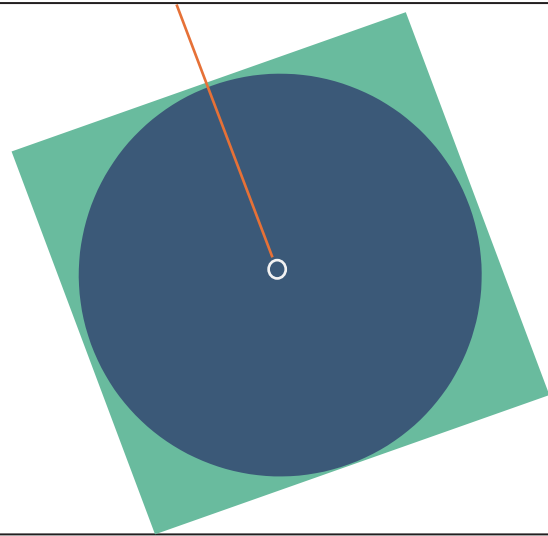

Global Insights on Local Leadership in Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning

Webinar Findings & Local Organization Engagements



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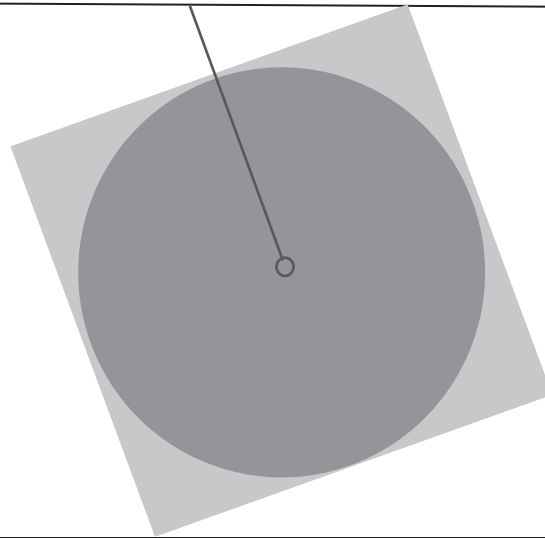
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This publication was produced with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Data for Impact (D4I) associate award 7200AA18LA00008, which is implemented by the Carolina Population Center at 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. SR-24-234 D4I

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Cristina de la Torre, Molly Lauria, and Liz Millar and reviewed by Susan Pietrzyk, Lwendo Moonzwe Davis, and Tory Michelle Taylor, with contributions from Michelle Jituboh, Oluwayemisi Ishola, and Athena Pantazis.

We are grateful to the organizations that worked with us on this activity.

Specifically, we extend our gratitude to Kiran Acharya and colleagues from New ERA as well as Lwana Palwendo Kamanga and colleagues from the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) for the information and perspective they shared during virtual engagements and the knowledge exchange webinar. We also thank Barbara Rawlins and Kristina Granger of USAID for their participation in the webinar.

Additionally, we thank the following individuals for taking the time to share their experiences with D4I during the virtual engagements.

- Gbenga Adedayo, Adeyini Ojo, and Elizabeth Bankole of Hanovia Limited
- Firmin Seka from Synergie Expertise
- Chrissie Thakwalkwa and Tawonga Mwase-Vuma for the Centre for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi
- Quamrun Nahar and Moinnuddin Haider of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b)
- Samson Babatunde Adebayo, Sani Gat, Madaki Jega, Adekambi Taiwo, and Obembe Michael of Data Research and Mapping Consult Ltd. (DRMC)

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Abbreviations

AFIDEP	The African Institute for Development Policy
CSR	Centre for Social Research
DEC	Development Experience Clearinghouse
DRmC	Data Research and Mapping Consult, Ltd.
HIC	high-income country
icddr,b	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
LLD	locally led development
LMIC	low- and middle-income country
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MCHN	maternal and child health and nutrition
MEL	monitoring, evaluation, and learning
MERL	monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning
PHC	primary health care
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

