

# Developmental Evaluation: A Practical Approach to CLA Implementation

## What is CLA and why should I care?

CLA stands for collaborating, learning, and adapting. Beyond being an Agency-mandated approach (see ADS 201.3.5.19), CLA is crucial to improving the effectiveness of our programming. While most agree that working together and adapting programming is important, unfortunately, CLA is not often systematically occurring; or is not intentionally resourced. When CLA doesn't happen, programming loses an opportunity to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance.

## What is DE and how does it fit in?

Developmental Evaluation (DE) is an approach to continuous adaptation of interventions through the use of evaluative thinking and tools. It includes having one or more evaluators integrated into the implementation team on a full time basis. DEs are methodologically agnostic and utilization-focused. They adjust as the project changes, and deliver contextualized and emergent findings on an ongoing basis to inform learning and adapting across and within teams. (For more of an introduction to DE, see [here](#)). **DE can serve as a key way to operationalize CLA.** See Table I on how the DE approach can operationalize the concepts of CLA.

## Should I consider DE as an option to practically implement CLA?

There are three key contextual factors that affect DE feasibility and appropriateness:

### Uncertainty

DEs are designed to support innovative programs with untested theories of change, uncertain environments, or other unknowns. If there are big questions about the operating context, expected outcomes, or underlying assumptions of the intervention, the DE approach can help navigate those challenges.




### Flexibility

DEs may recommend significant adaptations. Therefore, program stakeholders, especially leadership, and contracting mechanisms must be sufficiently willing and able to make changes. Making changes (e.g., to scopes, focal areas, or processes) may come with risks, so stakeholders should be aware of this from the outset. This might include changes.

### Budget

DEs embed evaluators in to a program team, which can result in an overall price tag that is higher than the cost of a typical performance evaluation. Programs hosting a DE must have the budget to hire at least one person full-time and cover associated costs, e.g. office space, supplies, etc.

# Table 1: Operationalizing CLA through DE

Concept	What does it mean?	How does DE operationalize it?
<b>Collaboration</b> 	Engagement with internal and external stakeholders, especially with regard to informing decision making	DEs ensure an evaluator is part of the team, engaging with a variety of stakeholders to design the evaluation iteratively; as well as to develop research questions, interpret data, and understand/implement recommendations.
<b>Learning</b> 	Consulting, generating, and adding to existing evidence bases, especially in relation to developing and testing theories of change and monitoring context and responding to changes	DEs usually start with 1-2 guiding research questions. They then generate evidence about the interventions as well as their dynamics, processes, and implementation. DEs monitor the context, determine whether assumptions hold true, and why changes are happening. They also document learning over time so that formal and informal discussions and decisions are captured and are able to be used and reflected on in the future. Further, DEs are effective at developing a learning culture within the activity or project.
<b>Adapting</b> 	Pausing to reflect, especially to consider new evidence to inform course correction or to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities, and to make change.	Evaluators' primary responsibility is to reflect on the data collected, help decision makers interpret data, and facilitate evidence-based adaptations based on the analyses. DEs make recommendations for program adaptation on a continuous basis. As the project or activity does or does not take up these recommendations, the DE itself adapts - collecting new evidence to see how implemented recommendations are or are not working.

To learn about DE (and/or procure one), contact the DEPA-MERL consortium:

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