



Mainstreaming Evidence Use through Locally Led Development: Recommendations for USAID

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Background: CGD's Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact

Since the 2006 release of the Center for Global Development report *When Will We Ever Learn: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation*, and building on evaluations of cash transfer programs in the 2000s, there have been nearly two decades of progress in generating and using evidence for public policy decisions and development programs.¹ One area of clear momentum is the steady increase in the number of impact evaluations, a rigorous approach that establishes the attributable net impact of a project or program. Their ability to assess attribution makes impact evaluations uniquely well suited for decision making. A global community of researchers and organizations conducting these evaluations and related evidence activities has also grown substantially in recent years. All the while, notable advances in data and evaluation methodologies and practices have enabled faster, lower-cost, and larger-scale evaluations, expanding the application of impact evaluation tools to new domains. And increasingly, impact evaluations are paired with complementary quantitative and qualitative information that help derive policy-relevant inferences.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on an unfinished agenda and underscored the need for high-quality, timely, and context-specific evidence. Across sectors, decision makers within

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USAID

1. Partner with philanthropies on a localization and evidence initiative to systematically support policy-proximate researchers, research organizations, and evidence collaboratives in a set of lower-income countries
2. Structure the new behavioral science and experimental economics unit for maximum impact, including high-value decision-oriented evaluation
3. Bolster agency capacity through new specialized evidence roles
4. Champion cost-effectiveness analysis and cash benchmarking
5. Develop accountability policies and performance metrics to incentivize sustained change
6. Build evidence, evaluation, and cost-effectiveness into the agency's routine operational policies and guidance

governments, aid agencies, multilateral organizations, and NGOs have not yet fully harnessed the value of evidence for better public policies. Numerous challenges limit evidence use. On the demand side, impact evaluations may lack relevance to policy decisions and fail to respond to the priorities, timelines, and questions of decision makers. On the supply side, decision makers often lack institutional incentives and funding to generate and act on relevant evidence. Current funding models further compound these challenges by contributing to misaligned incentives between policymaker needs and academic researchers.

In response to these challenges and building on progress to date, CGD launched the Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact to develop a renewed agenda for the next generation of investments in impact evaluation and related evidence systems to enhance their value for real-world decision making. The working group brought together a diverse set of policymakers and experts to review recent progress and examine how to address remaining obstacles to the use and utility of evidence for global development.

The working group's final report highlights how far the field has come in addressing persistent critiques about the scale, generalizability, and policy utility of impact evaluation. It also offers recommendations to the development community on "what and how to fund to deliver on the promise of impact evaluation *and* bolster the broader evidence ecosystem" as two intertwined goals. Specifically, the working group proposes five ways to improve impact evaluation funding and practice: (1) design evaluations that start from the policy question and decision space; (2) harness technology for timely, lower-cost evidence; (3) advance locally grounded evidence-to-policy partnerships; (4) enact new incentives and structures to strengthen evidence use; and (5) invest in evidence leaders and communities. The working group's reinvigorated agenda aims to optimize the benefits and full potential of impact evaluation for improved social and economic well-being around the world.

To illustrate the application of this agenda to specific development funders, the working group developed detailed

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recommendations for three key audiences with strong existing foundations for evaluation and evidence use to complement and leverage country government funding: philanthropies, USAID, and the World Bank. This brief details how USAID can mainstream evidence use across the agency. It is based on working group discussions, numerous consultations with experts including current and former USAID staff, and background research over the course of the project. Accompanying briefs directed to philanthropies and the World Bank can be found at www.CGDev.org/evidence-to-impact.

Mainstreaming evidence use at USAID through locally led development

US foreign assistance can deliver valuable improvements in well-being and prosperity around the world.² Building on USAID's historic leadership in evidence-based foreign aid, the agency has an opportunity to make even more substantial contributions to social, economic, and human rights gains globally by advancing the use of evidence, including impact evaluation, across its programming. Going forward, priorities should include increasing both the number and quality of evaluations of USAID's programs; making greater use of evidence to inform resource allocation and program design; and supporting partner country governments and

research organizations to strengthen capacities for evidence generation and use. These goals are fully aligned with Administrator Samantha Power’s commitment to put “local voices at the center” of the agency’s work and prioritize evidence-based programming.³ Achieving progress on this agenda, while challenging, is feasible within the next two years, especially given the agency’s existing evidence foundation and promising recent announcements.

