



FINAL EVALUATION BRIEF | JANUARY 2023

CROSS-PROGRAM EVALUATION OF EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON ILAB PROJECTS FLEXIBILITY IN RESPONSE HIGHLIGHTS VALUE OF ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

COVID-19 represented a profound, unexpected and unplanned shock to the implementation of DOL activities. To learn more, the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) commissioned Management Systems International (MSI) to conduct a cross-program evaluation to understand the effects and experiences the COVID-19 pandemic has had on program activities across the Office of Child Labor, Forced Labor, and Human Trafficking (OCFT) and the Office of Trade and Labor Affairs (OTLA).

Full report [here](#).

Case studies:

- 1: [Going Virtual](#)
- 2: [Creative Solutions](#)
- 3: [Adaptive Management](#)
- 4: [Data Collection](#)
- 5: [New Tools](#)
- 6: [Emerging Opportunities](#)
- 7: [Social Protections](#)

KEY RESULTS

HAVE ILAB PROJECTS EFFECTIVELY RESPONDED AND ADAPTED TO COVID-19?

- The effects of COVID-19 on project implementation were significant but decreased over time.
- Only 28% of grantees reported a major impact on the overall ability to achieve the activity's objectives.
- More than three quarters of grantees reported that their project responded effectively to COVID-19.
- The most common project responses were adoption of new technology (94%) and new management practices (72%).

HAVE ILAB PROJECTS APPROPRIATELY DISTRIBUTED OR REALLOCATED RESOURCES TO RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19?

- The majority of ILAB projects reported having to reallocate existing resources to respond to the pandemic.
- Many of these projects reported that existing risk management processes were insufficient for the pandemic.
- The few projects that did receive additional resources to mitigate COVID-19 effects (22%) used the funds for protective measures (44%) and to cover operational costs caused by project implementation delays (44%).

DID THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 REDUCE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES?

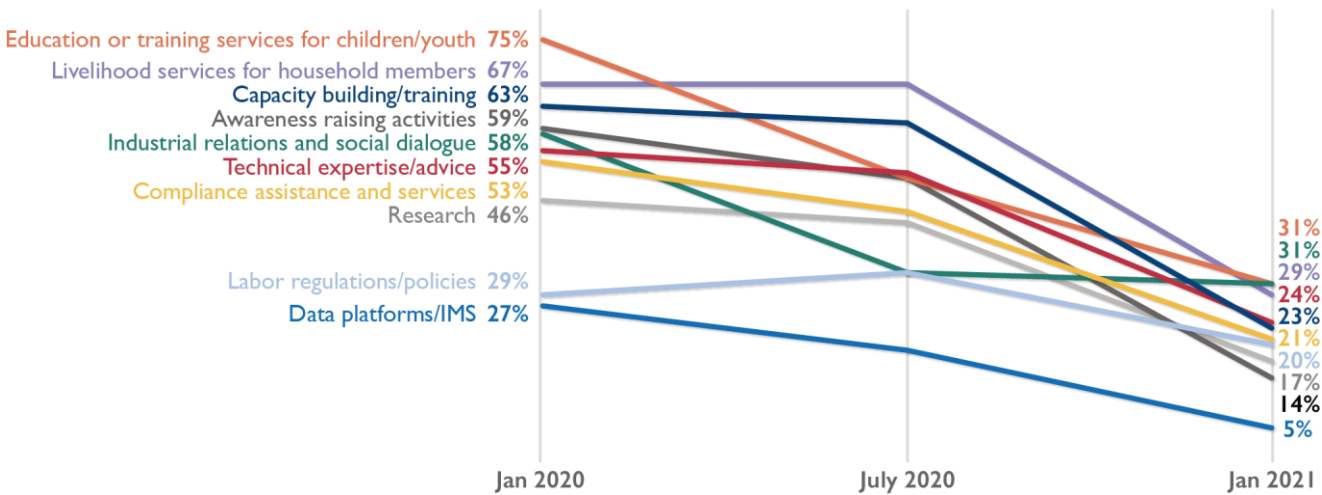
- Only a small minority of grantee respondents (12%) reported that project sustainability was negatively affected, while 20% of ILAB staff felt sustainability was negatively affected.

DETAILED RESULTS

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON PROJECT OUTCOMES WERE SIGNIFICANT, BUT DECREASED OVER TIME

ILAB staff reported that COVID-19 represented a severe shock to the implementing environment. The effects of COVID-19 on project implementation were significant but decreased over time (see figure 1). The largest effects were on education and training for youth, livelihood services and capacity building/training across key target populations and institutions (i.e., government counterparts, employers, civil society, workers and unions, and community-level stakeholders). Despite widespread negative effects, only 28% of grantee respondents reported a major impact on the overall ability to achieve the activity’s objectives. Most grantee respondents (76%) said that their project responded effectively to COVID-19 challenges, and that the adaptations should be captured and maintained going forward.

