Integrating MERL with program design – The BalanceD-MERL approach

6th September 2018
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

Photo credit: https://www.pexels.com/photo/blackboard-business-chalkboard-concept-355988/
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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Along the program spectrum</th>
<th>Along the MERL spectrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MERL and program design teams work in silos</td>
<td>Misalignment of program with context and key stakeholder needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise in evidence quality and integrity</td>
<td>Unintended negative consequences of programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninformed decision-making leading to ineffective activities</td>
<td>MERL burden on key stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With leadership:
- Poor commitment to MERL and demand in MERL
- Mismanagement of MERL expectations
- Lack of competency in MERL
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.

Principles can guide the improved execution of MERL.

Need for integration of MERL with program design for good program management and adaptive management.

Example: USAID’s MERLIN program and Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach.

Example: Lean Research by MIT’s D-LAB.

Example: CART principles by IPA.

BalanceD-MERL.
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant</th>
<th>Right-sized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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?

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels on the application of the principles</th>
<th>Unbalanced</th>
<th>Emergent</th>
<th>Balanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td></td>
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Still under development

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
What is the MERL Strategy Template?

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

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

Photo credit: https://unsplash.com/photos/v4RdUlhoc88
What are some of the lessons confirmed or key takeaways from this engagement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas</th>
<th>Key takeaway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utilization focused MERL</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building, expectation setting, and resource management</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy in MERL and resource management</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>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.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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 yaguta@umich.edu and hmoehle@umich.edu
Acknowledgements and disclaimers

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Thanks!

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Contact BalanceD-MERL’s Prime via Bridget Lanvin: blavin@worldvision.org
There are four principles of BalanceD-MERL

**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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