



KEY LESSONS FROM AN ATTEMPTED DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION PILOT

Bureau for Food Security (BFS)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BFS	Bureau for Food Security
DE	Developmental evaluation
DEPA-MERL	Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity-Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
Search	Search for Common Ground
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WDI	William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan

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CONSORTIUM INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Developmental evaluation (DE) is an emerging approach in international development and although several DEs have been conducted within USAID, there is still much to be learned from these experiences. By sharing lessons and applying them to future DEs, USAID can improve DE implementation and success rates, reduce delays in DE start-up, and strengthen its overall cost-effectiveness.

This short brief captures six key lessons learned¹ from the [Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity's](#) (DEPA-MERL) experience trying to launch a DE within the Bureau for Food Security (BFS). Offered from the perspective of the Developmental Evaluator and DEPA-MERL, these lessons focus closely on the various factors that impacted the DE start-up and buy-in processes. They are broadly applicable and can be used by USAID (or other interested practitioners) to decide whether or not to conduct or participate in a DE.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION PILOT ACTIVITY

In response to the growing interest and knowledge gaps in DE, the U.S. Global Development Lab at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned DEPA-MERL as part of a larger Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) program to test promising new practices in monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning in the Agency context.

DEPA-MERL is led by Social Impact, Inc. (SI) in partnership with Search for Common Ground (Search) and the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI). SI and Search oversee and manage DE pilots. WDI, on the other hand, serves as DEPA-MERL's learning agenda partner. To facilitate learning, WDI collects data from Developmental Evaluators and DE stakeholders involved in the pilots to capture and share learning on the implementation of DEs in the USAID context.

Since 2015, DEPA-MERL has implemented three DE pilots, assessed the potential of many other pilots, created a number of resources on DE management and implementation, and has managed a community of practice of Developmental Evaluators.

DE PILOT SUMMARY

DEPA-MERL engaged with BFS in Washington D.C. from December 2018 to September 2019. The transition from BFS to the proposed Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS) offered a unique opportunity for the Bureau to use DE to examine its knowledge management practices and improve its processes and systems around evidence-based decision making. BFS sought to build a coherent and efficient knowledge management system that would meet the needs of the future RFS, including its various centers, offices and Mission-based counterparts. DE was seen by certain senior leadership at BFS as a creative, yet evidence-based approach that could help inform knowledge management within the new organizational structure. Further, they believed the DE would serve BFS' goal to maintain and improve upon its historically robust

Want more information on implementing DE?

DEPA-MERL created two practical guides for audiences interested in conducting DEs:

- [Implementing Developmental Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Funders](#)
- [Implementing Developmental Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Evaluators and Administrators](#)

¹ Data on lessons learned were gathered using semi-structured telephone interviews, including six interviews with the BFS Developmental Evaluator and three interviews with BFS DE stakeholders.

evaluation culture during its transition to RFS.

“The idea was that the DE would be providing recommendations for how we [at BFS] did knowledge management as a Bureau to inform our Transformation into RFS. The recommendations would then be feeding into the various processes that were involved in the Transformation.”

– BFS Stakeholder

Unfortunately, in the case of the BFS pilot, the DE never fully launched. The intended outcomes of the attempted DE were not realized for a variety of reasons. Although this experience was markedly different than the other DEPA-MERL DE pilots, it is not an exception to other DEs that have struggled to realize their intended objectives. By sharing these barriers, as well as the lessons learned from the experience, DEPA-MERL hopes to offer the potential to improve on forthcoming DEs at USAID.

WHY DIDN'T DE WORK? KEY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED IMPLEMENTATION

As a strategic and adaptive approach to evaluation, DE helps teams make data-driven changes. DE provides a quick, ongoing, and iterative approach to data collection, analysis, and feedback that contributes to timely changes throughout the project cycle. DE allows for system changes as well as changes in targeted outcomes. However, these benefits can only be realized if the DE is successfully launched.

