

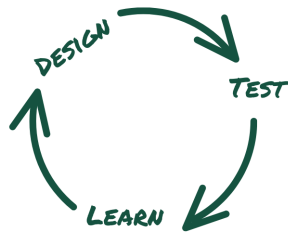
Leveraging Iterative Learning for Program Success

Have you ever invested large amounts of time or money in a program that didn't lead to what you hoped for? Was there a missed opportunity to identify the issues earlier so you could make changes to improve outcomes? **Iterative learning can help.**

WHAT IS ITERATIVE LEARNING?

Iterative learning is a continuous process of improvement through repeated trial and error.

In international development and humanitarian contexts, it involves cycles of designing, testing, and adapting programs based on data, including stakeholder feedback, to understand the reality of program progress or barriers. This iterative approach is essential to refine programs before substantial resources are committed to scaling their implementation. It involves posing the right questions, collecting and reflecting on data for decision-making, and implementing changes based on insights.



DATA COLLECTION FOR "FLYING COLORS" PROGRAM © IPA | JUNE 2023

Iterative Learning in The LEGO Foundation's Playful Learning in Crisis Settings Initiative

The LEGO Foundation partnered with six organizations under its Playful Learning in Crisis Settings initiative to test, adapt, and scale innovative programs to improve access to quality educational opportunities for vulnerable and out-of-school refugee children in Uganda and Ethiopia. These *creative solutions* programs had different learning needs and elements to refine and adapt in their models to make them right-fit for the context and populations with which they were working. Some were implementing a play-based curriculum for the first time while others were applying a tested curriculum in a new context. The LEGO Foundation supported them by encouraging field testing, fostering open communication about successes and challenges, and providing opportunities to work with IPA as a learning partner.

Iterative learning revealed insights such as language-of-instruction comprehension issues among refugee children, distinct needs for girls and children with special needs and disabilities in play-based learning, and the necessity for additional guidance for teachers post-training to integrate novel play-based learning approaches into lessons. The journey of each program was unique, but the continuous process of trial and error and open discussions about failure guided them in refining and strengthening their models.

WHY ITERATIVE LEARNING?

Iterative learning allows for program design to be adjusted and refined as needed, directing valuable funding to the most promising elements before committing more significant financial and logistical resources.

Iterative learning has several purposes that can be leveraged in pursuit of an impactful program, including:

- ➔ To **identify at an early stage both known and unknown risks** that threaten the success of the program design, which can then be addressed, adapted, and improved.
- ➔ To **adapt** and refine a program's design to **address the unique circumstances** of every community and context.
- ➔ To encourage teams to **allocate appropriate resources towards refining** promising designs, helping to produce more impactful programs and improve return on investment.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR INTEGRATING ITERATIVE LEARNING

Iterative Learning is growing in use to ensure scarce resources are allocated effectively to deliver impactful programs. However, the approach can appear daunting, especially for organizations that are unfamiliar with it or do not use it as a regular approach to programming. Below are practical steps for implementers and funders to integrate Iterative Learning into their frameworks.

FOR IMPLEMENTERS

ALLOCATE RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

- Dedicate time, budget, and team capacity to facilitate learning and informed decision-making.
- Create an environment for frequent data analysis and discussions to support program design adjustments.

CULTIVATE A GROWTH MINDSET AROUND LEARNING

- Encourage the team to embrace findings, including failures, as valuable learning opportunities to strengthen the program.

PRIORITIZE LEARNING FOCUS

- Direct Iterative Learning efforts towards critical program areas where the potential for impact is strong but evidence of their effectiveness is light.

CONSIDER SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALABILITY

- Assess long-term implementation risks and how they might affect the sustainability and scalability of the program; adapt the program to navigate those risks early.

FOR FUNDERS

PROMOTE FLEXIBILITY

- Allow implementing partners flexibility in time, budget, and communications to facilitate learning.
- Avoid rigid reporting requirements and targets that hinder opportunities for implementers to learn and improve the programs.

INTEGRATE LEARNING COMPONENTS INTO GRANTS

- Incorporate evidence-informed reflection and learning cycles into required program phases.
- Encourage implementers to share how insights inform program refinement, rather than selectively highlighting successes.
- Provide tools and frameworks to enhance learning capacity.

BUILD TRUST AND ENCOURAGE ADAPTATION

- Foster trust with implementing partner grantees by incentivizing learning and adaptation, even from failures.
- Create a supportive environment where challenges and necessary changes can be openly discussed without penalization.



IPA's Right Fit Evidence Unit is available to support implementers and funders in incorporating Iterative Learning in their program designs. For more information about our work, please visit [our webpage](#) or contact us at rightfit@poverty-action.org.

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IPA's Right-Fit Evidence Unit | poverty-action.org/right-fit-evidence

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA brings together researchers and decision-makers to design, rigorously evaluate, and refine these solutions and their applications, ensuring that the evidence created is used to improve the lives of the world's poor. Since our founding in 2002, IPA has worked with over 575 leading academics to conduct over 650 evaluations in 51 countries. Through its Right-Fit Evidence unit, IPA advises funders, NGOs, social businesses, and governments to help them be smarter producers and users of data and evidence.

