

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

MERLIN: U.S. Global Development Lab Evaluation and Impact Assessment

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MERLIN Co-Creation Workshop, June 2015. *Design Thinkers Group.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

The Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) activity is an effort to source, co-create, and co-design innovations in monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) to be tested in the USAID context. Led by the U.S. Global Development Lab with support from USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL), MERLIN aims to address the following challenges:

- Often, based on their experience and with limited evidence, USAID managers and other donors design programs with fixed results frameworks that lay out intended outputs and outcomes, with performance indicator data collected and reviewed periodically. Reporting on indicators is often used for accountability rather than learning.
- Performance evaluations or impact evaluations are conducted to gather additional information and assess project effectiveness. The results often come in too late to inform any changes in implementation or even the design of follow-on programs.
- Teams rarely take the time to “pause and reflect” on their work and see whether adaptations should be made based on implementation to date.

MERLIN sought opportunities to address these challenges of traditional MERL in the USAID context. Successful pilot innovations should be encouraged be more broadly across USAID and other international development partners.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

International development actors are increasingly seeking alternatives to the MERL status quo, in order to have better tools that reflect complex programs and contexts. Many of these tools have not been applied in USAID; as an actor in the innovation space, the U.S. Global Development Lab sought to identify MERL innovations to be tested. The overall opportunity is to understand how we foster increased development impact through improved and innovative tools for MERL.

Specifically, we hope answer the following questions through MERLIN:

- *What are the cutting-edge approaches to measuring impact, understanding complex development challenges and solutions, and using evidence to drive smart decision making and policy? How can we more quickly and effectively use monitoring and evaluation (M&E) findings to enable rapid learning and adaptive management?*

Generating high-quality M&E findings is no guarantee that the results will be used, much less that they will be used in a timely manner. Often, organizations lack the internal systems, processes, or incentives to ensure that M&E findings reach their intended audiences and are acted upon. In order for M&E to truly enable and support the adaptive management of development programs, findings must be disseminated quickly and lessons incorporated into project design. Through MERLIN, we are seeking new ways of structuring M&E, building capacity, and aligning incentives to ensure that findings enable rapid learning and adaptive management

- *Can we change the way that USAID or other stakeholders structure evaluations and/or engage evaluators?*

The process by which USAID recruits and contracts outside partners for evaluations plays a large role in determining how an evaluation is conducted and the usefulness of the results. The current process leaves little scope for the evaluator to weigh in on the evaluation purpose, its questions, or its methodology, and often encourages evaluators to submit only a limited number of reports. Evaluators are typically external and not directly involved in project implementation. While this may ensure independence, it also makes communication between evaluators and implementers more difficult, reducing opportunities for learning from evaluations. Furthermore, even external evaluators may have an incentive to gloss over negative findings when presenting results to the client. Through MERLIN, we hope to identify innovative ways for structuring evaluations and engaging evaluators to overcome these challenges

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

USAID and other donors sought to co-create and co-design solutions that innovate on traditional approaches to MERL. USAID did this through a Broad Agency Announcement that was open to anyone who might be interested — a radically different approach for USAID partnerships. The announcement generated 83 expressions of interest, and more than 30 organizations — representing a wide variety of actors, from academics to private companies and NGOs (many of whom had not worked with USAID before) — were invited to a MERLIN co-creation workshop in June 2015. During the workshop, representatives from these organizations worked with USAID teams and other funders, such as UNICEF and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to come up with innovative concepts together.

Several of the concepts continued to be co-designed between the partners and USAID and were presented to a peer review panel within USAID for approval.

