing factors. Without these factors, teams may understand the what but not the why. Throughout, teams will want to note areas of continued uncertainty or where additional evidence would be beneficial.

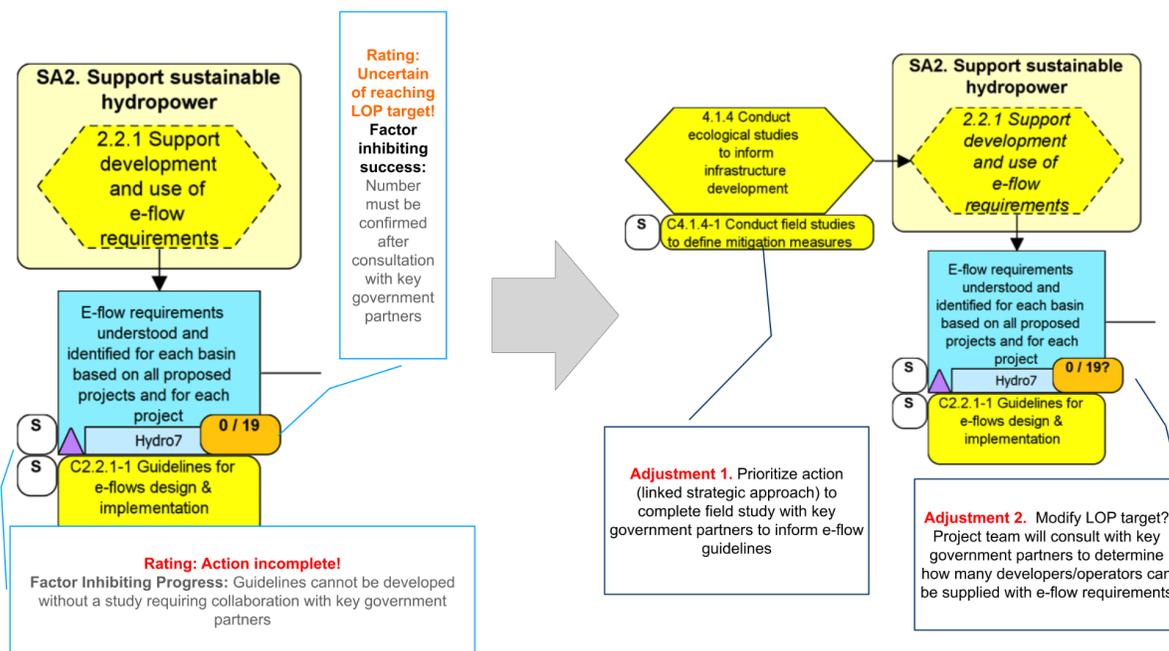


Figure 7: Analysis of Stoplight Diagram Factors and Adaptations based on Pause and Reflect Process

The participatory rating element of the pause and reflect process should be carefully planned and facilitated to promote discussion of what is and is not working. While it is important to celebrate success, it is also critical to create an environment of trust where it is safe to discuss failure. A helpful facilitation approach can include encouraging USAID representatives or activity team leadership to introduce the idea that part of a successful implementation strategy is understanding what is not working or where there is room for improvement.

In addition to analyzing MEL data, the team may need to use surveys or interviews to gather perceptions of progress and the factors contributing to or inhibiting progress, if they want to share a summary of perceptions for review during the process. Alternatively, the team may want or need to provide time during the process for brainstorming and group discussion to generate information about the factors contributing to or inhibiting progress. In situations of multi-stakeholder partnership awards or large consortiums, anonymous surveys are often a good way to generate broad-based input on activity implementation progress.