Background

Organizations formed, based, and directed by people in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) where projects are implemented have long been involved in USAID monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) activities related to health, including maternal and child health and nutrition (MCHN). These organizations—referred to interchangeably as local, in-country, LMIC-based entities—have most commonly worked as subrecipients to high-income country (HIC)-based prime awardees. However, many local organizations have the capacity to lead MERL work as prime awardees, and the number of local organizations doing so is increasing. As USAID and the broader global donor community’s localization efforts gain momentum, there is a growing need to define and assess examples of pathways for local MERL organizations to have leadership roles, including becoming prime funding recipients and exercising local programmatic leadership in other ways with support from USAID and other donors.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this work is to document insights from MERL actors, largely focused on LMIC-based organizations, about their experience establishing MERL leadership. Understanding these pathways and capacity strengthening efforts that have informed greater involvement from local organizations in MERL work will aid in establishing and documenting lessons learned, challenges, innovations, and best practices as part of supporting continued increases in locally led MERL work across the MCHN sector. This report documents identified pathways and processes and provides globally relevant information for LMIC-based organizations working not just in MCHN but across the health sector, USAID, and other donor agencies that implement and support MERL activities. The intended audience for this report includes LMIC organizations along with USAID and HIC based organizations.

Approach

Two distinct approaches were used to identify and document the pathways and processes that increase, and support locally led MERL in the MCHN sector:

- **A knowledge exchange webinar** was held with panel representatives from two LMIC-based MERL organizations and USAID to share their experiences and perspectives on challenges and opportunities in locally led MERL work. A brief web-based survey was shared with participants after the webinar to further understand their perspectives on locally led MERL work.
- **Virtual engagements** were conducted with five locally based MERL organizations through one-to-1.5-hour virtual discussions. These sessions focused on hearing about each organization’s experience and perspectives on locally led MERL, capacity strengthening efforts, and specific practices supporting locally led MERL work.

Discussion and Conclusion

Webinar

The knowledge exchange panel discussion held on June 6, 2024, provided an opportunity to hear directly from LMIC-based organizations that have established leadership roles in MERL work, including for MCHN, on what they perceive as potential pathways and challenges to local leadership in MERL.

Important pathways identified included increased trust and reliance on local actors in all stages of MERL work from design to data use, investments in capacity strengthening for MERL skills, ensuring MERL actors have access to emerging technologies and methods, and recognizing the importance of and investing in peer-to-peer networks and opportunities for locally based mentorship and other support for MERL skills. Responses from the post-webinar survey echoed the pathways and priorities shared by panelists. Survey respondents also expressed appreciation for hearing directly from local actors and emphasized the need for more opportunities for such knowledge exchanges in the future.

Virtual Engagements

The discussions with the five in-country MERL organizations provided valuable insights into their experiences in local MERL activities, including their trajectories towards leadership roles. **Each organization has navigated different pathways to leadership of MERL activities, but some common ones included establishing organizational goals and growth strategies, maintaining high quality standards, intentionally learning through partnerships with international research teams, and establishing strategic staffing and partnerships.**

A range of engagements and opportunities have influenced how and where local LMIC-based organizations have increased their leadership skills. However, these opportunities were often not within the control of the organizations themselves. Such opportunities included prolonged partnerships with international research teams over several cycles of research and access to intentional, demand-driven training and capacity strengthening initiatives.

The organizations expressed both readiness and keen interest in leading MERL activities. However, they noted limited opportunities to do so, often due to perceived and/or experienced difficulties associated with qualifying to manage funding directly for local organizations. Despite this, **staff from LMIC-based organizations value working with global research teams and see merit in continued partnerships.** These collaborations were reported to support continued growth while allowing leadership by local organizations by prime recipients.

Recommendations

Donors

- Include capacity strengthening activities in MERL contracts and grants with clear objectives, benchmarks, and budget lines.
- Develop a communication strategy to share MERL updates and upcoming priorities with LMIC-based MERL organizations.
- Support MERL communities of practice to improve networks, communication, and capacity.
- Release opportunities through mechanisms that enable local organizations to lead.
- Provide grants that enable in-country organizations to conceptualize and lead MERL activities.
- Ensure that local MERL organizations are providing input through all stages of the MERL activity. Where capacity exists, require leadership of the work from local organizations with guidance and back-up support from international researchers as needed and as jointly identified.
- Encourage the inclusion of local MERL organizations in implementation project consortiums to support MERL functions. Being in a consortium can help local MERL organizations gain familiarity with donor reporting systems and MERL requirements. When capacity strengthening is intentionally included, the local organizations can gain targeted support from other consortium partners in areas where they want to grow.