The main impediments to the successful launch of the DE were:

1. **The government shutdown.** The 35-day U.S. Government shutdown from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019 contributed to high-levels of complexity and situational uncertainty that effectively slowed down and complicated the DE start-up processes. In particular, the shutdown slowed momentum of the DE in two critical ways. First, it created a backlog in facilities clearance and badging processes for the Developmental Evaluator, impacting her ability to be physically co-located with the BFS team. Second, it halted communication and engagement between the Developmental Evaluator and DE stakeholders, including key decision makers.
2. **During the Transformation at USAID, BFS lacked sufficient structure to support DE.** Although DE is generally thought to serve stakeholders well during times of high uncertainty and complexity, the experience with BFS showed that DE does not work well when organizational structure is in a state of temporary disorder or confusion. As one BFS stakeholder commented, “we are in such a transition point... it almost seemed like we were a little too fluid to really benefit from a DE.” Given the fluid structure of BFS, there was a general lack of understanding among BFS staff about who could make what types of decisions, especially as they waited for high-level changes to take effect. Furthermore, there was a high level of turnover among BFS staff who had the authority to make decisions about the DE’s direction, which further exacerbated this issue. “As part of the Transformation, from my perspective, we kind of lost all structure,” said one BFS staff member. With the Transformation, BFS stakeholders and decision makers were preoccupied with “trying to figure out how things fit together” and therefore had limited capacity to engage in a successful DE start-up process.

“We were excited about DE but the folks we were trying to get to use DE, they didn’t necessarily have a clue. Trying to get our excitement across to them during this particular period [in USAID’s Transformation] was a bit of a challenge.”

– BFS Stakeholder

During a Developmental Evaluation clinic organized by DEPA-MERL and a call conducted with Michael Quinn Patton, who is considered the founder of DE, the WDI team discussed this factor further. Patton emphasized “those situations need organizational development, not DE. They need clarity and purpose, not someone to tell them what’s going on.”

- 3. The Developmental Evaluator was never fully embedded within a BFS project team.** Having a Developmental Evaluator embedded within a team is a critical component of DE success. At the start of the DE, it had not been decided which BFS team the Developmental Evaluator would be working with most closely. This caused issues in engaging in DE start up activities (e.g., the Acculturation Workshop² and stakeholder interviews). In the end, the BFS Developmental Evaluator was never successfully integrated with a specific team at BFS, which served as a major impediment to building DE buy-in.

While each of the three factors served as an important and unique barrier, the *combination* of these factors was perhaps the largest hindrance to the DE’s success. They were concurrent and dynamically interacting impediments that, together, complicated DE implementation more than any one factor alone. For example, the timeline for the Transformation was initially perceived as being ideal and well-matched to the implementation schedule of the DE. The DE work was intended to provide data and information that would feedback into specific areas that need to be discussed and decided about the Transformation. Because of the shutdown and the lack of structure at BFS, however, the parallel timelines for the Transformation and DE implementation became increasingly out of sync. These shifting timelines, compounded with the fact that the Developmental Evaluator was never fully embedded within BFS, made it even more difficult to implement DE. In fact, BFS and DEPA-MERL never reached agreement on a defined scope of work or evaluation questions for the DE.

KEY LESSONS

I. TOO MUCH UNCERTAINTY AND LACK OF INFORMATION MAKES IT HARD TO IMPLEMENT DE

The Developmental Evaluator’s experience engaging in DE was difficult given how much change and uncertainty occurred related to the Transformation of USAID, particularly with respect to BFS’ transition to RFS. It slowed the DE’s start-up activities as well as DEPA-MERL’s ability to promote buy-in for the DE because relevant staff felt a general lack of agency to promote or drive change.

The high situational uncertainty and lack of information during the Transformation also impacted the Developmental Evaluator’s ability to gather accurate data. Often stakeholders could not answer the Developmental Evaluator’s questions because either they were not privy to the information, or they could

² The Acculturation Workshop is typically a kick-off meeting conducted by the Developmental Evaluator with stakeholders. It seeks to a) educate participants about DE and its potential benefits for the program; b) refine research questions that the evaluation would explore and begin developing an evaluation work plan; and c) establish common expectations, roles, responsibilities, and communication protocols among stakeholders to ensure everyone was on the same page. These workshops generate interest and buy-in for the DE, which are critical to its ultimate success.

not share the information due to USAID’s human resource policies that limit disclosure. A couple months into the attempted DE, the Developmental Evaluator reflected that the ongoing change process occurring at the Bureau contributed to a general lack of information which slowed DE progress. “Folks can’t tell me something because they also don’t know it,” she said. “Every day there is something semi-major that shifts the work of the Bureau. It’s very unstable.”

