



Strengthening Capacity for Rigorous Evaluation in Malawi

Background

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded **Data for Impact (D4I)** project works with countries to strengthen capacity for rigorous evaluation by engaging with local institutions and evaluators as essential collaborators and learning partners. We plan and implement diverse capacity strengthening approaches, design our efforts around local priorities, and work to measure improvements in capacity and performance resulting from these efforts.

This brief highlights D4I's partnership with the **Centre for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi** and how D4I strives to practice the principles of effective programming and equitable partnerships outlined in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening (LCS) Policy through an intentional, partner-centered approach.

USAID LCS Policy Principle 1:

Start with the local system. Local capacity strengthening is a strategic and intentional investment in the process of partnering with local actors, including individuals, organizations, and networks, to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable development outcomes. With CSR, D4I designed capacity strengthening interventions to include and support local actors in the unique roles they perform within the existing system to enhance overall system performance.

Locally Led Context

D4I conducted an impact evaluation of the Malawi Secondary Education Expansion for Development (SEED) activity in collaboration with CSR. Local engagement extended to all aspects of the evaluation, including design, planning, capacity strengthening through collaborative implementation and training, and support for evidence use in policies and programs. In addition to “learning-by-doing” opportunities for organizational capacity strengthening offered by co-implementing a large-scale evaluation, D4I and CSR worked together to identify a set of activities to strengthen the organization's capacity for qualitative and quantitative analysis and results dissemination.



CSR SEED evaluation team at the midline data collector training.
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Using D4I's RECAP Tool to Catalyze Capacity Strengthening

To identify CSR's capacity strengthening needs and priorities related to rigorous evaluation, D4I implemented the Research and Evaluation Capacity Assessment Tool and Resource Package (RECAP) with CSR. RECAP is designed to provide a process-oriented self-assessment of an organization's evaluation capacity strengths and priorities for growth. The RECAP tool assesses capacity in six domains through a consensus-building approach. CSR staff participated in a RECAP assessment workshop and identified existing organizational strengths and opportunities for growth in the areas of qualitative and quantitative analysis and results dissemination.



D4I's capacity strengthening interventions included:

1. Qualitative software training and collaborative

analysis. D4I trained CSR qualitative team members plus research interns on Dedoose qualitative software at both baseline and midline to code transcripts for thematic analysis. D4I provided a monthly subscription to the software for each team member for the analysis period. CSR and D4I jointly analyzed the qualitative data at both baseline and midline, with CSR taking the lead at midline.

"I am more confident in analyzing qualitative data using Dedoose ... We are trying to internalize Dedoose within CSR as a qualitative data analysis software ... unlike other software because they are complicated and also relatively expensive compared to Dedoose."

—CSR Researcher

2. Quantitative impact evaluation mentoring and collaborative analysis.

"Using difference-in-difference analysis technique – I have never used it before, but I am confident that in future projects ... when we have an evaluation which uses treatment and comparison groups ... using difference-in differences data analysis technique, I will definitely apply that."

—CSR Researcher

D4I's quantitative analyst worked closely with CSR to mentor their quantitative lead on the difference-in-differences (DID) method for comparing changes in outcomes over time between the evaluation's treatment and comparison groups to estimate the impact of the SEED activity. At midline, CSR led the analysis of the evaluation's school-level data using the DID method with regular mentoring from D4I, including review of coding.

3. Data visualization training and collaborative dissemination of evaluation findings.



D4I also provided virtual trainings on data visualization, which culminated in the development of a [SEED theory of change \(TOC\) brief](#) by CSR. The training covered assessing your audience, communication messaging, visualizing data relevant to audiences that adopt data visualization best practices, and finalizing the TOC brief. CSR also jointly presented the study findings with D4I at dissemination meetings with USAID, the Ministry of Education, nongovernmental organizations, donors, and other stakeholders.

"There was training on data visualization. We have historically developed presentation slides and briefs without adding the visuals. Because of this ... training, we got the skills to add visuals to make the dissemination output more interesting and attractive to the audience. Also, we got the expertise to say when you are developing the outputs you should have the audience in mind—Is it the participants? Is it the policymakers? Is it the donor community? That way we will develop something which will be easily understood."

—CSR Researcher

"The dissemination brief we developed; we were privileged to be part of it ... This skill that we learned can be used further than this activity."

—CSR Researcher



What factors supported local capacity strengthening?

- **Using a participatory tool to catalyze change**

Use of D4I's RECAP tool allowed CSR to identify and advocate for their priorities in capacity strengthening. This provided an opportunity for both the organization and individual staff members to strengthen their skills in qualitative and quantitative data analysis, visualization, and dissemination. The use of the RECAP tool also provided an opportunity for CSR to identify areas for capacity strengthening beyond the assistance that D4I was able to provide.

- **Adopting an integrated approach**

While there was not a dedicated budget for capacity strengthening under this evaluation, capacity strengthening interventions were incorporated throughout the evaluation, allowing for tailored training, collaborative learning, consistent engagement, and on-the-job mentoring throughout the evaluation process.

“We used D4I’s RECAP tool to assess our capacity gaps and then together we developed a capacity building plan ... Importantly, we also had the opportunity to evaluate our capacity deficits which even outside this SEED impact evaluation activity, we will be able to implement some initiatives to further develop our capacities.”

—CSR Researcher

Mutuality in Partnerships

The partnership between D4I and CSR illustrated concrete examples of incorporating locally led capacity strengthening interventions into a complex evaluation. This mutually beneficial collaboration contributed toward sustainable, systems-level outcomes and local ownership. A key aspect of this work was the use of the RECAP tool, which helped CSR identify and advocate for the specific capacity areas in which they desired strengthening.



USAID LCS Policy Principle 2: Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches. Capacity strengthening approaches included learning-by-doing through collaborative implementation of an impact evaluation, training on qualitative software, mentoring on quantitative method for impact estimation, training on data visualization best practices, and hands-on learning through the development of a dissemination brief.

Malawi SEED midline evaluation dissemination meeting with USAID, Ministry of Education, and stakeholders. © 2024 Sally Zweimueller/Data for Impact

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