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# Implementing the BalancedD-MERL Approach in the Women + Water Global Development Alliance

## Executive Summary

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## ABOUT THE BALANCED-MERL CONSORTIUM

The Balanced Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (BalanceD-MERL) consortium, under the U.S. Global Development Lab's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) program at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is identifying solutions to commonly faced challenges in design (D) and implementation of monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL). D-MERL refers to the integration of program design, strategy, and implementation with MERL activities. The consortium provided support and technical assistance to USAID programs to enhance and conduct D-MERL activities. The consortium consists of five organizations: World Vision (prime awardee), Innovations for Poverty Action, Institute for Development Impact, Search for Common Ground, and William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan.

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## BRIEF SUMMARY OF THIS DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to provide an insider look at the application of the BalanceD-MERL approach in a program operating in a complex environment. The Women + Water Global Development Alliance is a five-year (2017-2022) collaboration among USAID, Gap, Inc., CARE, Water.org, the Institute for Sustainable Communities and the International Center for Research on Women. Together, these organizations are leveraging their complementary strengths to improve and sustain the health and well-being of women and communities touched by the apparel industry. The BalanceD-MERL consortium delivered a MERL strategy to the Alliance. In this document, the BalanceD-MERL consortium shares their experience of applying the approach and provides key takeaways from the application of the approach. The BalanceD-MERL consortium also gives decision-makers, program implementers, and MERL practitioners action-items to undertake to enhance the effectiveness of this approach.

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## USEFUL DEFINITIONS

- **Adaptive management** is defined as an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments to improve the program's activities and implementation in response to new information and changes in context that is captured through MERL data. Here decision-makers intentionally seek to incorporate learning into program delivery. This definition of adaptive management is based on the definition provided by USAID in ADS 201.6.
- **D-MERL** is defined as the integration of MERL activities with program design. *Monitoring* performance of the program, *evaluating* the program on its goals, developing a *research* agenda to generate new knowledge, and supporting iterative *learning* to adjust the program in response to new information and changes in context, are all integrated with the *design* and implementation of program activities. The goals of this is to create better programming to meet set objectives and increase developmental impact.
- **Key stakeholders** are defined as (1) the target audience(s) of the program, (2) key local partners such as local non-profits, civil society organizations, and government, (3) organizations implementing program activities, and (4) funders of a program. These multiple and varied individuals and groups may affect or be affected by the program.
- **Leadership** are the higher authority decision-makers in the organization who are often removed from the target audience(s) and communities where the program activities are being implemented. Leadership of organizations in a partnership ought to come together to set the vision for the partnership and collectively define the objectives of the program. Leadership also tend to serve as higher in the hierarchy than program managers and the MERL teams.
- **MERL activities** are both the activities and the iterative process of developing activities for performance measurement of the program. These activities measure and monitor how effective a program is at a moment in time as well as how to make the program more impactful in the future. Key activities include developing and implementing the following: (1) theory of change including program assumptions, (2) risk matrix, (3) evaluation matrix including the learning questions, (4) key performance indicators (with relevant metadata, namely definition of the indicator, unit of measure, source of data, reporting frequency, and data collection method), (5) research design including sampling strategy for the treatment and comparison group if applicable, and (6) data analysis plans and methods.
- **MERL team** is the collective term used for the person or group of individuals who develop and implement MERL activities for a program. There may be MERL teams from each organization in a partnership and/or there may be one overarching MERL team at the program-level overseeing the MERL of all program activities. The funder may or may not have a dedicated representative who focuses on the MERL of the program. Multiple MERL teams might collaborate on certain tasks and decisions or they might work individually to develop and implement MERL plans for their organization's activities. This depends on the specific needs of the partnership.
- **Target audience(s) of the program** are beneficiaries in a non-market-based program or customers, distributors, producers, and/or employees in a market-based program.
- **Program design** is both the activities that are planned to achieve the objectives of the program as well as the iterative process of developing the activities. These activities are often aimed at the target audience(s) of a program or for the benefit of them.
- **Program staff** is the collective term used for the activity design and implementation staffers. This includes the managers and field officers designing and implementing the activity to meet the objectives of the program. This does not include the program and organizational leadership nor the MERL person/team members. In programs, with multiple activities implemented by multiple organizations, program staff from each of these organizations collaborate with one another to find cohesion in the activities. There may also be an overarching program management team that oversees the design and implementation of all activities in the program.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Introduction.** The Balanced Design, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (BalanceD-MERL) consortium, under the U.S. Global Development Lab's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) program at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is identifying solutions to the D-MERL challenges posed when resources are limited but programs or country contexts are complex. The consortium hypothesizes: (1) A deliberate balanced *integration* of MERL activities with program design, strategy, and implementation will lead to a team's ability to rapidly and iteratively learn from their program implementation and incorporate lessons into their program design and (2) Applying four principles – *relevant, right-sized, responsible, and trustworthy* – into D-MERL can enable continuous learning as well as sustainable integration of MERL with program design, to subsequently improve the program through good program management.