“Every day there is something semi-major that shifts the work of the Bureau. It’s very unstable... For me, the biggest impediment is trying to convince people that [the DE] can [actually] affect change.”

– BFS Developmental Evaluator

Having the DE happen concurrently with the restructuring of BFS contributed to staff turnover, which also slowed the DE’s ability to make progress. Additionally, the high uncertainty associated with the Transformation inhibited people from believing that the DE would actually be able to affect change. For the Developmental Evaluator, “the biggest impediment ...[was] trying to convince people that you [the DE] can [actually] affect change” when stakeholders did not have any control over certain outcomes related to the transition.

2. TAKE TIME TO BUILD DECISION MAKERS’ BUY-IN FOR DE & MAKE SURE THEY KNOW HOW TO ENGAGE IN DE

Without highly engaged stakeholders, a DE cannot facilitate adaptive management of a program, project, or activity. To achieve buy-in, ideally, decision makers need to be excited by the topical focus of the DE and be aware of how they should engage in the DE. “It was not, perhaps, the wisest idea to pick knowledge management as a first [topic area] for the DE,” said one BFS stakeholder, “If you are going to do a DE... do it with something that people are really driven and excited about. [With] knowledge management, everyone gives lip service to it ... but when push comes to shove, it will go on to the backburner, if not off the stove top completely.” The stakeholder also reflected on how he and a colleague failed to garner buy-in among other key BFS staff: “We didn’t lay the groundwork [for others to engage in the DE]... [we had] seen where DE had worked before and [were] wanting to apply it to something. Our excitement was an internal bubble kind ... there wasn’t enough done to share that excitement with others... it became something of a rush job that led to challenges right from the start.”

Furthermore, strategies that had worked in previous DEPA-MERL pilots, namely the use of “quick-wins” to garner buy-in, did not result in the same positive outcomes. This was not as straightforward in the BFS DE. For example, the Developmental Evaluator conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise for a team, but key decision makers who were involved in the process and who requested the product, had differing ideas on the core audience should be. Hence, what would have normally been a quick win to gather DE support from stakeholders did not generate the intended outcome.

“We did not get the level of buy-in necessary for it [DE] to take root.”

– BFS Stakeholder

Additionally, significant staff attrition in BFS impacted decision makers’ buy-in and engagement in the DE (as well as the Developmental Evaluator’s ability to collect data to continue building buy-in). Staff attrition Turnover impacted the DE in two ways. First, when a stakeholder left USAID, their DE tasks would fall upon another person who, in most cases, would then deprioritize the DE in favor of other more urgent priorities (which was further compounded by the fact that the same amount of work fell to an increasingly smaller staff pool). Secondly, such circumstantial difficulties contributed to poor communication channels,

which created confusion about the general goal and direction of the DE for BFS stakeholders as well as for the Developmental Evaluator.

DE implementers must take the time and effort to build stakeholder buy-in. Otherwise, the DE will likely not progress past the start-up phase. It is critical that stakeholders understand (and buy into) the role they are expected to play within the DE. Being a silent observer of DE is not sufficient. Stakeholders who have bought into the idea that DE is a useful and valuable approach to use within their team also need to have the understanding that they need to *engage* in DE for it to be helpful. They can engage in DE by inviting the Developmental Evaluator to participate in team meetings, participating in workshops and exercises related to the DE evaluation questions, or implementing adaptations based on DE data and findings. “That willingness to engage ... that is going to be the key [to DE success],” said one BFS stakeholder. The BFS Developmental Evaluator added, “whoever is managing the overall DE should say what is expected of the client [DE stakeholders] early on.” She said, “stakeholders can [only] be an asset and an enabler if they know what is expected of them.” It is also important to understand the motivations behind why the DE approach is chosen in the first place, especially given that DE should only be used in certain conditions.

3. TOO MANY COMPETING PRIORITIES CAN HINDER DE SUCCESS

From the very beginning, the BFS Developmental Evaluator had a difficult experience trying to get stakeholders and decision makers to prioritize the DE amid other competing priorities. As shared by the Developmental Evaluator: “I am not sure that the DE is being prioritized at the right level.” For example, when scheduling the initial Acculturation Workshop, it was very hard to nail down a date or get BFS stakeholders and decision makers to commit to a time.

