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APPLYING RECOMMENDATIONS OF EVALUATION UTILIZATION IN USAID/PERU



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IN 2011, USAID RELEASED ITS EVALUATION POLICY (updated in October 2016), which set ambitious standards for high quality, relevant and transparent evaluations that document results, generate evidence to inform decisions, promote learning and accountability. To help ensure their practical value, this policy mandates periodic reviews of the Agency's evaluation use. In 2015, the USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) commissioned an independent study, 'Evaluation Utilization at USAID' (published February 2016), which included six recommendations regarding guidance, tools and Agency practices that could enhance evaluation utilization moving forward.

USAID/Peru conducts evaluations and other studies through its Evaluations Project (April 2013 – March 2018),¹ which is a monitoring, evaluation and learning platform (the Platform). The Platform carries out the evaluations and studies either directly with its own staff or through sub-contracting local teams. The purpose of this brief is to promote learning from these positive and challenging study implementation experiences by describing how USAID and the Platform have applied the six recommendations set forth in the Evaluation Utilization study. The brief summarizes Peru's Platform experience in engaging stakeholders (host country counterparts, implementing partners (IPs)) in the design and implementation of evaluations and studies, sharing good evaluation practices, promoting the use of findings, and disseminating its results.

This review draws principally from a selection of eight evaluations and studies conducted in Peru by the Platform between 2014 and 2016. These studies have been selected for their ability to serve as illustrative "cases" for specific topics.² Five of the eight cases correspond to performance evaluations (cases 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5). The remaining three cases (Cases 6, 7 and 8) are assessments implemented to close the knowledge gap of specific development issues.

1 Evaluations Project is a five-year USAID/Peru activity to foster evidence-based development programming through improved learning, monitoring and evaluations implemented by Partners for Global Research and Development.

2 The Platform has decided not to use the title of an evaluation, study or project, instead designating these as 'Cases'.



Photo: USAID

RECOMMENDATION #1:

ENGAGE PARTNERS DURING THE EVALUATION PROCESS FROM PLANNING TO IMPLEMENTATION TO REVIEW THROUGH DISSEMINATION.

Engaging partners in the evaluation process enhances the quality of the evaluation while contributing to the credibility of its findings and recommendations among an important end-user.³ USAID is the gatekeeper for the engagement of stakeholders, in general, and implementing partners (IPs), in particular, at any point in the evaluation process. Management of stakeholder engagement by the different evaluated-project Contracting Officer's Representatives (COR/AORs) or Government Agreement Technical Representative (GATR), affects the Platform from using a consistent protocol for engaging partners as part of the evaluation process. Given the importance assigned by USAID directives mandating the involvement of partners, including IPs, the Platform recommends that USAID establish guidelines for COR/AORs and GATRs regarding stakeholder engagement to ensure the best possible evaluation outcomes.

This recommendation is supported by the Platform's experiences to date. The following four cases, from the eight drawn for this brief, illustrate the ways in

which different levels of engagement have affected evaluations. Engagement of the IPs was particularly important in the first of the following four Cases and of the corresponding main host government counterpart in the latter four.

- **Case 1:** the evaluated-project AOR shared and solicited feedback from the IP and included the Platform in these communications. This worked well and, more importantly, reassured everyone that the evaluation was understood and accepted by all stakeholders.
- **Case 2:** the Platform maintained communication with the evaluated-project COR who obtained feedback from the IP that was then relayed to the Platform. Although the Platform was informed, the COR preferred to discuss the evaluation with the IP without the Platform staff's direct involvement. This approach had one main drawback - it was inefficient. The increased time required to complete the longer feedback loops also resulted in a longer response time from the evaluation team. This significantly delayed total completion of the evaluation.
- **Case 3:** the evaluated-project COR met jointly with the Platform and with the IP for the discussion of evaluation questions, the kick-off meeting, coordination of agendas and itineraries, and so on. This approach shared a wealth of information that ensured the evaluated-project was fully understood by the evaluators; and engendered a sense of

3 ADS 201.3.5.15 (Planning Evaluations) states that "stakeholders, including beneficiaries, partner country partners, implementing partners, other USAID and U.S. Government entities, should be engaged to inform the development and prioritization of evaluation questions." Moreover, "Except in unusual circumstances, the key elements of the design must be shared with implementing partners of the projects or activities..." (ADS 201.3.5.16 – Evaluation Implementation). "Draft reports must be shared with implementing partners of the projects or activities..." (ADS 201.3.5.17 – Evaluation Reports). Finally, "Evaluations should be distributed widely, inform decision making, and contribute to learning..." (ADS 201.3.5.18 – Evaluation Utilization).

common purpose that generated trust that was critical during the implementation of the evaluation.

