



# DEVELOPMENT EVALUATION PILOT ACTIVITY (DEPA-MERL)

The Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity (DEPA-MERL) project is one of the first attempts to introduce Developmental Evaluation (DE) to USAID. This project provides high quality DEs to interested Operating Units (OUs) while also rigorously collecting and widely disseminating learning about how to conduct DEs in the Agency’s unique context.

## THE CHALLENGE

For complex interventions or new innovations, traditional midterm and end line evaluations can occur too late to aid in programmatic fine tuning and adaptation. Many lack the flexibility to be truly user and use-focused, resulting in reports that do not get read, are not easily understood by intended stakeholders, or which do not address users’ most pressing needs. They also are often aimed at helping interventions reach pre-defined outcomes, rather than work on systems change or changes to program logic which would require the redefinition of outputs and outcomes.

## THE INNOVATION

Traditional approaches to monitoring and evaluation focus on making existing processes, structures and systems more effective. DE is an approach to use evaluative thinking and feedback to continuously adapt interventions. Deploying various data collection activities and methods on an as-needed basis, evaluators facilitate real-time, evidence-based reflection and decision-making.

DE takes into account the entire complex dynamic system in which the program, project or activity is taking place. DE provides an approach to evaluation that is quick, ongoing, and takes an iterative approach to data collection, analysis and feedback that contributes to timely changes throughout the project cycle and allows for system changes as well as changes in targeted outcomes. Deliverables are ongoing and defined by the users and the evaluator(s) iteratively; and the approach and outcomes of the DE changes over time as programmatic needs shift.



**Tools:** Embedded evaluators, methods tailored to emerging needs, network mapping, outcome mapping, contribution analysis



**Partners:** Social Impact (prime), Search for Common Ground, The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan



**Funding mechanism:** Contract (buy-in option for USAID operating units)



**Period of performance:**  
10/01/2015 – 9/30/2024



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## THE APPROACH

In DE, one or more evaluators are embedded in program teams, ideally on a full-time basis; and working with teams to contribute to modifications in program design and targeted outcomes throughout implementation. Although there is no minimum or maximum length of time for DEs, they ideally span from the program design stage through closeout.

DEs are methodologically agnostic and utilization focused. DE does not prescribe a single methodological design, tool, or framework – the evaluation approach taken is based on emerging needs. Evaluators continuously collect data and feed it back into the program team so that programs can adapt accordingly. Rather than a typical evaluation report, DE deliverables range greatly and vary over the life of the engagement. They might include options memos, network maps, guidebooks, dashboards, infographics, and/or presentations, to name a few.

DE is a highly versatile approach and is well suited for programs under flexible procurement mechanisms in which implementation is likely to change in response to emerging conditions on the ground. DE is particularly useful in programs with untested or incomplete theories of change, or where objectives may shift in response to contextual changes. Given the innovation and complexity orientation, DE is best suited for organizations which have:

- » A culture suited to exploration, inquiry, and innovation, and critical mass of staff with corresponding attitudes;
- » Financial and contractual structures to allow for adaptation of the process or intervention;
- » A high degree of uncertainty about the path forward;
- » Resources available for ongoing exploration;
- » Management and staff that are in agreement about the innovation and willing to take risks; and
- » An iterative loop of option generation, testing, and selection.

## COMPLETED PILOTS

The following Operating Units commissioned DE pilots with DEPA-MERL:

DEPA supported **USAID DCHA/DRG & USAID/Cambodia** to adapt its collective impact model which was aimed at increasing the number of children living in safe, family-based care. The DE helped the team increase inclusivity, redefine roles, and adjust their implementation to be more effective.

DEPA worked with multiple teams within the **USAID/Global Development Lab** to undertake and systematize learning about the viability of different approaches to scale and sustain innovations within and beyond the Agency. The DE resulted in numerous resources and new practices for these teams to improve their engagement, effectiveness, and sustainability.

DEPA is concluding a DE with the **USAID/Bureau of Food Security** which sought to develop new knowledge management solutions and approaches within the context of the USAID Transformation, pivoting to a more Mission service-oriented mode. Report forthcoming.