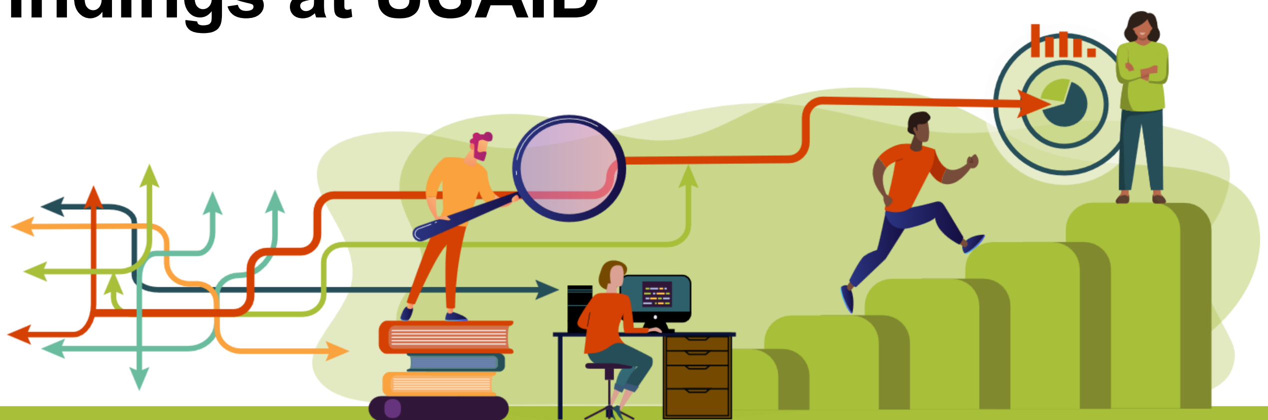
Applying Behavioral Insights to Increase the Use of Evaluation Findings at USAID



Key Takeaways

- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff feel they have the capacity to use evaluation findings for decision making. They are also intrinsically motivated to use evidence.
- There is a culture and norm of evidence use at USAID, supported in part by leadership.
- Engagement between evaluators and intended users, including USAID staff, encourages the use of evaluation findings.
- However, barriers to use exist and are mostly linked to contextual factors. These include findings not being produced in time to be useful for decisions, evidence not being considered relevant, limited dissemination formats, and unclear accountabilities for implementing evaluation recommendations.
- Behavioral insight-informed approaches can help increase the use of evaluation findings. These include:
  1) using timely reminders;
  2) building individuals' professional identities as evidence users, including by establishing communities of designated 'evidence use champions;'
  3) strengthening the capacity of evidence producers or disseminators to communicate about findings;
  4) applying techniques from communications and marketing to improve dissemination;
  5) designing user-friendly evidence repositories;
  6) accrediting individuals following a training program;
  7) strengthening evidence use norms;
  8) changing decision-making structures and processes; and
  9) creating structured collaborations between decision makers and evaluators.

Introduction

Significant investments have been made in research studies and evaluations to understand successes in global health programs and to identify opportunities for improvement. While there have been efforts to link research and evaluation findings to country-level action and to promote the uptake of findings to strengthen health policy and programming, challenges remain in putting evidence into practice in real-world settings. In short, evaluation findings are not always used to inform decisions on global health programs.

To help address this challenge, in 2021 and 2022, USAID's Data for Impact (D4I) project conducted a study that applied a behavioral perspective to understanding barriers to, and enablers of, the use of evaluation findings in USAID global health programs. The study consisted of a literature review on evidence-informed decision making, as well as interviews with individuals involved with USAID evaluations of global health programs and with professionals who are active in the promotion of evidence use. The team then proposed promising strategies for increasing the use of evaluation findings. Strategy design relied on a review of evidence from behavioral sciences, including behavioral economics, psychology, and sociology.

This brief summarizes the study's findings on barriers and enablers to the use of evaluation findings at USAID. It then outlines approaches that can help address these barriers and build on the enablers.

Barriers and Enablers to the Use of Evaluation Findings at USAID

While the literature on research uptake frequently points to capacity as a barrier to people using evidence, at USAID, capacity to better understand and use evaluation findings does not appear to be a key barrier. Staff are also intrinsically motivated to use evidence—that is, they derive inherent satisfaction from using findings for decision making; for example, to improve programs and strengthen development impact. In addition, USAID has an established culture, and norms, of evidence use—staff are expected to use evidence to make decisions. These are enforced, in part, by leadership. Engagement between evaluators and intended users, including USAID staff, also supports evidence use, whether in the form of agreement on evaluation questions, discussing preliminary findings, or co-drafting recommendations.