- **Case 4:** the evaluated-project AOR trusted the Platform to manage communications directly with the IPs once it had the necessary inputs and guidance. In this case, direct engagement with the IPs facilitated the evaluation team in understanding different nuances directly from each evaluated project that allowed them to plan fieldwork better, among others. The AOR participated timely and actively during the key points that required his/her engagement.
- **Case 5:** the evaluated-project GATR and the IP's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) team jointly provided the main evaluation questions to the Platform which were subsequently refined in coordination with the evaluation team. The parallel guidance provided by USAID M&E Point of Contact (POC) and the Platform to the evaluation team was not the best arrangement.

- **Case 6-8** were studies, not evaluations. In all three Cases, the relevant technical team was actively involved in the identification of questions or research themes, kick-off meetings, and identification of key informants. This provided effective and quick focus and understanding of the purposes of the tasks. The degree of participation of key stakeholders during implementation varied, from passive to active engagement in meetings and workshops. In all three Cases, staff from the technical offices found findings very useful.

Based on these experiences, involving IPs and host government counterparts does have a significant value added in making the process more efficient and robust. In cases where engagement has been closer, the implementation process was generally shorter and produced higher quality draft reports. Good engagement also contributed increased and earlier understanding by the evaluation team of the evaluated activities.

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RECOMMENDATION #2:

SHARE GUIDANCE ON BEST PRACTICES TO ENSURE THAT EVALUATIONS ARE HIGH QUALITY AND RELEVANT EVERY TIME.

Learning from the experience of previous years, starting 2015, the Platform enhanced its evaluation management process through ten “moments” to systematically provide guidance to the evaluation team, and meet USAID expectations regarding quality and timely delivery.

These Moments constitute milestones that guide the process forward when accomplished by the relevant parties (i.e. the evaluation team, USAID or the Platform).

- **Moments 1-4** are related to design elements, from the identification of the questions or subject of research, to the methodology, team composition and timeframe of the evaluation or study. The process starts with the identification of issues or questions USAID wants to have answers to. These moments culminate with USAID approval of the Statement of Work (SOW).
- To ensure that expectations on the evaluation or study are well understood, the Platform organizes a kick-off meeting (**Moment 5**) for each evaluation or study with the participation of the three main parties involved in its implementation – the evaluation team, USAID (the Regional Program Office (RPO) M&E coordinator and the technical office, at least the M&E POC and COR/ AOR/GATR) and Platform staff (the evaluation experts and the Chief of Party). Inviting the IP to the kick-off meeting led to a more efficient coordination during the evaluation (Case 3). This kick-off meeting ensures all parties share a common understanding on the purpose and objective of the study, the intended audiences, and the expected quality of the evaluation. Moreover, participants receive guideline materials and discuss three evaluation characteristics at length: evaluation/ study contents, format and procedures. The Platform provides the evaluation team with tools and guidance regarding the use of standardized best practices offered in the USAID Evaluation Toolkit. It particularly focuses in the preparation and delivery of three key products: the inception report, the preliminary findings and the draft final report.
- Following the kick-off meeting, the evaluation team confirms its understanding of the guidance received on best practices through the submission of an Inception Report (**Moment 6**). This report incorporates all previous guidance and enhances the SOW with details regarding the methodology, fieldwork, data collection instruments, data analyses, deliverables and timeline stages of the evaluation. Once approved, the Inception Report constitutes a key reference for the implementation of the evaluation or study.
- The Platform accompanies the evaluation team throughout the process ensuring that the following moments are completed as planned. For the presentation of the initial findings (**Moment 7**), the Platform ensures executive, well-prepared Power Point presentations. Very seldom is one revision of the draft final report (**Moment 8**) enough since most evaluation teams are not too immersed with USAID’s format and even writing style. The Platform provides close guidance and support. **Moments 9 and 10** constitute the discussion of the Plan of Recommendations (see Recommendation 4 Section) and the final report that is eventually approved by USAID. This process ensures quality products and on time delivery, or at minimum, concerted efforts and decision making to shepherd the evaluation to successful completion.

