



THE DEPA-MERL CONSORTIUM

2020



Advancing the Use of Developmental Evaluation

A summary of key questions answered during a multiyear study of developmental evaluations implemented at USAID

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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| D2FTF | Digital Development for Feed the Future |
| DE | Developmental evaluation |
| DEPA-MERL | Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity-Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning |
| FCF DE | Family Care First in Cambodia Developmental Evaluation |
| MERL | Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning |
| Search | Search for Common Ground |
| 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, Search for Common Ground, and the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION PILOT ACTIVITY-MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING (DEPA-MERL) BACKGROUND

DEPA-MERL—situated in the U.S. 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 (DE) in the USAID context. DE was created to evaluate innovative programs that operate in complex environments and are thus expected to adapt over time.

REPORT PURPOSE AND EVALUATION BACKGROUND

Since 2016, there have been three DEPA-MERL DE pilots. This report shares findings and lessons learned from across the experiences to facilitate learning from the implementation of DE in the USAID context. Findings shared in this report are based on an independent across-case analysis conducted by one of the DEPA-MERL consortium partner organizations: the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan. The WDI team collected data to answer the following four 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, such as 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 stakeholders consider to be the value (added or lost) of conducting a DE compared to a traditional evaluation approach?
- Research Question 4: What are the key lessons learned from building and managing buy-in for the DE approach in the USAID context?

To answer these questions, a mixed-methods approach was used and included outcome harvesting, document reviews, semi-structured interviews with the Developmental Evaluators and DE stakeholders, and an electronic survey administered to stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

Should DE be used in the USAID context? Findings from this research suggest, *yes, DE can be an appropriate and valuable evaluation approach in the USAID context*—but only if it is supported by leadership, has the right Developmental Evaluator, and is used strategically to support innovative programming. Based on combined findings from the four research questions, WDI offers the following crosscutting conclusions:

- DE can support the adaptive management of USAID programs in complex settings, but the level and benefit of any adaptations are highly dependent on the context and the USAID teams participating in DE.
- While DE stakeholders highly recommend DE, there are barriers that must be overcome and managed for a DE to be successful in the USAID context.

- Buy-in for DE needs to be developed at the start of DE and continually maintained throughout the DE’s period of performance.
- DE can provide added value to USAID programs, but it is not a substitute for other evaluation approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The WDI team offers eight key recommendations for implementing DE in the USAID context. The recommendations are organized into themes that follow the order that one would execute a DE. As much as possible, the recommendations are meant to offer holistic and crosscutting guidance that does not draw from a single DE, research question, or finding. Rather, they should be considered general best practices based on findings from across the three DE pilots conducted by DEPA-MERL.

| Stage of Implementation | Recommendations |
|--|---|
| Selecting DE as the evaluative approach | 1. Confirm that DE is the right fit for the USAID context and team |
| Launching a DE | 2. Select the right Developmental Evaluator for the team 3. Use targeted activities to increase USAID stakeholders’ buy-in and familiarity with DE 4. Make sure the Developmental Evaluator is fully embedded in the USAID team and context |
| Implementing a DE | 5. Work with a diverse set of DE champions who can help support the Developmental Evaluator 6. Bolster the Developmental Evaluator’s autonomy to conduct independent, objective, and utilization-focused evaluation activities |
| Using DE data for decision-making | 7. Be prepared to help mobilize USAID stakeholders to make data-driven changes |
| Closing out a DE | 8. Take steps to close out the DE and transition the Developmental Evaluator’s responsibilities to the USAID stakeholder 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, such as in the USAID context?