HIC prime implementing partners working with local MERL organizations as subrecipients

- Extend engagement with local MERL organizations throughout the research life cycle, from co-creation to knowledge translation. This allows for local input in all phases of research and closer collaboration that benefits prime contractors and donors, while also allowing for more mentorship and learning opportunities. Longer-term agreements also reduce the burden of looking for new work, freeing staff to be more engaged in technical work.
- Include local MERL partners in project consortiums. This provides an opportunity to be directly engaged with donors, including USAID, and in all MERL work from the start. If capacity gaps exist at the local organization, consider if the gaps can be filled by other consortium members and serve as learning opportunities.
- Provide targeted capacity strengthening and mentorship based on identified needs, while allowing local partners to lead aspects of research where they want to grow.
- Provide grants that enable local organizations to conceptualize and lead the work.
- Build bridges and help establish partnerships and networks locally and internationally. Help organizations identify synergies and how they can work together. Link local organizations to external capacity strengthening opportunities and to other USAID mechanisms working to strengthen the institutional capacity of local organizations.
- Enhance the visibility of local MERL partners. Ensure they have opportunities to participate in meetings, technical discussions with clients and stakeholders, and dissemination events.

LMIC-based MERL organizations

- Increase visibility and engagement throughout the project cycle; when working as a subrecipient, request involvement in technical discussions with clients and in dissemination activities; and discuss co-authorship of reports and manuscripts.
- Engage with existing implementing partners to understand the type of MERL support they may require and discuss partnerships and collaboration on current or upcoming projects.
- Develop an organizational growth strategy focused on achieving more MERL leadership roles, set achievable goals, and specify actions and timelines. Review progress overtime.
- Identify areas for capacity strengthening that benefit the organization in line with the organizational growth strategy. Request that capacity strengthening opportunities be included in subcontracts and subawards. The nature can be negotiated based on targeted areas of growth and can include trainings, leading specific tasks, and learning by doing with guidance or mentorship.