Figure 1: Grantee perception of Covid-19 impacts over time by implementation areas



Both OCFT and OTLA projects reported opportunities during the pandemic. The most common project responses were adoption of new technology (94%) and new management practices (72%). Less common responses included new partnerships with other activities or donors (28%) or government (16%).

PROJECT OBJECTIVES REMAINED RELEVANT, BUT GRANTEES SOMETIMES STRUGGLED FOR STAKEHOLDER ATTENTION

Grantee staff reported that their objectives retained relevance following the emergence of the pandemic while ILAB staff were less likely to report a retained relevance. Implementing partners saw COVID-19 as an implementation challenge requiring more time, while ILAB staff viewed COVID-19 as an existential threat to activity objectives. Where relevant, projects also aligned themselves with changes in laws or policies caused by COVID-19. There is evidence that COVID-19 shifted the priorities of stakeholders across the board, but to a slightly greater extent among beneficiaries such as communities or workers, relative to government or private sector. Grantees reported realigning priorities less for employers/the private sector, relative to all other groups, though this difference could be the result of selection bias in the sample. Nearly half of grantees reported forging new linkages with additional partners as a necessary part of priority realignment. Examples of these new linkages include business chambers, worker organizations, municipalities and the private sector.

COVID-19 THREATENED, BUT DID NOT ULTIMATELY DESTROY PROJECTS' SUSTAINABILITY

Most grantee respondents maintained their outlooks on sustainability, but a proportion (12%) reported that project sustainability was negatively affected. For example, Producción Agrícola Responsable (Argentina) reported that public officials had other priorities in the face of the emergency, which delayed their responses. Additionally, 20% of ILAB staff reported that the projects they manage suffered from a negative effect on sustainability. A third of grantees reported new opportunities for sustainability as a result of COVID-19 and subsequent adaptation and realignment. For example, Evidence to Action project staff (Mauritania) incorporated basic humanitarian needs into child labor objectives. The Labor Market Information project (implemented by AIR) convened a foreign government working group.

PROMISING PRACTICES

This cross-program meta-evaluation identified the following promising practices:

1. Reassessment of existing training content in light of COVID-19 hastened adaptation.
2. Virtual training sessions of 2-3 hours spread over multiple training days were most effective.
3. Projects that had invested early in grassroots relationship building proved more resilient to COVID-19 disruptions.
4. Projects cognizant of both mental and physical health contributed to more resilient staff and continuity of project implementation.

LESSONS LEARNED

This cross-program meta-evaluation identified the following lessons learned:

1. Virtual training was initially a disruptive shock, but after a period of adaptation became DOL projects' strongest adaptation to COVID-19.
2. Adapting to COVID-19 validated an adaptive management approach.
3. The effectiveness of virtual approaches varies depending on the target population.
4. A lack of GESI planning resulted in slowed reaction to COVID-19 and possibly an exacerbation of harms.

AREAS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

This cross-program meta-evaluation identified the following suggestions, organized according to the intended audience:

GRANTEE

1. Where relevant to context, grantees should build-in rapid assessments of virtual training feasibility and suitability for target populations
2. Grantees should implement user-feedback mechanisms to address key challenges and inform adaptations specific to local communities.
3. Grantees should incorporate a mix of in-person and remote data collection methods for performance and contextual data.
4. Where relevant to context, grantees should disaggregate project data according to additional sub-groups of interest, beyond more standard groups such as sex, age, or locality.

USDOL

5. USDOL should continue to afford grantees flexibility in response to future unplanned challenges.
6. USDOL should continue to adopt a stance of nimble, adaptive management.
7. USDOL should proactively seek to incorporate stakeholders' emerging priorities into ongoing projects to maintain priority and relevance.
8. USDOL should include a gender and social inclusion assessment or situational analysis as part of its scoping and risk mitigation measures.
9. As part of the award process, DOL should place greater emphasis on evaluating applicants' identification of critical assumptions, and conduct risk assessment/scenario planning exercises

EVALUATION METHODS

This performance evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Data collection comprised a survey of 60 grantee staff across 50 projects (majority operating in the agricultural sector and geographically located in Latin America/Caribbean), a separate survey of 15 ILAB staff and in-depth interviews across 10 projects to help develop case studies.

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