The BalanceD-MERL consortium is testing its hypotheses through the delivery of technical assistance to USAID programs. To this end, this document describes the 15-month technical assistance provided to the Women + Water Global Development Alliance (Women + Water) and resultant learning and recommendations. Commencing in 2017, Women + Water is a five-year collaboration among USAID, Gap, Inc., CARE, the International Center for Research on Women, Water.org, and the Institute for Sustainable Communities. The goal of their collaboration is to improve and sustain the health and well-being of women and communities touched by the apparel industry.

USAID engaged the BalanceD-MERL consortium to provide longitudinal MERL support to Women + Water in India. Following an initial review of program and partner MERL documentation, as well as discussions with the Women + Water partners, the BalanceD-MERL consortium determined that the program design and MERL planning were nascent. However, because the Alliance and its management structure were complex, and the program would be multifaceted, the BalanceD-MERL consortium proposed and was commissioned to deliver a MERL strategy – a framework for MERL decision-making and implementation that presents an overarching program learning agenda and strategic priorities for performance management. The MERL strategy was to be developed through a structured, participatory process involving Women + Water program staff and the MERL team, commencing with co-development of the program's theory of change. Because Gap, Inc. had not worked with USAID previously and had limited D-MERL capacity, the consortium also was commissioned to provide MERL mentorship to Gap, Inc. throughout the engagement.

**BalanceD-MERL's Technical Assistance.** The BalanceD-MERL consortium's integration approach relied on facilitated communication among MERL teams and program staff and among partners. The BalanceD-MERL consortium's initial work focused on working with the partners to build the program's theory of change, a foundational component of the MERL strategy that informs all the other strategy components. However, these early attempts to construct the theory of change while both facilitating integration between the MERL and program teams and incorporating the BalanceD-MERL principles were hindered by the Alliance's slow progress in finalizing the program design. Continued updates to the program design resulted in backtracking and revisions to the theory of change. In response, there were two occasions over the BalanceD-MERL consortium's 15-month engagement in which the consortium paused its development of the MERL strategy to allow the program design to mature. These intermissions sought to *right-size* resources as well as to promote *relevant* and *trustworthy* MERL activities that matched the program design.

As the technical assistance progressed, there were other barriers to the integration of MERL with program design. These included a lack of cohesion and communication among partners stemming from the group's rushed formation; the complexity of USAID's management structure of Women + Water; and MERL competency issues at Gap, Inc., which was providing overall management for the partnership. The BalanceD-MERL consortium capitalized upon a Women + Water MERL strategy workshop to edify the partners' program and MERL staff about key components of the Women + Water program-level MERL strategy and to elicit the partners' *relevant* and *trustworthy* feedback on the draft MERL strategy components. Throughout, the BalanceD-MERL consortium encountered situations in which tradeoffs between the BalanceD-MERL principles were possible or necessary. For example, while the program design evolved, the BalanceD-MERL consortium proceeded with selection of key performance indicators (KPIs) for the program. This created a tradeoff between *relevant* (selecting KPIs on a ready version of the theory of change) and *right-size* (managing the resources of time). However, even during these instances, the BalanceD-MERL consortium applied the principles as possible. For example, to ensure a *relevant* and *right-sized* MERL strategy, the BalanceD-MERL consortium solicited and incorporated multiple rounds of feedback from the Women + Water partners. As the theory of change approached finalization, the other components of the MERL strategy were fleshed out.