USAID’s evaluation policy, first introduced in 2011 and updated in 2020, has been hailed as a gold standard.⁴ Following the policy’s launch, the agency realized an increase in the number and quality of evaluations and enhanced staff training in evaluation methods and processes.⁵ Subsequent updates to agency operational policy helped clarify expectations for selecting evaluation questions and conducting evaluations and set the stage for more cost-effectiveness analysis. Over the past decade, USAID has pursued a number of innovations in evaluation and evidence-based policy, including pioneering work in cash benchmarking, creating the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) Program, and aggregating cross-country indicators and evidence to support its Self-Reliance Learning Agenda.⁶ These initiatives and related efforts have bolstered USAID’s reputation as a leader in evidence use among US federal agencies.⁷

The Biden-Harris administration launched a “Year of Evidence for Action” in April 2022, advancing the US government’s commitment to evidence.⁸ Administrator Power’s vision for expanded evidence generation and use could further elevate USAID’s global leadership in development effectiveness. Consistent with requirements in the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), USAID launched a new Agency Learning Agenda in March 2022.⁹ USAID has also deepened its partnership with the US Office of Evaluation Sciences, which deploys embedded teams to help federal agencies answer priority questions through evaluation. And in November 2021, Administrator Power announced plans to establish a new behavioral sciences and experimental economics unit headed by the agency’s chief economist in an elevated role.¹⁰

Evidence-based programming is a well-established agency principle, but more work remains to translate policies into widespread practice and to institutionalize a culture of evidence use among agency leadership and staff. While USAID’s own guidance on project and activity design lists “apply analytic rigor to support evidence-based decision making” as the first principle of its program cycle,¹¹ gaps remain between this stated goal and reality:

- ▶ Roughly 10 percent of USAID’s evaluations are impact evaluations.¹²
- ▶ Approximately half of those do not meet USAID’s definition of an impact evaluation because they lack a statistical justification for the validity of the comparison group (28 percent) or do not have a comparison group (18 percent).¹³
- ▶ Approximately 17 percent of USAID impact evaluations are found to be of high quality.¹⁴
- ▶ A portion of USAID’s performance evaluations intend to answer questions about causal inference, which they are not methodologically suited to do.¹⁵

As USAID operationalizes its updated evaluation policy, implements its learning agenda, and establishes a new economics-oriented unit, it should focus on evaluating and improving the results of USAID-supported programming, prioritizing the use of evidence when selecting and designing programs, applying relevant learnings to course correct, deepening engagement with local officials and researchers to support policy decisions, and coordinating with other donors on the development evidence agenda. Unlocking the benefits of evidence for policy use requires supporting those who can generate new information and facilitating their engagement with relevant decision makers to promote evidence uptake and realize the vision of locally led development. This brief offers six ways that USAID can solidify the agency’s role as a leader in evidence-based policy. Across these areas, sustained political support is critical to embrace results and learnings—from both successes and failures.

1. Partner with philanthropies on a localization and evidence initiative to systematically support policy-proximate researchers, research organizations, and evidence collaboratives in a set of lower-income countries

A growing number of philanthropic funders are interested in the intersection of localization and evidence-based policymaking. They increasingly seek to ensure that research is conducted by people and organizations who understand the operating environment and the fit of research questions and approaches with local policy priorities. Strengthening organizational capacity to engage with and influence policymakers paves the way for responsive evidence-to-policy partnerships, context-specific evidence ecosystems, and productive uses of countries' own data systems.

A partnership backed by pooled funding between philanthropic funders and USAID would help advance the twin aims of locally led development and evidence-based policymaking. USAID could fund local research organizations and/or evidence collaboratives with project-specific support to undertake evaluations and evidence uptake activities in shared areas of interest, especially those in high-value but neglected areas, such as climate or immunization delivery. Philanthropy could contribute flexible, longer-term financing for medium-term institutional support to these entities, thus enabling greater policy responsiveness and sustainability.¹⁶ Specifically, the new office of USAID's chief economist could mobilize high-level support, while functional and regional bureaus or missions could contribute resources for co-investment. The Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL) is a logical hub to develop a framework to guide other USAID bureaus on how to design projects supporting local evidence organizations as one way to reduce transaction costs.