3.3 IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS (IF NEEDED)

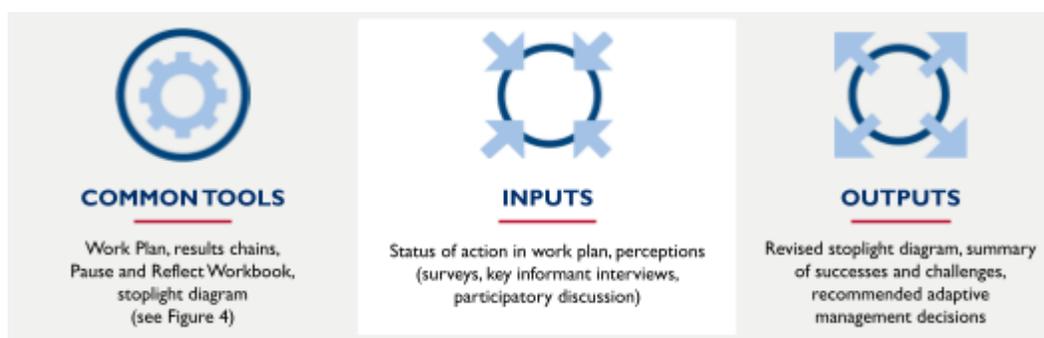


Figure 8: Common Tools, Inputs, and Outputs for Implementation Progress

Assessing progress toward actions is common prep work before a participatory workshop. Often this data is readily available through activity reporting processes and other activity management processes. Teams should consider whether they want to assess progress directly from reporting data, have a small group complete an implementation progress assessment in advance, or use participatory discussions to determine if the activity accomplished its goals in a given year. This rating can coincide with the discussion on achievement of results (see [Section 3.2](#))

TIP: For participatory discussion during in-person or virtual sessions, focus action-related conversations on areas where the team is having major challenges.

After indicating progress toward implementation of activities, including an explanation of ratings, teams should develop recommendations for actions. These recommendations should focus on how actions can facilitate the more effective achievement of outcomes.

Whether assessing implementation progress as prep work or during a participatory exercise, it is important to consider the status of implementation in conjunction with the achievement of results (see [Section 3.2](#)). This may illuminate important operational recommendations for the strategic approach or overall adaptive management (e.g., insufficient financial resources, lack of sufficient skills within the team, needs for equipment, coordination challenges). A commonly used framework uses the phrasing, “What should we keep doing? What should we stop doing? What needs to change?”

3.4 LEARNING QUESTIONS AND ADDRESSING UNCERTAINTIES

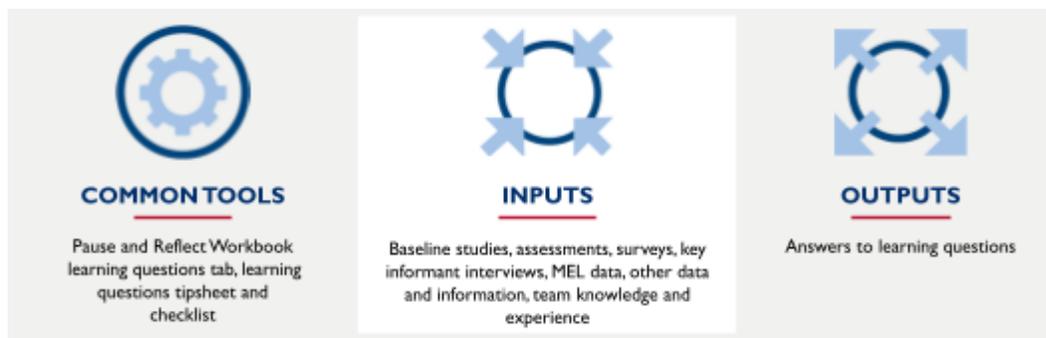


Figure 9: Common Tools, Inputs, and Outputs for Learning Questions, and Addressing Uncertainties

A team may approach learning in many ways. One approach is developing learning questions and designing activities to answer them during an activity’s life or including them in the design of third party evaluations. Learning questions can help teams make adaptive management decisions for their activity. Learning questions can also contribute to broader learning within and beyond the biodiversity conservation community for those implementing similar strategic approaches.

Teams often create learning questions where there are uncertainties in the team’s situation model or theories of change, especially when there is a lack of published evidence on the effectiveness of the activity’s strategic approaches, and document this in the activity MEL plan during the start-up phase. During the pause and reflect process, teams have the opportunity to evaluate, review, and answer their learning questions and use that learning to adapt their activities. However, during year one and sometimes year two, teams may still be refining their learning questions.