4 <https://usaidlearninglab.org/evaluation>.



RECOMMENDATION #3:

HOLD BRIEFINGS—NOT JUST WITH USAID STAFF, BUT WITH IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS, THE DONOR COMMUNITY AND LOCAL COUNTRY GOVERNMENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS.

The Platform provides at least two briefings of findings of every single evaluation and study to USAID – one to the RPO and COR/AOR of the evaluated activity (on occasion IP representatives) and another to the Mission at large. The former is a presentation of initial findings that usually takes place before completion of the draft report. Its main purpose is to discuss the findings and provide feedback to the evaluation team and Platform staff. These serve to enrich and fine tune the draft report and to prepare the second briefing which is more executive and to a broader USAID audience. Based on the intended uses of the evaluation or study, one or two additional presentations to USAID/Washington and other USG agencies, and other partners or stakeholders may be delivered by either the evaluation team or the Platform.

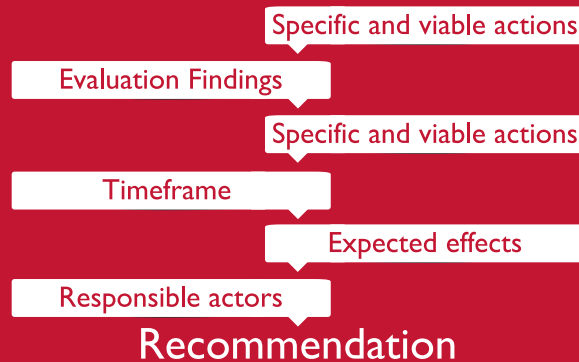
- **Cases 1-3** constituted final evaluations. IPs were no longer active by the time the initial findings were produced except for case 3.
- In **Case 4**, the project Platform provided briefings on study results to other IPs working on the same development topic and also to USAID/Washington, a main stakeholder.

- In **Case 5**, the Platform and USAID briefed the host government counterpart on the results of the evaluation. This special briefing served greatly to assess evaluation recommendations and jointly elaborate post evaluation actions.
- In **Cases 6 and 7**, findings of the studies were shared broadly within USAID, technical office IPs and other USG agencies working in the sector. Learning from the studies served to have a better understanding of the context where the development work is occurring.
- Results and recommendations of **Case 6** were received with high interest by the technical teams of more than one office and reminded staff about the importance of knowing the potential beneficiaries and their cultural context.
- In **Case 8**, USAID presented and directly shared the findings and final report with its government counterpart in anticipation of the implementation of several recommendations proposed in the study.

While it is ideal to share and brief all possible stakeholders, including other development partners, often times this requires customizing the presentation (e.g., language, length, types of recommendations). This also entails including appropriate time and resources in the SOW and in the dissemination plan. The Platform found important to carry out collaborative meetings that include briefings and joint work among USAID and stakeholders. From the above, this recommendation has been implemented to varying degrees, but in no case has the donor community been engaged yet.

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ELEMENTS OF A PLAN OF RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATION #4:

DEVELOP TRACKERS THAT LINK EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS TO SPECIFIC ACTIONS, RESPONSIBLE PARTIES AND TIMELINES.

By translating study results into concrete actions by designated parties at particular times, ‘trackers’ provide a road map to the utilization of study results. As per ADS 201.3.5.18, “...Mission and Washington OUs must develop a post-evaluation action plan upon completion of an evaluation.” Under the project, all evaluation reports include a Recommendations Plan that is either an annex or submitted as a separate document.⁵ Each SOW mandates that the contents of this plan serve as a tracker that links recommendations to specific actions and, particularly, to the timeframe agreed for their implementation.

The Platform facilitates the completion of the recommendations implementation plan (the Plan) with

USAID participation. This Plan is discussed in detail with the participation of the evaluation team, the USAID M&E, RPO, the COR/AOR/GATR, and Platform staff. In theory, the Plan unpacks each recommendation into specific and feasible actions, identifies the person/actor responsible for their implementation, their priority (if appropriate) and the timeframe for taking action. In the case of strategic recommendations, this discussion often does not reach the point of identifying responsible parties and timelines because the appropriate decision makers are not involved. Therefore, the completion and commitment to the plan are left pending for USAID in the report.