By strengthening the capacity of in-country evaluation organizations, this partnership would dovetail with several

of Administrator Power's priorities. It could contribute to the agency-wide goal for 50 percent of USAID's programming to be implemented, directed, or evaluated by local partners, and it would likely fit within both the Local Capacity Development policy and the forthcoming Strategy for Strengthening Local Evaluation Capacity.¹⁷ While USAID has supported local evidence-to-policy capacity development through the MOMENTUM, BUILD, and HP+ projects for reproductive, maternal, and child health, the agency should build on this experience by placing a greater emphasis on institutional capacity for research and policy communication.¹⁸

2. Structure the new behavioral science and experimental economics unit for maximum impact, including high-value decision-oriented evaluation

A new behavioral sciences and experimental economics unit, led by an empowered chief economist, offers a key pathway to systematize evidence use at USAID. Through Development Innovation Ventures (DIV), which provides funding to pilot, test, and scale innovative proposals, USAID has demonstrated the value of using experimental economics. DIV's early portfolio yielded an impressive estimated \$17 in social benefit for each dollar invested.¹⁹ But DIV, which is small in scope and funds external applicants, is largely disconnected from USAID's core programming. The new unit with an empowered chief economist at its helm should help integrate experimental approaches across a larger share of USAID's portfolio.

As the agency irons out the details of the new unit's structure and activities, it will need to grapple with several questions: Will it focus squarely on behavioral science, more narrowly on "nudges," or will it take a more expansive view of experimentation? Behavioral science can generate useful insights but often tells a partial story. Couching the agency's reinvigorated focus on behavioral science within a broader prioritization of experimental processes will help maximize the new unit's value.

There are also outstanding questions about how the empowered chief economist role will be operationalized. Compared to peer agencies like the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and other development institutions like the World Bank, USAID's chief economist has been relatively under-resourced to date, with a small budget and limited staff. Key to success will be ensuring that the person who fills this (currently vacant) role has a skillset that spans research, management, and political savvy. Once in the role, the chief economist must be supported with the relevant policy authority, resources, and mandate to go beyond solely running experimental studies to facilitating evidence uptake across the agency. Quality assurance could also be considered part of this role's remit, which would include offering incentives and technical assistance to staff for evidence use in program design, and then reviewing the evidence case for proposed programs.²⁰

Other questions remain about where this new unit will sit within the agency and what its relationship will be to PPL's Office of Learning Evaluation and Research and other parts of the agency responsible for evaluation. As agency leadership irons out the details, it will need to demonstrate the new unit's value-add and generate buy-in by avoiding duplication and turf battles.

3. Bolster agency capacity through new specialized evidence roles

The agency's challenges in conducting high-quality evaluations and matching evaluation questions with appropriate methods stem in part from the considerable burdens placed on in-country staff. These positions are often stretched thin and experience high turnover, which means staff are only likely to work on a few evaluations throughout their careers. As a result, despite efforts to train large numbers of these staff in evaluation methods and provide them with detailed guidance notes and toolkits, evaluation quality lags.²¹

First, USAID should establish a finer division of labor for evaluation-related functions across agency staff. Specifically,

USAID should invest in expanding its central team of evidence and learning experts under PPL's mandate to provide more long-term embedded support to bureaus and missions. Prompted by the Evidence Act, the agency has considered creating an evaluator job series, which could provide an opportunity to bring on more specialized staff to perform key evidence functions across the agency. Investing in evaluation experts who can be deployed across the agency, rather than developing the evaluation capacity of *all* agency staff, offers a more efficient use of evidence-focused resources. These specialists can help missions identify evidence needs (including opportunities for impact evaluation), develop evaluation scopes of work, manage the procurement of an evaluation and its implementation, and facilitate communication and uptake of results to inform decision making. This approach would marry the in-depth knowledge of local contexts, understanding of priority learning needs, and timelines of mission-based staff with the specialized skills and bandwidth to conduct longer-term studies of a centralized team of evaluation experts.

Further, evidence and learning specialists should ensure that USAID's procurement and program design are informed by existing evidence and incorporate opportunities for experimentation and learning.²² This includes engaging in interagency knowledge sharing with the Millennium Challenge Corporation and other entities to inform investment decisions and program design.