The BalanceD-MERL technical assistance culminated with a final exit workshop with Gap, Inc.'s MERL team and USAID, to prepare Gap Inc. to implement the MERL strategy. The workshop included: (1) a detailed review of the theory of change, (2) discussion and decision-making around outstanding MERL strategy content, including key performance indicator selection, (3) capacity building exercises with Gap, Inc.'s MERL team, and (4) recommendations for next steps in implementation. The final MERL strategy incorporated content from these discussions and was transferred to Gap, Inc. for implementation.

**Findings and Recommendations.** The BalanceD-MERL consortium found that the technical assistance pilot with Women + Water provided limited evidence to support its hypotheses about the benefits of integrating MERL activities with program design and about application of the four BalanceD-MERL principles. The findings are limited because, as of September 2018, the program and MERL implementation activities on Women + Water are in their beginning stages. However, early feedback from the partners about the implementation of the MERL strategy are suggestive that integration is ongoing, and there is evidence of adaptive management.

Additional learning from the BalanceD-MERL consortium's experience with Women + Water can be summarized into seven takeaways, described below. The first three relate to utilization-focused MERL. Takeaways 4 and 5 concern relationship building and expectation setting in a collaboration. The final two takeaways pertain to resource management.

1. Integration of MERL with program design can improve both program design and MERL activities and in a cost-friendly manner. This integration also enables good program management and adaptive management. To enable integration of MERL with program design, example action items include (1) requesting program staff to work with the MERL team to co-develop the theory of change as well as the subsequent MERL activities and (2) building in sufficient time for the co-development of MERL activities in the program design phase.
2. Leadership's and program staff's competency in MERL bolsters integration of MERL with program design, investment in MERL, and implementation of adaptive management. To leverage the MERL competency of leadership and program staff, example action items include (1) assessing their MERL competency and developing solutions for competency gaps and (2) identifying MERL champions who can advocate for investment in MERL competency and the use of MERL for good program management.
3. Organizations tend to overlook the design and implementation of learning activities necessary for adaptive management of their programs and thus either fail to implement adaptive management or do so in an ad-hoc manner, both of which result in missed opportunities to improve the program in real-time. To give equal important to learning activities, example action items include (1) establishing a learning culture by encouraging program staff to share information transparently and (2) thoughtfully designing learning activities during the program design phase.
4. Unless managed head-on and upfront, differences in culture, working styles, and MERL competence among organizations in a partnership can drain resources, affect timelines, and possibly compromise program design. To enable the development of a shared culture within the partnership, example action items include (1) building in extra time for partnership building and (2) using participatory processes for decision making.
5. In the event that a third-party organization provides MERL services to the partnership, this service provider ought to conduct a detailed handover process when they exit. But in addition to that, and in fact throughout the period of engagement, they should provide necessary capacity building to MERL team(s) and program staff in the partnership. To enable a successful engagement with a third-party organization providing MERL services, example action items include (1) ongoing open conversations between the parties involved and (2) conducting an in-person exit workshop with relevant partnership staff to handover each MERL activity.
6. The four principles of BalanceD-MERL have been appropriately identified and developed to design and implement rigorous MERL activities as well as to integrate MERL with program design. While all the principles are necessary, it is possible that a principle is used more frequently than another at a point in time in the development of MERL activities. In addition, there will be times when tradeoffs will have to be made between principles. To enable effective use of the BalanceD-MERL principles, example action items include (1) actively using the principles in conversations to guide the development of MERL activities and (2) developing creative solutions to minimize possible negative effects from particular tradeoffs between the principles.
7. Without a mature program design, the theory of change cannot be co-developed accurately and in a timely manner. All subsequent MERL activities, designed based on the theory of change, then suffer the same fate, resulting in a loss of resources. To right-size the development of MERL activities, example action items include (1) first assessing the maturity of the program design and (2) proceeding to theory of change development and, then, MERL strategy development only if the program design is deemed mature.