A systematic review of 39 outcomes of the DE (henceforth called DE outcomes), which were harvested during two DEPA-MERL DE pilots,¹ revealed that DEs can capture, promote, and enable the utilization

¹ Using the six-step outcome harvesting approach, the WDI team harvested 39 DE outcomes in total (17 DE outcomes were harvested during the FCF DE and 22 DE outcomes were harvested during the Uptake DE). Due to timing and resource constraints, outcome harvesting was not used to study the attempted DE with a large USAID Bureau.

of emergent learnings in a variety of ways within the USAID context. The WDI team presents the following key takeaways:

1. DE outcomes in the USAID context can present as follows: (a) large or small, (b) positive or negative, (c) program- or sector-level, or (d) relational- or institutional-level changes.
2. The DEs helped catalyze several adaptations to each program's strategy based on data collected and shared by the Developmental Evaluators. Jointly, two DEs *captured* (n = 6), *promoted* (n = 8), and *enabled the utilization* (n = 25) of emergent learnings throughout their implementation.²
3. The DEs provided value to DE stakeholders in a wide variety of areas: from improved knowledge management and sustainability planning to Mission engagement. The largest number of DE outcomes (36%; 14 of 39 total outcomes across the two DEs) resulted in improved operations for DE stakeholders. Improved operations included refining program activities, updating branding or communication, and establishing new operating procedures.

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

Data from interviews with the Developmental Evaluators and with DE stakeholders on barriers and enablers to the implementation of the DE methodology, revealed the following:

1. Several factors that influenced DE implementation in the USAID context were discovered. Further analysis revealed that each factor could serve as both a barrier and an enabler to DE.
2. Overall, *skills of the Developmental Evaluator, data collection and sharing, and data utilization* (by the stakeholders participating in the DE) were the top enabling factors. *Leadership* (of the program being evaluated) and *USAID dynamics*³ were the largest barriers to DE implementation.
3. The prevalence of different factors varied overtime depending on the stage of the DE.
4. As a funding partner and key stakeholder, certain USAID staff involved in a DE play a critical role in managing the barriers and enablers to DE.

Research Question 3: What do key stakeholders 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 30 stakeholders across the two DEs, the WDI team found the following:

² The "role of the DE" is incremental in nature because each subsequent subcategory builds off the previous category. For example, if the role of the DE was to *enable the utilization* of an emergent learning, then the DE needed to first *capture* and *promote* that learning. Each outcome was categorized as one category. For example, if the DE *captured* an emergent learning and then subsequently shared or *promoted* a related recommendation, the outcome was categorized as *promote*, not *capture*.

³ The dynamics related to USAID culture and/or administrative processes that were perceived as affecting DE implementation.

1. Ninety-six percent of survey respondents said they would recommend DE to other organizations. Respondents' top reasons for recommending DE were that it: (a) provided data-driven recommendations in real-time, (b) improved strategic management and evaluative thinking, (c) offered a fundamentally different approach to evaluation, and (d) included a Developmental Evaluator who is embedded within the teams.
2. The Developmental Evaluators themselves were one of the biggest reported sources of added value of DE. The intimate nature of the Developmental Evaluators' embeddedness allowed them to share useful and timely information with stakeholders in a way that was understanding of their needs and complexities.
3. Compared to other evaluation approaches, such as a performance evaluation, respondents said that DE was better because it was aware of complexities in the local environment, allowed for evidenced-based decision-making, facilitated adaptations to their program, and provided feedback in a timelier manner.
4. Some stakeholders lacked data to form a judgment on DE cost-effectiveness and time savings. More than half of respondents (52%) said they did not know how cost-effective their DE was. In addition, nearly a quarter of all respondents (24%) did not know if the DEs resulted in more time savings for their teams.

Research Question 4: What are the key lessons learned from building and managing buy-in for the DE approach in the USAID context?

Research from the three DEs shows that buy-in for the DE changes over time and can vary significantly across stakeholders. One of the most notable learnings was that the level of stakeholder buy-in for DE exists on a continuum. Six critical steps for building DE buy-in in the USAID context were identified: (a) selecting DE as the evaluative approach, (b) hiring the Developmental Evaluator, (c) educating DE stakeholders on the DE approach, (d) embedding the Developmental Evaluator, (e) collecting and sharing DE data effectively, and (f) adapting the program/innovation regularly based on DE data.