Second, the agency should bring on additional researchers, data scientists, and other evidence specialists to implement the agency's new learning agenda and bolster the capacity of the new unit for behavioral science and experimental economics. The Bureau for Development, Democracy and Innovation's Center of Excellence for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance provides a useful model for defining questions of interest to both USAID missions and academic researchers; conducting evaluations; and using evidence to inform program design, procurement, and implementation.²³

The agency's expanded relationship with US Office of Evaluation Sciences (discussed above) will help fill some gaps in capacity needs, but there are other options to explore. For instance, USAID could partner with philanthropies to secure funding for specialized evidence roles through philanthropy-supported fellowship positions (i.e., through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, which allows individuals from other agencies, academia, or nonprofit organizations to perform a "tour of duty" at an agency for up to two years). Such fellowships represent an opportunity to build on USAID's MERLIN project and harness the latest methodological approaches and data advances for USAID's programming. Examples include greater investments in the quality, regularity, and granularity of administrative data and low-cost remotely sensed data, as well as new and improved methods such as geospatial impact evaluation, A/B testing, and adaptive optimization that help enable faster, less costly, policy-relevant studies.²⁴

There is also scope for greater investments in *evidence broker* functions. Through the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership and other fora, USAID and external partners have noted challenges with synthesizing and acting on growing quantities of data and evidence. USAID program staff do not always have the time or skills to sift through available evidence and ascertain the strength and reliability of evaluation findings. Evidence brokers can offer this function as a dedicated service across the agency, providing tailored translation of existing evidence to help inform resource allocation and project design or to develop or commission evidence gap maps and systematic reviews. Moving forward, USAID could also explore opportunities to deploy evidence specialists to other aid agencies as a way to advance collective donor action and peer learning on evidence use incentives and systems. One growth opportunity underway involves the Agency Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning (KMOL) function, which is currently developing a new KMOL policy to be followed by an Automated Directives System (ADS) chapter. The KMOL policy and ADS chapter will help build USAID's infrastructure to support evidence and

learning, including guidance on skills, processes, systems, resources, culture, and governance.

4. Champion cost-effectiveness analysis and cash benchmarking

The new requirement in the ADS that impact evaluations must include cost analysis is a welcome development (see Box 1 for other ADS opportunities). USAID's innovative use of cash benchmarking and recent advances to establish a common costing methodology in collaboration with other partners through the Costing Community of Practice should also be applauded.²⁵ Going forward, USAID should assess how well the new ADS requirement is implemented, including the quality and usability of the newly generated cost data.²⁶ USAID should also expand its cash benchmarking evaluations, especially for prioritized learning agenda questions where feasible. Institutional targets should also be set on the extent to which comparative value-for-money evidence is brought to bear in program design.

5. Develop accountability policies and performance metrics to incentivize sustained change

To monitor progress in implementing its evidence and evaluation agenda, USAID should commission independent assessments along relevant dimensions, including (1) the frequency with which USAID's solicitations use evidence to justify interventions, (2) review of the evidence cases for the most common or highly funded interventions, and (3) the quality of impact evaluations.

USAID should also hold staff to account for evidence generation and use. Staff performance rubrics that reflect institutional priorities are an important complement to policy changes. The Foreign Service Skills Matrix currently includes vague references to applying best practices and lessons learned, but could be strengthened with a more explicit assessment of staff competence in evidence generation and application as part of performance reviews and promotion criteria.

BOX 1. OPPORTUNITIES TO USE THE USAID AUTOMATED DIRECTIVES SYSTEM (ADS) CHAPTER 201²⁷ TO FURTHER EVIDENCE USE INCLUDE:

- ▶ Stating that cost-effectiveness is a key consideration in programming (ADS 201.3.1.2.a and 201.3.4)
- ▶ Clarifying that performance evaluations are not intended to answer questions about the change that a program caused in key outcomes if factors other than the program may have had an influence (ADS 201.3.6.4 and 201.3.6.7)
- ▶ Mandating statistical justification for comparison groups in quasi-experimental evaluations (ADS 201.3.6.4 and 201.3.6.9)
- ▶ Requiring the citation of evidence as a mandatory section of activity design approval (ADS 201.3.4 and 201mba and 201sam)
- ▶ New requirements could include targets for the number of procurements and the dollar value of procurements that are made through open innovation grants, use statements of objectives, and use performance-work statements. Performance-based incentives for implementers could also be added.

6. Build evidence, evaluation, and cost-effectiveness into the agency's routine operational policies and guidance

Longer-term operational changes and formal guidance are also a critical complement to new institutional arrangements like the behavioral science and experimental economics unit. USAID can increase the use of evidence in program design and increase the number and quality of evaluations by amending guidance for all programmatic staff (see Box 1).

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