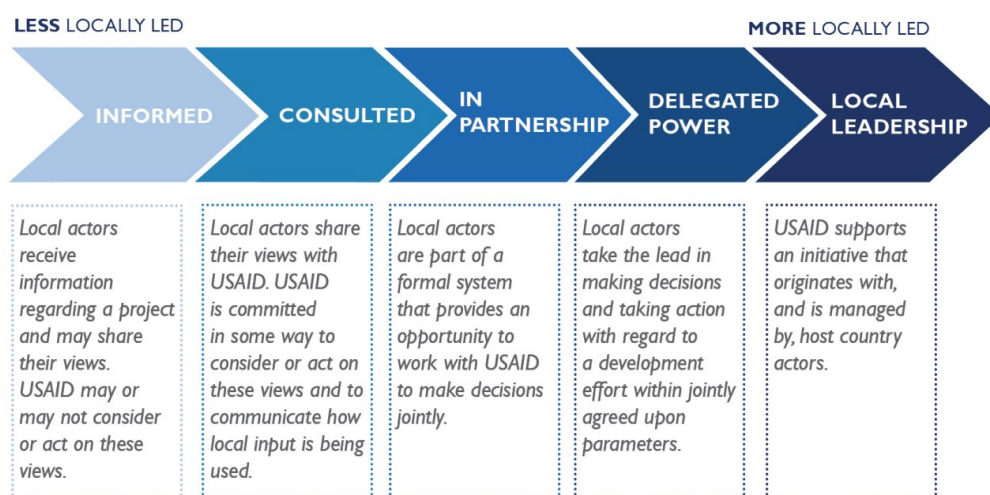
Introduction

Historically, the landscape of monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) activities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has seen local organizations in supporting roles within consortiums led by counterparts based in high-income countries. Such arrangements for conducting MERL work may fail to adequately incorporate important local knowledge, cultural insights, and contextual understanding that are essential for designing and implementing sustainable and effective maternal and child health and nutrition (MCHN) programs. However, many local organizations have the capacity to lead MERL work, and the number of local organizations doing so is increasing. There is also growing recognition in the development sector that MCHN challenges and solutions are inherently local, and that MERL work must be inclusive of and responsive to local communities and local experts. This paradigmatic shift recognizes the crucial role that local communities, organizations, and institutions play in shaping and driving development initiatives within their own contexts.

Through their localization vision and approach, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has formalized the agency's commitment to shifting leadership to locally situated actors for setting research agendas, designing and implementing projects, and measuring results (USAID, 2022b). USAID considers localization to be “a set of internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes that the Agency is undertaking to ensure our work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities.” (USAID, 2022b)

To achieve this vision of localization, USAID aims to adapt their own agency policies and program practices, **shift power to local actors**, channel a **larger portion of funding directly to local partners**, and serve as a public advocate for locally led development. The agency will accomplish this by increasing the share of program funds going directly to local partners and ensuring that at least half of USAID-supported programs include local community leadership in program design, implementation, and/or evaluation (USAID, 2022b). Locally led development is one aspect of USAID's localization approach and is defined on a spectrum of “less locally led” to “more locally led,” shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. USAID’s spectrum of locally led development approaches



Source: [USAID’s What is Locally led Development | Fact Sheet](#)

Alongside USAID, international development organizations and donors have publicly committed to support locally led development. Fourteen donor countries and several international donor organizations including the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, The Rockefeller Foundation, and others endorsed a donor statement during the 2022 Effective Development Cooperative Summit supporting locally led development and committing to (1) shift and share power; (2) Work to channel high quality funding as directly as possible; and (3) publicly advocate for locally led development (USAIDa, 2022).

Yet, despite the commitments to and recognition of the importance of local leadership in health, including MCHN and MERL work, the pathways to local leadership, especially in MERL work, are not well documented or understood. As such, there is a need to understand and document examples of pathways to MERL leadership for local organizations to expand locally led MERL efforts. The term “pathway” is used to signal that there are numerous ways a local organization might move into leadership roles.

Understanding the pathways will aid in establishing and documenting lessons, challenges, and best practices as part of supporting continued increases in locally led MERL work across the MCHN sector.

Toward this goal, USAID requested that Data for Impact (D4I) explore and document pathways and processes towards MERL leadership to provide globally relevant information for LMIC-based organizations and donor agencies, including USAID, that are engaged in MERL activities related to MCHN. To accomplish this, D4I employed a multifaceted approach.

Initially, D4I conducted exploratory work through an internal rapid literature scan to identify examples of leadership pathways to locally led MERL work and compiled a list of local MERL projects. This preliminary work informed the subsequent activities that are the focus of this report.

Following this initial exploration, D4I pursued two main approaches:

1. Collaborated with two local MERL organizations to host a knowledge and learning exchange webinar to explore the role of local organizations in MERL activities, including challenges and

successes and the role of capacity strengthening efforts.

2. Conducted virtual engagements with local organizations, including USAID Global Health and primary health care (PHC) priority countries. These engagements provided additional information about locally led MERL work, including capacity strengthening efforts, and specific practices being implemented to support MERL led by in-country organizations.

This report presents insights and findings from these approaches, with a focus on the pathways, lessons, challenges, and recommendations regarding pathways local organizations have taken in securing or seeking leadership in MERL work, MCHN, and other sectors.

Approach

D4I employed two complementary methods to investigate locally led MERL activities, including a knowledge exchange webinar and virtual engagements with local organizations. These approaches were designed to gather diverse perspectives on MERL leadership pathways, challenges, and successes.

The following sections detail the specific methodologies used for each component of this study.

Knowledge Exchange Webinar

D4I selected the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) and New ERA to be panelists for the webinar because of their demonstrated leadership in MERL. In addition, USAID also participated in the webinar to represent their perspectives supporting locally led MERL.