However, barriers to the use of findings exist. For example, use may be impacted by cognitive biases; in particular, by confirmation bias—the tendency for people to disregard or disbelieve evidence that does not correspond with existing beliefs—and status quo bias—a reluctance to change because the expected risks or costs of change outweigh the expected benefits.

However, most of the identified barriers to evidence use relate to contextual factors, which are external to staff. For one, the timing of evaluation findings can serve as a barrier, particularly in terms of findings not coming out in time to be useful for decisions. For example, in the case of midterm evaluations, findings are often produced past the halfway point in an activity. By that point, decisions may have been made regarding the activity, or its follow-on efforts, without the benefit of the evaluation's findings.

The timing of findings, in turn, impacts whether they are considered relevant to decision makers. Not surprisingly, relevance is one of the most important factors in whether evidence will be used or not. To some extent, relevance is an objective assessment—whether the evidence is related directly to someone's interests, duties, or decisions—but it is also a matter of perception. If findings are not presented in a way that clearly responds to intended users' needs and interests, these individuals may not dig deeper to determine whether the findings contain information useful to them. This is particularly important to staff at USAID, who shoulder large workloads and navigate demanding timelines. As a result, USAID staff may not always be able to 'hunt' for available evidence when making a decision.

This is related to another barrier: at USAID evaluation findings are rarely tailored to different audience groups—especially to audiences outside of USAID. This is due, in part, to evaluators lacking the time or expertise to produce such products; in particular, because their contracts rarely require these. Instead, lengthy final reports are the primary communications product produced from evaluations; and, depending on the audience, these can be difficult to read, overwhelming, and not easily digestible.

Perceptions of the quality of evidence affect the use of findings as well. Such perceptions can be linked to a variety of factors, such as a sense that evaluation teams do not sufficiently understand the sector that is the focus of the evaluation, or due to questions regarding the methodology.

Another barrier is a lack of defined roles charged with promotion of findings and a lack of accountability for following up on evaluation recommendations. Lastly, there is room for improvement around the engagement of intended users in evaluations, as there is often a disconnect between evaluation funders, the evaluation team, and decision makers (whether USAID, implementing partners, or within national governments).

Approaches to Increasing Evidence Use

Understand Individuals' Decision-Making Cycles and Use Timely Reminders

In multiple domains, the right timing of interventions has proven to be a key determinant of their effectiveness. This includes providing people with information at the precise time they need it—that is, at the decision-making point. Similarly, reminders, such as automatic emails or decision-making tools and checklists, are useful techniques for nudging behaviors at appropriate times.

In the USAID context, reminders to use evidence could take several forms. For example, staff might receive automated emails or pop-ups on screen when new evidence is uploaded to an online evidence repository such as the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC). Additionally, reminders could be sent at key decision-making points during a project's life cycle reminding staff of the existence of relevant findings.

Build Individuals' Professional Identities and Roles

People tend to align their actions with their beliefs about themselves. Reminding staff of their professional identity as 'evidence-informed decision makers' can increase their use of findings. Leaders can convey such messages in emails and presentations; and language used in organizational policies, codes of conduct, and guiding principles can be updated accordingly.

One way to integrate this approach is by establishing a community of designated 'evidence use champions'—select USAID staff who model evidence use and promote new findings. Champions should have clearly defined responsibilities and goals to motivate them in this role, and be offered training and networking opportunities with other champions.

Strengthen Capacity of Evidence Producers or Disseminators by Using Effective Adult Learning Techniques

Adult learning programs can improve evidence producers' (e.g., evaluators) understanding of how to disseminate evidence effectively. Country-based evidence producers should be included in such capacity-strengthening exercises.

These programs should use proven techniques. For example, it is important to actively engage participants in learning, through hands-on workshops with peers and mentorships where new skills can be applied in real-time, for instance.

Apply Techniques from Communications and Marketing to Improve Dissemination

Creating targeted, accessible communications products increases the likelihood of people paying attention to and absorbing information. To accomplish this, it is necessary to identify the various audience groups for the evaluation findings, to assess those aspects of the findings most relevant and useful to them, and to develop products that are tailored in terms of format, messages, and language.

