What is Balanced Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning?

Session Description: This session will explore efforts by a large implementing partner and a research organization to promote data-driven operations, both within their own organizations and within a larger consortium seeking to innovate learning in the context of USAID programming. Participants will be introduced to the concept of balance, the principles underpinning it, and benchmarks for assessing it.

Session Leaders:

- Bridgett Lavin, World Vision
- Joel Hughey, World Vision
- Thoai Ngo, Innovations for Poverty Action
- Jessie Pinchoff, Innovations for Poverty Action

Jessie Pinchoff, Research Manager, Research & Knowledge Management, IPA:

- This session’s note taker was absent for the first part of the presentation, so below is an excerpt from the IPA website describing the IPA evaluation that was discussed:
- “An evaluation led by researchers from Harvard Business School and the London School of Economics found that when recruiting community health workers in Zambia, emphasizing career incentives rather than social incentives attracted workers who were more qualified and performed better on the job. These workers conducted 29 percent more household visits and organized twice as many community meetings, while also seeing the same number of patients. In response, the Zambian Ministry of Health has begun using career incentives in its nationwide recruitment of community health workers.”
- Findings were that we need local resource infrastructure.

Joel Hughey, Director of Research for World Vision:

- Question of whether all data being collected is actually being put to use.
- Developed LEAP (Learning through Evaluation with Accountability & Planning) which brought new solutions, but also new gaps.
  - Achieved some consistency in the way we were gathering data, but inadvertently created a culture of compliance, where the data wasn’t seen as relevant to day-to-day management but rather just meeting the needs of upper management.
  - We realized we had inadvertently created a disconnect between outputs and outcomes (couldn’t tell whether the outputs were leading to the outcomes).
  - We also struggled with focus (being multi-sectoral, we struggled with alignment to strategy and focus on goals). Many program had developed their own way of collecting data. This led to over 20,000 indicators.
- Addressing these challenges:
  - Harmonized indicators to create a core 250 indicators to bring uniformity.
Put tools in the hands of staff working in the field to collect data.
We piloted this first and then we, along with program staff, saw value in it as something that we could use to make decisions on a local level.

Bridgett Lavin, Project Director for Balanced MERL Consortium, World Vision

- USAID made an agency announcement that it was partnering with a consortium of organizations to develop and test new ways to measure the impact of beneficiary programs.
- Hypothesis that MERL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning) should be supported by several principles:
  - Relevant
  - Right-sized
  - Responsible
  - Trustworthy
  - Utilization-focused
- In this consortium, we create materials and test them on USAID missions.
- Maturity matrix places programs in one of four categories:
  - Unbalanced
  - Emergent
  - Balanced
  - Balanced + Sustainable

Q&A with audience:

- Can you ever be fully balanced and sustainable (right hand box)?
- Are you using this to measure baseline versus improvements or just one time?
- Would organizations call themselves “unbalanced” whenever they are donor funded? Have to be careful in wording to avoid categories that contain judgment.
- The maturity matrix is more complex than the simplified version in the provided handout. The actual set of questions in more extensive and specific.
- Data is being used at a local, not just global, level so it is working for those at the program and management levels.

Key Takeaways:

- Being “balanced” means a program is prioritizing each aspect of D-MERL equally and extensively, supported by the principles listed previously.
- The maturity matrix is still being shaped and developed, and the consortium is open to feedback.

Additional Resources:

- Evidence-Based Community Healthcare in Zambia (IPA)
- LEAP 2nd Edition (World Vision)
- BalancedD-MERL Fact Sheet (US Global Development Lab)