Integrating MERL with program design – The BalanceD-MERL approach

6th September 2018



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Institute for Development Impact

WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Search for Common Ground

What is our plan today?

1. **Why did we develop the BalanceD-MERL approach?** ~ 5 min
2. **Summary of the BalanceD-MERL approach** ~5 min
3. **Introduction to the tools, case study, and lessons learned** ~15 min
4. **Questions** ~5 min
5. **Engagement with the audience** ~30 min



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Before we begin,

Think about the last program you've worked on. Think about when did program leadership and staff start talking about and planning for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL).

Was it before, after, or during the design of the program?

What are some of the key tensions and challenges we have seen so far in program and MERL implementation?

Along the program spectrum	Along the MERL spectrum
	MERL and program design teams work in silos
Misalignment of program with context and key stakeholder needs	
	Compromise in evidence quality and integrity
Unintended negative consequences of programs	
	MERL burden on key stakeholders
Un-informed decision-making leading to ineffective activities	

With leadership

- Poor commitment to MERL and demand in MERL
- Lack of competency in MERL
- Mismanagement of MERL expectations

What did we find in our search for solutions to address these challenges?

Organizations recognize the challenges posed by complex programs and are looking for solutions → Example: USAID's MERLIN program and Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach

Principles can guide the improved execution of MERL → Example: Lean Research by MIT's D-LAB

Example: CART principles by IPA

Need for integration of MERL with program design for good program management and adaptive management → BalanceD-MERL

Lean Research Principles: right-size, relevant, respectful and rigorous; CART principles are credible, actionable, responsible and transportable

Here are some of the resources we reviewed to inform our development of our forthcoming BalanceD-MERL tools: AEA principles, Base of the Pyramid Impact Assessment Framework, Nesta's Standards of Evidence, UN Evaluability Assessment Template , DAC Guidelines and Reference Series Quality Standards for Development Evaluation, Good Governance Institute's 'Good governance outcomes for CCGs: A maturity matrix to support development and improvement of CCGs', USAID's Collaborating, Learning and Adapting materials, Acumen's Lean Data materials, Search for Common Ground's Designing for results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs, DFID's Monitoring and evaluation framework: Breaking the cycle: saving lives and protecting the future, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria's Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit, Hewlett Foundation's Evaluation Principles and Practices, Overseas Development Institute's Learning how to learn: eight lessons for impact evaluations that make a difference, UNDP's Handbook on planning, monitoring and evaluating for development results, UNITAR's Monitoring and Evaluation Policy Framework and more.

What is the BalanceD-MERL approach?

Hypothesis

- Deliberate integration of MERL with program design to enable utilization-focused MERL
- Application of the BalanceD-MERL principles into D-MERL activities to enable continuous learning

Principles

Relevant	**Right-sized**
Responsible	**Trustworthy**

How to apply the BalanceD-MERL approach?

- During program design, MERL team and program staff, co-develop the components of the MERL Strategy Template (developed by our consortium partner – Institute for Development Impact – I4DI)
- During the life of the program, MERL team and program staff, implement the principles by using the Maturity Matrix

What is the BalanceD-MERL Maturity Matrix?

Still under development



A framework intended to integrate design with MERL while simultaneously improving upon:

- **Program design and execution**
- **MERL design and execution**

Every row of the matrix is linked to the scope of the definitions of the principles			
Levels on the application of the principles	**Unbalanced**	**Emergent**	**Balanced**
Relevant			
Right-size			
Responsible			
Trustworthy			

Picture credit: https://unsplash.com/photos/KcAE4ORTGbk and https://unsplash.com/photos/7nrsVjvALnA

An introduction to the case study on the Women + Water Global Development Alliance



Goals of the report out:

1. Introduce the BalanceD-MERL approach
2. Share:
    - How we used the approach
    - The MERL Strategy Template
    - Key takeaways from using the approach
    - Action-items for MERL teams, program staff, and leadership based on each takeaway

The publication will be available in October 2018

Photo credit: Gap, Inc. http://www.gapincsustainability.com/environment/creating-solutions-women-water

What is the MERL Strategy Template?

This template was developed by our consortium partner- Institute for Development Impact (I4DI)

Table of Contents
Theory of change
Risk matrix
Evaluation matrix
Key performance indicators with performance indicator reference data (e.g. USAID PIRS)
Research design and methods for data collection
Analysis and reporting plans (including program Management Information System)
Collaborating, Learning and Adapting plans
Timeline of MERL activities, over the life of the program
Roles and responsibilities for MERL
Level of effort and budget estimates
Data quality assurance plans



Photo credit: https://unsplash.com/photos/v4RdUJhoc88

What are some of the lessons confirmed or key takeaways from this engagement?

Areas	Key takeaway
Utilization focused MERL	Integration of MERL with program design can improve both program design and MERL activities (D-MERL) in a cost-friendly manner and also enable good program management. Integration is possible through the MERL team's and program staff's co-development of the theory of change and subsequent MERL activities, all done during the program design phase.
	Organizations tend to overlook the design and implementation of learning activities necessary for adaptive management of their programs and thus either fail to implement adaptive management or do so in an ad-hoc manner, both of which result in missed opportunities to improve the program in real-time.
Relationship building, expectation setting, and resource management	While often overlooked and underestimated, differences in culture, working styles, and MERL competence among organizations in a partnership can heavily drain resources and affect timelines, unless managed head-on and upfront.
Accuracy in MERL and resource management	Without a mature program design, the theory of change cannot be co-developed accurately and in a timely manner. All subsequent MERL activities, designed based on the theory of change, then suffer the same fate, resulting in a loss of resources

We have questions for you!

- Is it sufficient on how we have included technology into our products? Where else can we include technology?
- Are the action items we presented realistic? What have we missed?
- What best practices have you used to integrate MERL with the program design?
- What messaging got you most interested or excited about BalanceD-MERL?
- Come find us during the conference to share more of your feedback –we'd love to connect one-on-one!
- You can also email us at yaquta@umich.edu and hmoehle@umich.edu

Acknowledgements and disclaimers

- Acknowledgement: This publication was produced by The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI) in collaboration with World Vision (WV) under the BalanceD-MERL Program, Cooperative Agreement Number AID-OAA-A-15-00061, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

- Disclaimer: This study/ report/ audio/ visual/other information/ media product (specify) is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the USAID. The contents are the responsibility of WDI and WV do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Thanks!



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Annex

There are four principles of BalanceD-MERL

Still under development

Relevant

D-MERL is informed by development theory and is shaped by the local people, context, and strategy. D-MERL responds to MERL evidence that focuses on how these characteristics evolve over time.

Right-size

D-MERL is a match between resources (people, time, and money) and goals. D-MERL activities, processes, and methods are coordinated and efficient. D-MERL processes and data are non-duplicative and meet program management and compliance needs.

Responsible

D-MERL is responsible when it goes beyond the "Do No Harm" principle to engage respectfully, ethically, and sensitively with the primary intended users and local partners. D-MERL is transparent and accountable.

Trustworthy

D-MERL is trustworthy when it is conducted according to standards of rigor appropriate to context, constraints, and/or intended use of the data. D-MERL is internally and externally valid, reliable, and objective, ensuring integrity of both the process and results.

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