Finally, the Platform tracks on an annual basis the number of recommendation plans agreed for implementation and the percentage of evaluations/studies used to improve programs or projects. To this end, an online survey is completed by USAID/Peru staff members that have been involved in developing, or targeted as clients of, the Platform’s studies. According to these survey respondents, some 63% in 2015 and 67% in 2016 used at least one evaluation and/or study.⁶

⁵ Assessments and other non-evaluations do not necessarily include a Plan of Recommendations.

⁶ The project carried out one in April 2016 and plans to conduct a second and final one in January 2018.



RECOMMENDATION #5:

CREATE ACCESSIBLE PRODUCTS TO COMPLEMENT THE EVALUATION REPORT. SHORT BRIEFS AND ABSTRACTS OFFER AN OVERVIEW OF KEY POINTS AND ENABLE CONVERSATION AND DECISION-MAKING.

The Platform understands that the value of its deliverables is proportional to the use USAID gives them. Therefore, it creates a series of additional products to make these studies more accessible and to generate interest among a variety of end-users. Besides the required executive summary in English and Spanish, more recently, each evaluation or study contains a 250-word abstract in both languages in compliance with

USAID guidance. In addition, the Platform prepares and facilitates the discussion and completion of a Recommendation Implementation Plan with USAID representatives.

In Case 8, the Platform promoted the publication of the final report in a book which was not only disseminated through a well-known web site of a Peruvian non-profit organization, but was shared among academic and public entities with success.

Finally, over the last year, the Platform has begun producing Evaluation Fact Sheets, which have the evaluation final report and related working material as sole source. This work is accomplished in a collaborative fashion with USAID Development Outreach and Communications team. These two-page documents present a targeted selection of the most applicable and relevant findings and recommendations and are intended for dissemination to a wider audience beyond USAID.



RECOMMENDATION #6:

SYNTHESIZE EVALUATION FINDINGS ACROSS MULTIPLE EVALUATIONS IN KEY SECTORS TO EASE ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION FOR MISSIONS.

The Platform has begun preparation of reader-friendly Learning Brief (LB) reports to disseminate study findings, conclusions and recommendations across studies and to promote the application of evaluation and study best practices. This includes an analytical focus on cumulative learning and best practices drawn from the management and implementation of the evaluations and assessments.

The fact that the Platform has carried out evaluations and studies for all technical teams, and that the RPO is the office responsible to manage the Platform and the M&E function, has provided an opportunity to identify common trends in the findings and conclusions across several evaluations and studies. A case in point was the analysis and presentation made by the Platform that identified selected areas for improvement on activity design in USAID that included internal decision makers. In addition, themes were jointly selected with USAID M&E team on strategic learning gaps from the 28 evaluation and studies for the preparation of learning briefs. Governance and knowledge transfer are two key examples. Targeted audiences vary but are mainly focused on USAID staff and IPs. These briefs are usually discussed with USAID staff.

USAID/Peru, through its Evaluations Project, has performed well when compared to the six recommendations and will continue refining and consolidating these best practices. The challenge for the near future will be to apply them in a uniform manner and make them part of standard operations.

TAKEAWAYS FROM EACH OF THE SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.**
 - Engage partners from design to implementation to dissemination.
 - Increased IP involvement leads to more efficient and robust evaluation processes.
- 2.**
 - Share best practice guidance with relevant stakeholders
 - Evaluations Project's 10 moments provides systematic guidance to the evaluation management process.
- 3.**
 - Hold briefings with IPs, donor community, and local country governments.
 - At the request of USAID, provide briefings on study results to USAID/Washington.
- 4.**
 - Develop trackers that link recommendations to specific actions, responsible parties and timeframe.
 - 67% of USAID surveyed staff used at least one or more evaluation or study.
- 5.**
 - Create user-friendly products to enable conversation and decision-making.
 - The value of the Project's evaluations is proportional to the use USAID gives them.
- 6.**
 - Create reader-friendly learning briefs to summarize findings across multiple evaluations to promote the use of evaluation best practices.
 - Hold dynamic learning sessions with USAID and implementing partners to discuss and brainstorm on the learning briefs.

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