Stakeholders faced a myriad of competing tasks and responsibilities which disrupted their ability to engage meaningfully in the DE. These competing priorities included busy schedules and travel, which limited their engagement with the Developmental Evaluator and participation in DE activities, as well as their need to complete other, often more time-sensitive tasks. Additionally, it seemed that stakeholders did not always understand what value the DE could bring to them³. For example, there was one instance where BFS stakeholders chose to engage another external mechanism in a scope of work that DEPA-MERL believed the DE could have completed. Likewise, the Developmental Evaluator reflected that she sometimes felt seen only as “an extra pair of hands” that could assist BFS with isolated activities, as opposed to being regarded as a Developmental Evaluator whose goal is to expressly facilitate DE implementation and adaptive management.

Is it possible to engage in DE if you have a busy workload?

Yes! It is possible for busy stakeholders to participate in a DE. When stakeholders are faced with many competing tasks, it is important to recognize what those responsibilities are and how they will be managed during DE implementation. Stakeholders will need to select DE as the appropriate path forward—explicitly agreeing that DE is approach they will use to help accomplish their objectives. “*The biggest hurdle,*” reflected the BFS Developmental Evaluator, “*is that they [BFS decision makers] haven’t decided that DE is the pathway they want to use to take forward.*” Without an expressed commitment from decision makers, the DE will fail to be prioritized among other competing priorities. Likewise, there is a need for both action and resources behind the DE for it to be prioritized and implemented.

³ Many of the stakeholders that the Developmental Evaluator interacted with most often did not attend (or were not invited to) the DE Acculturation Workshop, which may have contributed to their lack of familiarity with/understanding of the DE approach.

Overall, it is important to understand how stakeholder’s parallel priorities may affect their ability to effectively engage in DE. BFS itself was in a state of flux, and the primary emphasis was on how to enable a smooth transformation from BFS to RFS (as part of the larger Transformation occurring at USAID). “If your [to-do] list has too many things,” said the Developmental Evaluator, “which ones are absolutely necessary or non-negotiable? And does DE fit in the non-negotiable [category] or is it in the nice to have [category]?”

4. IT IS CRITICAL TO EMPOWER THE DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATOR TO WORK AUTONOMOUSLY

In DE, it is important that the Developmental Evaluator feels empowered to make independent decisions and control the direction of the evaluation activities. With BFS, unfortunately, the Developmental Evaluator didn’t feel this way. Often, she lacked sufficient permission from leadership to make independent decisions, to ask questions that would allow her to serve as an autonomous Evaluator and to be vocal to share her observations. A few factors contributed to this lack of empowerment and autonomy, including:

- **Lack of sufficient onboarding for the Developmental Evaluator.** The BFS Developmental Evaluator did not receive an official onboarding orientation and was not formally introduced to the BFS team at the start of the DE, which left her feeling isolated at times. Although she had heard of instances where she was introduced in meetings without her being present, she lacked sufficient opportunities to vocalize her role or the intent of the DE. She stated that “If this [DE] is to be attempted again, the Developmental Evaluator should get a more clear onboarding process.” Without onboarding she said, “it doesn’t feel like you belong, it feels like you are an outsider all of the time.” Proper onboarding to the BFS team could have empowered her to work more freely as an embedded member of that team.

“[The Developmental Evaluator] needs to have an orientation... [and] to be introduced [to the entire team] at an all-hands meeting. I think that would help with [their] empowerment.”

– BFS Developmental Evaluator

- **Delayed integration of the Developmental Evaluator.** When the DE started, the team that the Developmental Evaluator would be embedded with had not been chosen. In addition, several other issues inhibited her ability to comfortably integrate within BFS during the first few months:
 - **Lack of facilities access:** For the first four and a half months of the DE, the Developmental Evaluator did not have facilities access.⁴ During this time, the Developmental Evaluator worked in a café, which made it difficult to speak candidly or ask sensitive questions to BFS stakeholders. Additionally, later on in the DE, the BFS office underwent a series of structural renovations that limited the Developmental Evaluators access to (and engagement with) staff since all BFS staff members were required to work remotely at some point during the three-month period of construction.
 - **Lack of internet access and computer equipment:** For a period of time while working in the BFS office, the Developmental Evaluator lacked Wi-Fi and did not have a computer, or the equipment needed to work effectively.