The webinar was recorded, and panel responses were transcribed and summarized for key themes related to pathways, facilitators, and challenges to locally led MERL. The following is a summary of the discussion that took place during the June 6, 2024, knowledge exchange webinar.

During the webinar, representatives from AFIDEP and New ERA gave presentations to highlight their MERL work and discuss challenges and opportunities they have faced in leading or aspiring to lead MERL work. The presentations were followed by a panel discussion, with representatives from each organization and USAID as panelists. The discussion sought to elucidate globally relevant pathways for locally based organizations to take on direct funding for MERL work.

The panel discussion was advertised as a knowledge and learning exchange and an opportunity to explore the role of local organizations in MERL activities, what challenges and successes have occurred, and how capacity strengthening efforts been undertaken and received. The primary intended audience was LMIC-based organizations with USAID and HIC-based organization staff also part of the intended audience and included French translation. The [webinar recording](#) is available through D4I's website.

A brief web-based survey was shared with participants following the webinar, asking participants who were engaged in locally led MERL work to describe their experiences and engagement. Respondents were asked to self-identify their organization type, location, and their level of engagement in leadership of MERL work. Respondents were also asked to describe, in their view, the biggest barriers and facilitators to local leadership of MERL work. The survey questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Virtual Engagements

Following the webinar, D4I scheduled virtual meetings with leadership and technical staff from five MERL organizations based in LMICs to discuss their organization's experience leading MERL activities.

The discussions focused on the opportunities and challenges for local organizations leading or seeking to lead MERL activities, the support organizations have received, and steps taken to gain more leadership roles in MERL activities. The virtual discussions were held over Microsoft Teams in June and July 2024 and lasted approximately one hour. A total of 13 staff from the five local organizations (10 men and 3 women) participated in these engagements. These discussions were held in English with four of the organizations and in French with one.

During the discussions, D4I asked the participants about the types of opportunities that exist for local organizations to lead MERL activities, what types of work the organizations had led, what factors

contributed to their gaining leadership of MERL activities, what type of support the organizations received to improve their ability to lead MERL activities, what challenges they face in leading MERL work, and whether they have a growth strategy that addresses increasing leadership roles. We defined leadership as having ownership over the design and implementation of a MERL activity.

The information from these discussions was compiled and reviewed to identify strategies for USAID and other donors aiming to work with local organizations in the implementation of MERL activities.

The MERL organizations were selected based on predetermined, specific criteria. These criteria included the organization's presence in focus countries for USAID's Primary Impact Initiative, known expertise in MERL activities, including for MCHN, and/or their availability for engagement. This selection process aimed to support a sample of local MERL organizations with insights on leadership trajectories in MERL.

The organizations that participated in the discussions were:

- **The Centre for Social Research (CSR) at the University of Malawi** is a Malawian research organization founded in 1979 and affiliated with the University of Malawi. It is staffed by university faculty and fellows, conducting social science research and providing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) consulting services. They also provide seminars and workshops to build in-country capacity for MERL activities.
- **Data Research and Mapping Consult, Ltd. (DRMC)** is a Nigerian-based private research organization operating since 2007. It supports international organizations focusing on training, research, mapping, and data processing.
- **Hanovia Limited** is a Nigerian-based research firm founded 22 years ago that specializes in surveys. They have worked in more than nine West African countries and have supported several impact evaluations and research activities. Much of their work has focused on data collection, while they have recently started leading evaluation activities.
- **icddr, b** is a Bangladesh-based research organization that is independent and autonomous and was founded over 60 years ago. Currently the organization has 5,000 staff, including 400 scientists, with headquarters in Dhaka and field offices across the country. They do a large volume of scientific, laboratory, and clinical research, including clinical and vaccine trials. They also support program evaluations and implementation research.
- **Synergie Expertise** is a Côte d'Ivoire-based private research firm founded in 2009. They primarily conduct surveys but also offer broader research and M&E services in Cote d'Ivoire and in other West African countries.