For teams with learning questions in place, they should:

- Analyze existing data that would contribute to answering existing learning questions.
- Review and prioritize learning questions. At certain moments in implementation, often near the midpoint, teams may want to prioritize learning questions for inclusion in a learning review or evaluation.
- Assess progress toward addressing learning questions. Is the team addressing priority information needs? If not, and if those information needs are still priorities, how will the team address them in the future?
- Address learning questions by answering them as a team based on existing data and the experience of the team. Teams may want to focus the process on specific learning questions.

- Make adaptive management decisions based on addressing questions.

Teams may use baseline studies, evaluations, discrete research projects, assessments, surveys, key informant interviews, MEL data, personal experience, specific activities or meetings, and other resources to answer these questions. Teams may need to generate information about their learning questions through participatory discussions during the pause and reflect process. The planning team may recommend discussing learning questions at the beginning of, integrated throughout, or later in the process. As with other elements of the process, teams should sequence and highlight process elements depending on what makes the most sense in a given programming context.

3.5 MAKING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

HOW SHOULD THE ACTIVITY ADAPT BASED ON THE PAUSE AND REFLECT PROCESS?



Figure 10: Common Tools, Inputs, and Outputs for Making Adaptive Management Decisions

The most important element of the pause and reflect process is using the team’s analysis and discussion throughout to inform adaptive management decisions. While addressing the other elements of the process, the facilitation team should capture synthesis and group consensus around major successes, challenges, and decisions/changes, organized by strategic approach, site/regional or national levels, or some other framework. The team may want to look at information compiled in prior steps and review for gaps or recommended revisions. Acting on these changes may require engaging other important actors with influence over activity decision-making, ideally those who have participated in the process at some point. The team may invite them to the final discussions. Teams should also discuss and agree on next steps to take forward those decisions, including who will take action and associated timelines.

It is important to remember that effective reflection does not require lots of adaptation. The team may not propose any changes to processes that are working well. It is valuable learning for the team to understand what is working well (and why). This is an equally important part of practicing adaptive management.

If individuals external to the activity team lead the pause and reflect process, consideration needs to be given to how to support the activity team in reflecting the major decisions in work plans, MEL plans, changelogs, or other tools. To help translate the learning from a pause and reflect process into concrete

programmatic changes, it can be helpful to summarize all the ideas for adaptation generated by the team and dedicate time to organizing those ideas into main changes to results, outcome statements, and actions. The team may also require support after the process to update results chains or situation models. The activity team may want to consider how to bring these process elements into their own internal systems or align them to the activity’s ongoing collaborating, learning, and adapting efforts. The team may want to adapt this guide’s tools and resources to reflect their existing tools and resources.

TIP: Offer examples from teams that have incorporated pause and reflect results into their annual plans (where possible) and offer to review plans for adaptive management language.

3.6 SHARING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS



Figure 11: Common Tools, Inputs and Outputs for Sharing Adaptive Management Decisions

Documenting and sharing a team’s pause and reflect process is an important step. Teams should summarize successes, challenges, and decisions and capture that information in one place. Often this takes the form of a workshop report. As teams move into the annual work planning process—or the next time they engage in a pause and reflect process—these outputs can help remind them of key decisions, and the rationale for those decisions.

This element is also an opportunity to share key insights with activity partners. Teams should remember to share documentation with stakeholders who were not involved in the entire process or only targeted for engagement at the end. Debriefs, report-outs, or sharing of process documentation is an opportunity to foster support and buy-in for recommended adaptive management actions.

When possible, sharing insights beyond the activity team helps contribute learning to the broader community. Teams should consider formats and forums that allow the team to share their learning, which may include sensitive information, with others. Particularly as the activity moves to the final years of implementation, knowledge management and lessons learned may be an important focus of the activity and a priority for USAID audiences who will design the next phase of programming.

4. AVAILABLE TOOLS

- [Supplemental Guide 4: Technically Strong and Politically Savvy - Enhancing Thinking and Working Politically When Practicing the Conservation Standards at USAID](#)
- [USAID Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Toolkit - Facilitating Pause & Reflect](#)
- [Facilitating Intentional Group Learning: A Practical Guide for 21 Learning Activities](#)
- [USAID Tip Sheet on Learning Questions](#)
- [USAID Checklist on Learning Questions](#)



U.S. Agency for International Development

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, D.C. 20523

email: biodiversity@usaid.gov

<https://biodiversitylinks.org>



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