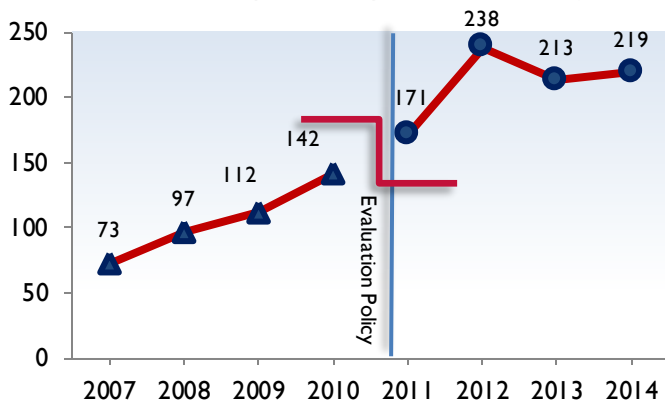# Evaluation Utilization at USAID

Findings from an Independent Study, February 2016

Background

In 2011, USAID released its *Evaluation Policy*, which set ambitious standards for high quality, relevant and transparent evaluations to demonstrate results, generate evidence to inform decisions, promote learning and ensure accountability. This policy not only reflects the Agency's commitment to conducting evaluations to support its program management processes, but it also holds Agency staff and partners responsible for enhancing the quality and utilization of the evaluations they undertake. Since the issuance of the *Evaluation Policy*, there have been two important developments:

1. An increase in the number of evaluations submitted to USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse.[1]

Number of Evaluations Submitted to USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse

2. Overall quality of USAID evaluations has improved, according to a 2013 independent study.[2]

To fulfill the *Evaluation Policy's* mandate for periodic reviews of evaluation utilization, in 2015 USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning commissioned an independent study, *Evaluation Utilization at USAID* (published February 2016), which assessed how Agency evaluations from 2011-2014 have been used, and what guidance, tools and/or Agency practices might be improved to enhance evaluation utilization moving forward.

Study Questions

The following questions guided the study:[3]

1. How and when in the course of USAID programming are evaluations used or not?
2. What changes or decisions are subsequently made?
3. To what degree, and under what conditions, does unanticipated learning occur?
4. What particular business processes or characteristics appear to encourage or discourage the utilization of evaluations?

Study Findings

Evaluation Utilization Occurs at Multiple Levels: The study found that 93 percent of evaluations have been used in some capacity, most frequently in project design and implementation as well as strategy and policy formulation. At the country level, 59 percent of approved Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS) referenced findings from USAID evaluations.

Evaluations More Frequently Inform Project and Activity Design: The data show that 71 percent of evaluations had been used to design and/or modify a USAID project or activity. Group interviews also indicated high levels of evaluation use along these lines.

These changes include refocusing or prioritizing interventions within a project or activity, revising a project or activity's work plan, or revising an activity's monitoring and evaluation plan or performance

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[1] USAID's Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC) is the largest online public resource for USAID evaluations. You can learn more by visiting dec.usaid.gov. The figures used for this report differ from USAID's official annual reporting, which uses the Evaluation Registry.

[2] For more information on this study, please read *Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations,* found here: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACX771.pdf

[3] For full methodology, please see pages 50-70 of the report. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00KXVT.pdf

management plan. Moreover, 27 percent of survey respondents perceived an improvement in the effectiveness of programs, projects and activities when actions were taken based on a USAID evaluation.

Increased Spillover Effects of Evaluations: Twenty percent of survey respondents stated that sustainability of the evaluated program, project or activity had improved, and 7 percent perceived improved cost-effectiveness when actions were taken based on a USAID evaluation. Further, 19 percent of respondents reported that evaluations triggered complementary actions by USAID implementing partners and 8 percent indicated that macro-level country government strategies and/or policies had changed to reflect learning from USAID evaluations.

Learning Is Happening: The study found that 97 percent of those surveyed responded that they had learned about the evaluation process, specifically improving: their understanding of the purpose and role of evaluation (77 percent); their ability to review or critique evaluation products (76 percent); and their ability to engage stakeholders in an evaluation process (73 percent); among others. USAID staff pointed out during group interviews that when their missions or offices have a robust learning agenda and a variety of learning activities underway, learning from evaluations is often a focus. Study findings also showed 53 percent of respondents reported that an evaluation included important new information, not previously known to USAID.

Conclusions

Evaluations are being used to improve programming in ways that contribute to better development outcomes. . The study team found that USAID evaluation utilization practices are strong. Moreover, learning from these evaluations is happening in the form of evidence-based decision-making and an increased understanding of the context in which USAID operates. With a solid learning foundation in place, USAID staff, implementing partners and in-country partners can continue to work together to find solutions that improve the utilization of evaluation and make USAID programs more responsive and successful.

By furthering the accessibility and utility of evaluations, USAID has the opportunity for greater impact at two levels: 1) Immediate management use for course correction during activity and project design, and **2)** The broader international development community by sharing information drawn from evaluations that might help to build more effective development programs.

Data and information are only as relevant as the extent to which they are synthesized, made available, understood, discussed and acted upon. USAID seeks to ensure that knowledge doesn't "sit on a shelf." The evaluation utilization study provides insight into the ways in which USAID leadership and staff have used evaluations in recent years. Now is the time to leverage these insights and engage others in this conversation, explore recommendations to increase utilization and take action to further the impact of USAID's evaluation efforts.

Next Steps

Evidence generated by this study will help Agency leadership and staff understand and encourage evaluation utilization. It is recommended that USAID:

- Engage partners during the evaluation process from planning to implementation to review through dissemination.
- Share guidance on best practices to ensure that quality, relevant evaluations are conducted every time.
- Hold briefings—not just with USAID staff but with implementing partners, the donor community and local country governments and stakeholders.
- Develop trackers that link evaluation recommendations to specific actions, responsible parties and timelines.
- Create accessible products to complement the evaluation report. Short briefs and abstracts offer an overview of key points and enable conversation and decision-making.
- Synthesize evaluation findings across multiple evaluations in key sectors to ease accessibility of information for missions.[4]

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[4] To see an example of a sector synthesis, please read *Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014 Evaluation Findings,* commissioned by USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment, found here: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/E3_Sectoral_Synthesis_Report.pdf.