Approved MERLIN concepts:

- Tools to improve program design in complex systems, such as modeling scenarios and social network analysis (Strategic Program for Analyzing Complexity and Evaluating Systems [SPACES])
- Evaluation methods that employ more rapid feedback mechanisms (RAPID Feedback MERL)
- Evaluation methods that allow for continuous learning about the effectiveness of a program before the program ends, via an embedded evaluator (Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity [DEPA] MERL)
- Right-sizing MERL to respond to local needs and iterate based on input from the primary intended users of information and other stakeholders (BalanceD-MERL)
- Using geospatial data, often gathered from space, to provide added and more cost-effective insights into the long-term results of completed evaluations (Expanding the Reach of Impact Evaluation [ERIE])

Implementation of these concepts will continue to be a joint effort between the consortium members and USAID's Evaluation and Impact Assessment (EIA) team.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

During the MERLIN co-creation process, it was originally assumed that USAID operating units would be willing to contribute funds and other resources to test/pilot the MERLIN concepts. It has proven far more difficult than expected to get sustained enthusiasm and financial buy-in from missions and Washington, D.C.-based operating units. (Of more than 40 operating units initially expressing



interest, only two have committed funding so far). Challenges include a perception of high costs, resistance to changing from traditional methods, and resistance to perceived additional MERL work.

Enablers included having champions throughout the agency to help explain MERLIN and match USAID needs with consortia.

Based on these lessons so far, we are tailoring our communications tools and seeking to identify additional champions within the agency to identify and secure more pilots.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

In the initial co-creation workshop in June 2015, the organizations came together to collaborate and share their experiences and skills to create innovative M&E approaches for future use throughout USAID. At the MERLIN Roundtable in June 2016, EIA performed qualitative stakeholder interviews with representatives of the prime awardees of each of the MERLIN consortia. They all reported the challenge of working with other organizations, with whom they often compete with for USAID awards. Another challenge mentioned in these qualitative interviews was working with USAID as both a donor and a partner. USAID is ultimately the donor of the core funds used to support work under MERLIN, but USAID's EIA team also acts as one of the partners. Many reported this dual responsibility of USAID as a challenge, due to perceived power dynamics, and as an opportunity, because many have not worked with USAID in a capacity beyond its role as donor before.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

The MERLIN program has a learning agenda with key questions related to the outcomes of the pilots/tests to determine whether a recommendation should be made to scale them.

Evaluating the results of a program that implements innovative evaluation methodologies presents an interesting challenge, because the desired outcomes of a successful MERLIN mechanism — better-designed and more adaptable programs — are particularly difficult to measure and track. The EIA team spent quite a bit of time in the early stages of the MERLIN program working with colleagues in the PPL and E3 bureaus to develop a reasonable way to understand how MERLIN is operating and how specific MERLIN mechanisms compare with traditional USAID M&E activities.

MERLIN is using several tools to track results and understand the impact of the program. First, we and our partners have a list of indicators that track details, such as the number of USAID operating units that contact us and are interested in buying into the program, and those that do eventually buy in. PPL is supporting implementation of our learning agenda by conducting surveys based on PPL's Complexity-Aware Monitoring trials. MERLIN is also employing an innovative approach to evaluate



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the impact of an operating unit, using a MERLIN mechanism to compare outcomes if the operating unit had (hypothetically) used a traditional M&E activity. We have developed a method that allows us to compare the subjective cost-effectiveness of each MERLIN mechanism with traditional M&E activities. To do this, we combine an activity-based costing exercise with a subjective benefits-scoring exercise. This allows us to make comparisons and, along with other criteria, recommend which MERLIN mechanisms are best suited for wider USAID use, and in which contexts they work best.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Managing the first four MERLIN consortia during their start-up stages required a much higher level of effort than expected on the part of the EIA team. Based on lessons learned, EIA intends to provide the consortia with templates (e.g., for communicating the value and criteria for appropriate pilots) to avoid reinventing the wheel. Having some partners of multiple consortia has proved useful in terms of sharing experiences across mechanisms. The newest partner to receive an award this spring is benefiting extensively from the experience and lessons learned from the first four consortia. If we were to do this again, we would start with consistent guidance on the EIA team's part and ensure that the consortia had relevant templates at their disposal. We are sure to learn more lessons as we continue!

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.