⁴ The first two months of the DE, the Developmental Evaluator lacked access because of the shutdown. It took an additional two and a half months for her clearance to be processed and approved.

- Lack of email communication with BFS teams: Often, the Developmental Evaluator was not copied on emails, nor did stakeholders know that she should be included in their correspondence.
- **Comparisons made about the quality/process of BFS and another DE at USAID.** Prior to the BFS DE, another DE had been carried out in another office at USAID headquarters in Washington, DC. Some BFS DE stakeholders were aware of the previous DE and, as a result, drew comparisons between the two. In some instances, the BFS Developmental Evaluator felt that there was an expectation that she should conduct the DE in the same manner as the previous Developmental Evaluator. For her, this task proved extremely difficult, especially considering the notably different cultures and contexts of BFS and the other office. Making these types of comparisons between the Developmental Evaluators' work can be harmful, unmotivating, and take away a Developmental Evaluator's autonomy to implement DE. For example, it may limit how "methodologically agnostic" the DE is if the Developmental Evaluator is focused on using the same evaluation methods employed for another DE instead of selecting those methods that are best suited the context and meet the needs of stakeholders.

5. STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD BE EMPOWERED TO MAKE DECISIONS WITH DE DATA

Just as a Developmental Evaluator needs to be empowered to make decisions, so do DE stakeholders. "[DE] requires someone in leadership position that has the autonomy or authority to deal with the Developmental Evaluator and make calls [decisions] based on the recommendations being provided," shared one BFS stakeholder. There was a lack of this sense of empowerment among stakeholders. On one hand, stakeholders felt that there was no point in making a decision because things would come to change again in this period of transition. On the other hand, given changes at the Bureau, some BFS staff members felt that they did not have a lot of autonomy to make independent decisions, and hence, were being extra cautious and making sure they were consulting with the BFS Front Office to make decisions, that in other circumstances may not have required their input or support. "By not having the Developmental Evaluator have a connection with someone who is either leading the team, leading the Division, or leading the Bureau [BFS] from the very beginning, having that person bought-in and regularly meeting with the Developmental Evaluator than that is also a missed opportunity because that gives a lot more legitimacy to the activity and an awareness for it [the DE] that we haven't been able to get [with the BFS DE]."

6. IT'S OKAY TO CALL IT QUILTS AND END A DE THAT ISN'T WORKING

If a DE is not working, or if it has failed to gain sufficient momentum with stakeholders, DE implementers need to be prepared to end the DE process prematurely. This should not be viewed as a failure, but rather an opportunity to save valuable time and resources that would otherwise be used inefficiently.

During the attempted DE with BFS, the Developmental Evaluator and stakeholders faced many challenges that led them to question whether there was value in continuing the DE. The extended government shutdown, the non-suitable culture for a DE at BFS, and the inability to clarify the DE scope of work were all challenges that signaled that perhaps the DE should have ended sooner. At the same time, it is important to recognize that DE implementation isn't supposed to be easy. In fact, there are many instances in which "quitting" is *not* the right action to take. Based on lessons learned during the BFS DE, **Table I** gives examples of contexts where a DE implementation team could benefit from a thoughtful discussion about whether ending the DE might actually be the best strategy.

Table 1: Calling it quits: when is it okay to end a DE prematurely?

CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGE	NO – DON'T GIVE UP!	YES – THE BEST OPTION MAY BE TO END THE DE
Leadership turnover	A key DE decision maker has left, but remaining stakeholders and leadership are bought into the DE.	Key DE decision maker has left, and an alternate decision maker is not identified. Key remaining stakeholders are not bought in to the DE.
DE stakeholders lack an adaptive culture	DE stakeholders express willingness to learn and innovate, but need help to make adaptations.	Either there isn't a willingness to learn, no history of innovative thinking, and/or DE stakeholders are <i>unable</i> to adapt team processes, structure, etc.
Significant external event halts DE progress	DE stakeholders can continue to work and pursue their mission, despite changes to the external environment.	Routine work of DE stakeholders is halted because of an external event, e.g., government shutdown, political unrest, etc.
DE stakeholders cannot agree on DE scope of work	DE scope of work is actively being refined. Key DE decision makers are providing input and a deadline to agree on a tentative DE scope of work is established.	DE stakeholders cannot agree on DE scope after multiple months and several failed attempts to convene stakeholders to determine scope of work.