



# A STUDY OF THE SUSTAINED UPTAKE DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

How does developmental evaluation work in the **USAID** context, what factors help and hinder its success, and what is its value to stakeholders?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

D2FTF	Digital Development for Feed the Future
DE	Developmental evaluation
DEPA-MERL	Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity-Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
DFS	Digital Financial Services
DI	Digital Inclusion
EIA	Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment
iDesign	Innovation Design and Advisory team
PSP	Program and Strategic Planning Office
Search	Search for Common Ground
SOGE	Scaling Off-Grid Energy
Uptake DE	Sustained Uptake Developmental Evaluation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WDI	William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan

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## CONSORTIUM INFORMATION

The DEPA-MERL consortium consists of Social Impact, the prime awardee; Search for Common Ground; and the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity-Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (DEPA-MERL)—situated in the US Global Development Lab’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations Program at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—is testing the effectiveness of developmental evaluation in the USAID context. Developmental evaluation (DE) was created to evaluate innovative programs that operate in complex environments and are thus expected to adapt over time. From March 2017 to December 2018, DEPA-MERL conducted a DE with the US Global Development Lab (hereinafter, “the Lab”). The Sustained Uptake DE (hereinafter, “the Uptake DE”) was conducted in service of the Lab’s mission to source, test, and scale development solutions. The Uptake DE helped several of the Lab’s teams to collect, analyze, and disseminate learnings regarding the sustained uptake<sup>1</sup> of innovations these teams seek to promote within and beyond USAID.

### EVALUATION BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

DE is an evaluative approach aimed at facilitating continuous adaptation of interventions. In this context, it involves having one or more Developmental Evaluators integrated into the implementation team, usually on a full-time basis. This report seeks to facilitate learning on the implementation of DEs in the USAID context. Readers of this report include USAID stakeholders, organizations funding or implementing DE, and Developmental Evaluators themselves. Using the information collected, the DEPA-MERL consortium aims to build on existing literature and offer readers targeted data and guidance to improve the effectiveness of DE. Additionally, the findings from this study will be compared to findings from other DE pilots conducted by DEPA-MERL. A cross-case comparative report is expected to be released in September 2019.

### METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

During all 22 months of the Uptake DE, the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI) team collected data to answer the following three research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How does DE capture, promote, and enable the utilization of emergent learnings in support of ongoing programming in a complex system, in the USAID context?
- **Research Question 2:** What are the barriers and enablers to implementation of DE in the USAID context?
- **Research Question 3:** What do key informants consider to be the value (added or lost) of conducting a DE compared to a traditional evaluation approach?

To answer these questions, the WDI team used mixed methods, which included [outcome harvesting](#). The WDI team conducted a document review, held semi-structured interviews with the Developmental Evaluator and stakeholders, and administered an electronic survey to stakeholders. Limitations of the study included resource constraints (time and funding), respondent selection bias, funding bias, and lack of a counterfactual.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “sustained uptake” refers to the adoption of Lab-team-promoted innovations by USAID Missions (or external stakeholders) beyond the direct period of engagement with those Lab teams.

## FINDINGS

### Research Question 1: How does DE capture, promote, and enable the utilization of emergent learnings in support of ongoing programming in a complex system, in the USAID context?

A systematic review of the 22 harvested outcomes revealed that the Uptake DE used many approaches to *capture, promote, and enable the utilization* of emergent learnings. The Developmental Evaluator documented emails, meetings, and one-on-one conversations she had with stakeholders to capture this information. She conducted key informant interviews and facilitated workshops with all relevant stakeholders to gather and promote emergent learnings and data. She attended meetings and shared recommendations both formally and informally to enable the utilization of emergent learnings for program adaptations, with the goal of increased impact. The WDI team presents these key takeaways:

1. The most frequent types of changes were from outcomes that affected stakeholders' knowledge and capability (41%, 9 of 22 outcomes) and their team's strategy (36%, 8 of 22 outcomes).
2. The DE provided value to Lab teams across all areas, but the largest percentage of outcomes (32%, 7 of 22 outcomes) from the DE, resulted in improved operations for the stakeholder teams.
3. For the majority of outcomes (68%, 15 of 22 outcomes), the Developmental Evaluator helped stakeholders make changes based on DE data or recommendations by either offering advice or providing co-implementation support.

### Research Question 2: What are the barriers and enablers to implementation of DE in the USAID context?

Data from interviews with the Developmental Evaluator and with stakeholders revealed:

1. Several factors that influenced the implementation of the Uptake DE served as both barriers and enablers, including *integration of the Developmental Evaluator, DE readiness, skills of the Developmental Evaluator, USAID dynamics, and data utilization*.
2. Overall, *skills of the Developmental Evaluator and data utilization* were the top enabling factors. *USAID dynamics and stakeholder relationships* were the largest barriers to DE implementation.
3. With the exception of *skills of the Developmental Evaluator*, the prevalence of key factors varied over time. Further analysis showed that each factor was composed of different sub-themes that varied in importance over time.
4. Despite various USAID-specific barriers, the USAID Team Leads and award management staff played a role in ensuring the successful use of DE data and recommendations. For example, Lab teams did not wait until the end of the evaluation to use data from the Developmental Evaluator.

**Research Question 3: What do key informants consider to be the value (added or lost) of conducting a DE compared to a traditional evaluation approach?**

Based on the analysis of the Value of Developmental Evaluation Survey, which included responses from 16 stakeholders (70% response rate)– the WDI team found:

1. The majority of survey respondents thought the Developmental Evaluator addressed the needs of their organizations while incorporating an awareness of their complexities and also helping to facilitate adaptations to their programming. Of the 15 respondents who answered the question, 11 (73%) said that the Uptake DE was *much better* than traditional evaluation because it integrated the complexities of the local environment and provided timely feedback.
2. Respondents shared similar thoughts on the value of the Uptake DE, regardless of whether they had self-identified as being *somewhat involved* or *very involved* in the Uptake DE.
3. When reporting how the Uptake DE was most valuable, respondents emphasized the Uptake DE’s ability to integrate data into strategy, decision-making, and adaptation; provide dedicated attention from a skilled evaluator; and improve stakeholder communication and relationships.
4. Of the 12 respondents who answered the question, 100% of them said that they would recommend the DE approach to other organizations.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the combined findings of the three research questions outlined above, the WDI team identified eight key recommendations. These recommendations are organized into themes that follow the order in which one would execute a DE, from deciding whether to select DE as the evaluative approach, to launching a DE, to closing out a DE successfully.

Theme	Recommendations
<b>Selecting</b> DE as the evaluative approach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confirm that a learning culture exists within the organization before selecting the DE approach.</li> <li>2. Determine the scope of work based on the time frame to best meet stakeholder needs.</li> </ol>
<b>Launching</b> a DE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Select the right Developmental Evaluator for your team.</li> <li>4. Develop familiarity with stakeholders to include them in DE design and implementation.</li> <li>5. Produce quick wins for stakeholders to increase buy-in for the DE.</li> </ol>
<b>Implementing</b> a DE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Acknowledge that the role of the Developmental Evaluator will evolve over time and expect it to do so.</li> </ol>
<b>Utilizing data</b> for decision-making in a DE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Be prepared to help mobilize stakeholders to make data-driven changes.</li> </ol>
<b>Closing</b> out a DE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Take active steps to close out the Developmental Evaluator’s integration with the stakeholder teams.</li> </ol>