Findings and Insights

Knowledge Exchange Webinar

To better understand pathways and processes that have increased local leadership in MERL work, D4I engaged with two research organizations (AFIDEP—headquartered in Lilongwe, Malawi, with an office in Nairobi, Kenya, and New ERA—based in Kathmandu, Nepal) to participate in the design and execution of a knowledge exchange webinar.

About AFIDEP

The [African Institute for Development Policy \(AFIDEP\)](#) is a Pan-African research and policy institute established in 2010 to bridge the gaps between research, policy, and practice with a vision of an Africa where evidence is used consistently to transform lives.

Who they are: The organization employs more than 80 multi-disciplinary research staff members from 11 countries, governed by an international Board of Directors.

What they do: AFIDEP's work is guided by their theory of change, with a goal of elevating African voices on the national and global stage. AFIDEP is engaged in projects for a variety of funders and is the prime recipient of USAID's [BUILD project](#), the first African nongovernmental organization (NGO) with this distinction.

How AFIDEP supports MERL capacity strengthening: By supporting individual, organizational, and systems strengthening through capacity strengthening in MERL skills and promoting institutionalization of MERL processes and systems in government and non-government local entities.

How AFIDEP pursues local leadership opportunities: Through a communications and donor engagement strategy, including strategies to increase organizational visibility.

About New ERA

[New ERA](#) is a non-profit research organization based in Kathmandu, providing independent Nepali perspective in design, implementation, and assessment of development policies and programs.

Who they are: Led by a female executive, the organization's staff has a long history of expertise and skills in multiple research disciplines across development sectors including health and MCHN.

What MERL they do: Provide research and management expertise and experience in complex survey execution (including the Demographic Health Surveys and Service Provision Assessments), impact studies, needs assessments, knowledge translation, dissemination, and more.

How New ERA supports MERL capacity strengthening: With a focus on youth employment and Participatory Rural Appraisal training, New ERA supports capacity strengthening for government and NGOs and runs a master's student fellowship program. They have been leaders in training participatory research approaches since 1989.

The organization strives to maintain staff expertise in emerging technology and methods for MERL.

How New ERA pursues local leadership opportunities: Through partnerships with organizations in all Nepal's provinces and support for local MERL networks to share best practices and resources.

In preparation for the knowledge exchange webinar, D4I interviewed organizational representatives to better understand each organization's engagement in supporting and leading MERL work, their organizational strategies for pursuing opportunities in local leadership of MERL, and their experience and priorities for strengthening capacity both within their organizations and within their local system of actors.

Both AFIDEP and New ERA expressed that their respective organizations' experience and multidisciplinary staff with diverse skill sets in MERL and MCHN facilitated opportunities to lead MERL work. Both New ERA and AFIDEP also employ organizational strategies to increase their visibility locally and internationally, working to build networks and make connections that may increase their opportunities to take on MERL leadership roles. In addition, AFIDEP noted that their internal M&E systems and supportive leadership were key. New ERA cited their organizational resilience and ability to adapt to different contexts as being key facilitators in New ERA's pathways to securing MERL leadership roles.

Both organizations highlighted challenges in the pathways towards leadership in MERL, noting limited investment in MERL, a dependence on donors, and a lack of donor diversity. AFIDEP also noted political leadership changes that affect the continuity and demand for MERL work from governments as a challenge to increasing local leadership and visibility and to recognizing the importance of MERL work in general.

Summary of Knowledge Exchange Results

During the webinar, panelists responded to four questions designed to better understand LMIC-based actors' experiences and perspectives on the pathways to increasing in-country leadership in MERL work, and how USAID is responding to those facilitating factors and challenges to meet its goal of increasingly shifting funding and power to local actors.

What pathways have led to, and support locally led MERL?

