



DRG IMPACT EVALUATION RETROSPECTIVE

Learning from Three Generations of Impact Evaluations

In response to an influential 2008 National Academies of Science report, the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Center initiated a pilot program of impact evaluations (IEs). As of March 2021, the DRG Center and its learning partners have completed or are close to completing 27 IEs. This brief summarizes a retrospective the DRG Center commissioned to review the accomplishments and the challenges of DRG Center IEs with the goal of deriving lessons learned and providing evidence-based recommendations for future DRG Center evaluations.

LEARNING FROM THE BENEFITS OF IMPACT EVALUATIONS

Unlike more traditional performance evaluations (PEs) and monitoring, IEs are able to measure a counterfactual for an intervention and make causal inferences about that activity’s impact. In Haiti, an IE demonstrated that a program was working and should be scaled up. In the Caribbean, an IE found that previous project reviews, which concluded that the intervention was producing dramatic results, were incorrect. Furthermore, IEs frequently provided better measures of outcomes and changes in those outcomes over time relative to the earlier studies that did not employ counterfactual reasoning rigorously as per USAID IE guidelines. In some cases, baseline data or regression analysis produced insightful information that implementers could use to shape their programming. As such, the evaluation team can point to valuable findings that would not have otherwise existed in the absence of an IE. Notably, although IEs encountered a number of challenges, the vast majority of stakeholders interviewed and surveyed acknowledged the indispensable role of impact evaluation and they expressed their support for the continuation of impact evaluation within the DRG Center and USAID.

LESSONS LEARNED

Despite significant achievements, the DRG Center's IE program encountered several challenges. First, the objective and intended use of the IEs was often not well defined. For example, it should be clear whether the goal of an IE is to help *determine a new USAID approach* to addressing a DRG program or to *test USAID's existing approach* to addressing a DRG problem. Second, just because an IE was possible did not mean that one should have been carried out. For example, several IEs failed to test an intervention with an adequately robust theory of change. Third, DRG Center IEs confronted numerous implementation challenges, many of which stemmed from inadequate implementing partner (IP) buy-in, insufficient input from IPs, and conflict between implementers and evaluators. Fourth, the DRG Center and its partners lacked strategies at the outset to move from a conflictive to a cooperative relationship between evaluators and IPs. Fifth, the DRG Center and its partners also lacked strategies to ensure coordination and communication across IE stakeholders during implementation, including agreement on communication and information sharing protocols, active DRG Center and Mission engagement and facilitation, an in-country presence for evaluation teams, and an active role for DRG Center learning partners

IMPACT EVALUATION USE

While we do find evidence of IEs informing existing projects, future projects, strategies, and general knowledge, there is considerable variation in IE usefulness. Several factors help explain this variation. Survey and case study evidence show that IE reports are often produced too late to inform decision making -- sometimes due to delays on the part of evaluators or USAID Missions -- and at times due to idiosyncrasies related to the timing of other programs. In addition, although there are good examples of dissemination, the survey suggests that on the whole reports were not widely distributed nor read. Furthermore, while evaluators were generally under the impression that reports were easy to read and contained actionable recommendations, IP and USAID survey respondents were far less likely to agree. Finally, although post-evaluation action plans have been a USAID requirement since 2016, they were the exception rather than the norm.

WHAT SHOULD THE DRG CENTER'S APPROACH TO IMPACT EVALUATIONS BE GOING FORWARD?

This retrospective offers several key recommendations. On a broad level, it recommends that the DRG Center build from its previous IE program, rather than abandon the program or shift to an entirely different model. Nonetheless, the Center needs to implement some key changes. Among them, Missions and the DRG Center should make greater use of formal evaluability assessments, with an emphasis on defining the objective of a resulting IE, whether it be *formative* or *summative*, with more specific associated goals. Contracting should include a better-defined evaluation objective that clarifies stakeholder roles with specific provisions for implementing partners, evaluators, and academic PIs. In most cases, the conventional evaluation-implementation firewall should be dropped and instead stakeholders should work as an evaluation team, with a representative from the IP as an official team member, and a representative from the evaluators/PIs in-country for the life of the evaluation. In this process, Missions and the DRG Center could play a stronger role to ensure coordination and harmonization. Instituting these recommendations should encourage a much more nimble but far-reaching IE approach, and one that keeps a learning agenda at the fore. Emphasizing a clear IE objective, carried out by a well-coordinated evaluation team, would make possible more targeted dissemination and use both during and after a project. Dissemination and use would be further enhanced through increasing the accessibility and actionability of the findings report, involving USAID staff in crafting recommendations for Agency strategy and programming, and creating a central repository for posting research products.