Different types of messaging can also be tested to determine what works best with a given audience to motivate them to engage with findings. For example, a social norms-based message (such as: "Your colleagues have accessed this evaluation. Have you?") could be tested against a professional identity-based message (such as: "As a USAID team member, you use evidence to strengthen the impact of your work. Click here for the latest findings.").

Alongside increasing motivation, it is also important to provide multiple ways to access evaluation could be communicated through a combination of an email newsletter, a leader's announcement, a webinar, and an online platform, for example.

Design User-Friendly Evidence Repositories and Resources for Accessing Findings

Well-designed online evidence repositories create easy, user-focused ways for decision makers to access information by removing barriers related to limited time and information overload. Five ways to increase the effectiveness of online repositories, such as USAID's DEC, are: (1) assessing a website from the point of view of the main decision-maker groups' information needs, and then optimizing its structure, buttons, and search terms; (2) using algorithms to suggest content that is most likely to be of interest to users based on their past interactions on the site; (3) building mobile apps to allow decision makers to access evidence anytime they need; (4) creating data visualizations, such as infographics and dashboards; and (5) synthesizing findings to reduce information overload.

Accredit Individuals Following Training Completion

When clients and employers require accreditation, or view it favorably, individuals are more likely to participate in training and apply the techniques learned. USAID could create an accreditation process that strengthens evaluators' ability to communicate their findings. The accreditation would provide evaluators with training in topics such as audience segmentation and tailored dissemination, behavioral techniques to frame and present information, and data visualization. These techniques could also be incorporated into USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Toolkit and Evaluation Toolkit and other relevant guidelines, to align official guidance with what is covered in the training.

Strengthen Organizational Norms around Evidence Use

Organizational norms can drive the use of evaluation findings by reinforcing the belief that one is expected to use evidence. Norms can be reinforced in multiple ways, including by making staff aware of how frequently their colleagues use evaluation findings and how much they value using evidence for decision making. Considering their level of influence, leaders are important contributors in promoting evidence-use norms—which they can do by modeling and promoting evidence use and rewarding evidence-users.

To strengthen evidence-use norms, USAID could establish structures for recognizing the effective use of evaluation findings. For example, the agency could create a 'Team of the Quarter' recognition, profiling a team that served as an exemplar for use of evaluation findings in their work. Leaders would announce this recognition to their teams.

Change Decision-Making Structures and Processes

Because decision makers are often limited by time and competing demands, it is important to make evidence access and use easy, or even habitual, for them. This can be done by adjusting decision-making structures and processes. For example, people's natural propensity to favor solutions requiring less effort means that they are more likely to select the 'default' option—that is, the option that has been preselected. Changing the decision-making environment to incorporate defaults—for example, by making an online evidence repository the default page in one's browser—can help strengthen use and turn evidence use into a habit.

USAID could also create a decision-making tool for its staff to help guide them to select a learning or evidence-generation activity that produces relevant, timely evidence. The tool would guide staff in thinking through research questions, the intended users, and key decision-making points that the evidence could inform. It would incorporate a strategy that reduces bias in decision making, such as encouraging people to "consider the opposite" of whatever decision they are about to make.

Create Structured Collaborations between Decision Makers and Evaluators

To increase evidence use, interactions between researchers and decision makers must be structured and well planned, with clear objectives. They should also build trust, including by establishing regular contact between stakeholders, creating a space for informal interactions, providing clear outlines of the collaborative process, and supporting the co-development of research questions.

USAID and evaluation teams can follow three principles for effective collaboration: (1) create a clear process to ensure transparency and evaluator independence; (2) spend time in kick-off meetings establishing professional and group identities that promote evidence use, build trust, and allow for constructive exchanges; and (3) co-develop evaluation questions and recommendations.

Final Note

By applying a behavioral lens to understanding barriers and enablers to the use of evaluation findings and employing behavioral insights to design evidence-use interventions, we bolster our chances of strengthening evidence use. Because behavior is context-specific, interventions should be tested before being widely rolled out, with a clear theory of change developed to explain how they are expected to work, along with a plan for measuring their effectiveness to inform adaptation.

For more information

D4I supports countries to realize the power of data as actionable evidence that can improve programs, policies, and—ultimately—health outcomes. We strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of local partners to collect, analyze, and use data to support their move to self-reliance. For more information, visit https://www.data4impactproject.org/

This publication was produced with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Data for Impact (D4I) associate award 7200AA18LA00008, which is implemented by the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in partnership with Palladium International, LLC; ICF Macro, Inc.; John Snow, Inc.; and Tulane University. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government. FS-22-588