What is our plan today?

1. Why did we develop the BalanceD-MERL approach? ~ 5 min
2. Summary of the BalanceD-MERL approach ~15 min
3. Our guest presenter shares her perspectives on the approach ~10 min
4. Questions ~5 min
5. Engagement with the audience ~25 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 the tensions and challenges we have seen so far in program and MERL implementation?

Along the program design and implementation spectrum:
- Poor project tradeoffs due to limited resources
- Misalignment of program with context and key stakeholder needs
- Unintended negative consequences of programs
- Un-informed decision-making leading to ineffective activities
- MERL and program design teams work in silos
- Misaligned MERL to context and complexity
- Compromise in evidence quality and integrity
- MERL burden on key stakeholders

Along the MERL design and implementation spectrum:
- Poor leadership commitment to MERL
- Shortcomings in MERL competence in program staff
- Lack of support from other organizational units for program MERL
What did we find in our search for solutions to address these challenges?

Organizations recognize the challenges posed by complex programs and/or complex operating environments and are looking for solutions.

Principles can guide the improved execution of MERL.

Need for integration between program design and MERL → in order for MERL to be utilization-focused and have true value → to result in program improvement for social change.

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

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

Example: CART principles by IPA.

BalanceD-MERL - an adaptive management approach.

Lean Research Principles: right-size, relevant, respectful and rigorous; CART principles are credible, actionable, responsible and transportable.

What is the BalanceD-MERL approach?

**Hypothesis**

• Deliberate **integration across MERL with program design** can enable better use of MERL data leading to rapid learning and decision-making
• To create sustainable program improvements for greater developmental impact on target audiences

**Principles**

- Relevant
- Right-sized
- Responsible
- Trustworthy
What were our experiences in applying the BalanceD-MERL approach?
What is the MERL Strategy tool?

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

Table of Contents of MERL activities and processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Risk matrix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation matrix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key performance indicators (measurements) framework, including baseline and targets across life of activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MERL activities, over the life of activity including timeline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibilities for MERL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methods for data collection (should include first drafts of evaluation SOWs and potential / proposed research foci)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis and reporting (including program Management Information System)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration, Learning and Adapting (data and insights, planned activities &amp; events)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of effort and budget estimates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance indicator reference data (e.g. USAID PIRS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data quality assurance plans</td>
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Photo credit: https://unsplash.com/photos/v4RdUlhoc88
What are some of the lessons we have learned so far from our pilots?

How to apply the BalanceD-MERL approach?

- During program design, develop components that form the MERL Strategy (i.e. a tool developed by our consortium partner – Institute for Development Impact – I4DI)
- During the life of the program, account for BalanceD-MERL’s four principles by using the BalanceD-MERL Maturity Matrix in D-MERL activities and processes
- Integrate the MERL person/team with program teams

What helps to bring success in using this approach?

- Leadership buy-in and readiness
- Availability of an interim version of the program design that meets programmatic and impact goals set by leadership
  - Program design is informed by a context, stakeholder, and needs assessment analysis
- Flexible donor procurement, contracting, and reporting processes

Still under development
What is the BalanceD-MERL Maturity Matrix?

A framework intended to integrate design with MERL while simultaneously improving upon both:
• 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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
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<td>Trustworthy</td>
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</table>
Our guest speaker – Vava Angwenyi
We have questions and an activity for you!

• Given how we have defined the principles, can you identify examples of tensions or places where you have had to make trade-offs between principles, as related to your D-MERL?
• What tensions do you experience in trying to incorporate MERL into the program design phase?
• Let’s do a comparison exercise between two formats that explains the relevance principle
• Come find us during the conference to share more of your feedback—we’d love it 😊
Acknowledgements and disclaimers

• Acknowledgement: This publication was produced by The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI) in collaboration with World Vision (WV) under the BalanceD-MERL Program, Cooperative Agreement Number AID-OAA-A-15-00061, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

• Disclaimer: This study/report/audio/visual/other information/media product (specify) is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the USAID. The contents are the responsibility of WDI and WV do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.
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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.

Still under development

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