- **Local actors have the skills and ability to use local data to address local needs.** This means MERL efforts are designed to align with local actors' priorities and that local actor capacity strengthening is supported where needed to strengthen data analysis and use by local actors in MERL work. This includes efforts to **strengthen the internal capacity of local organizations** through training programs to support local use of data, workshops on MERL methods and tools, and partnerships with local and regional entities.
- **Investments in sustainable systems and local research institutions support local MERL capacity for leadership.** Mentorship programs, support for peer networks, and local conferences implemented by local practitioners stand to strengthen local skills and locally available support. Partnerships with government entities to build local MERL systems and standardize approaches stand to strengthen the ability to use local data for local solutions.
- **Research agendas are set by local actors** to be responsive to the local needs and context, which they best understand. **Trust and reliance on local experts** enable them to lead and operate in their own context.
- **Investments in individual, organizational, and systems capacity strengthening** enable local actors to continue MERL work beyond the life of short-term funded projects.
- Local actors must have **access to emerging tools and methods for MERL work**, such as resources for mobile data collection and analysis software. **Innovation hubs** provide a space where local organizations can experiment with new MERL methods and technology.

- Establishment of **feedback mechanisms that rely on local communities** enables those communities to interpret and act on MERL findings.
- Funder goals need to be aligned with local interests, and while a **balance of power may not be realistic, a balance of interests** can be achieved.
- The **localization agenda** has increased opportunities for partnerships as a growing number of organizations from high-income countries (HICs) seek to partner with local actors and recognize locally identified solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic response shifted the landscape as both a disruptor of traditional approaches to MERL processes but also by stimulating the use of digital technology for MERL. **Mobile data collection and web-based platforms** for MERL have made it easier for local organizations to conduct MERL work independently.

What challenges exist to furthering locally led MERL?

- Barriers to locally led MERL include a **lack of adequate resources**, including a lack of consistent funding for local organizations to maintain staff and operations, which in turn affect **perceptions of the reliability of local organizations**.
- **Political instability or changes in leadership** may affect resources for strengthening MERL capacity at a country or regional level.

What opportunities exist to support local leadership in MERL?

- External support should be directed to **long-term individual and institutional capacity strengthening efforts and systems development**.
- Investments are made **in long-term relationships with local actors**, supporting opportunities for established local institutions to then support other local organizations, including at the provincial and community level.
- Recognizing the ability of local organizations to be nimble and adapt to the local and changing contexts and be **better able to access and serve marginalized and underserved populations**.
- Continued support for capacity strengthening for analysis, reporting, and use of technology for MERL beyond MERL-specific activities or projects.

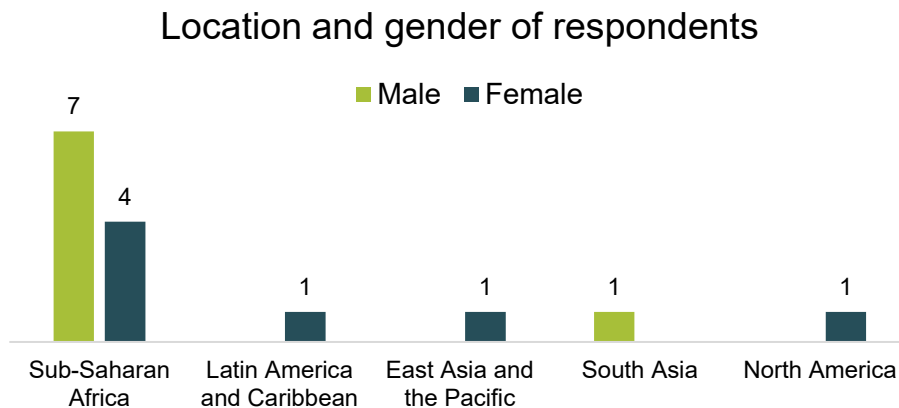
How is USAID supporting local leadership in MERL work?

- Establishing targets to **direct funding increasingly to local partners** and to invest in locally led development initiatives.
- Working to ensure that **metrics used in MERL work reflect local actors understanding** of what matters for their context and outcomes.
- Creation of **feedback mechanisms to share back data to the communities** where it will be most useful.
- Recognizing **the need for more community-led monitoring** and metric development.
- Working to make **funding more available and accessible** by removing language barriers and restrictions and supporting cocreation of activities, projects, and research priorities.

Summary of Survey Responses on Engagement in Locally Led MERL

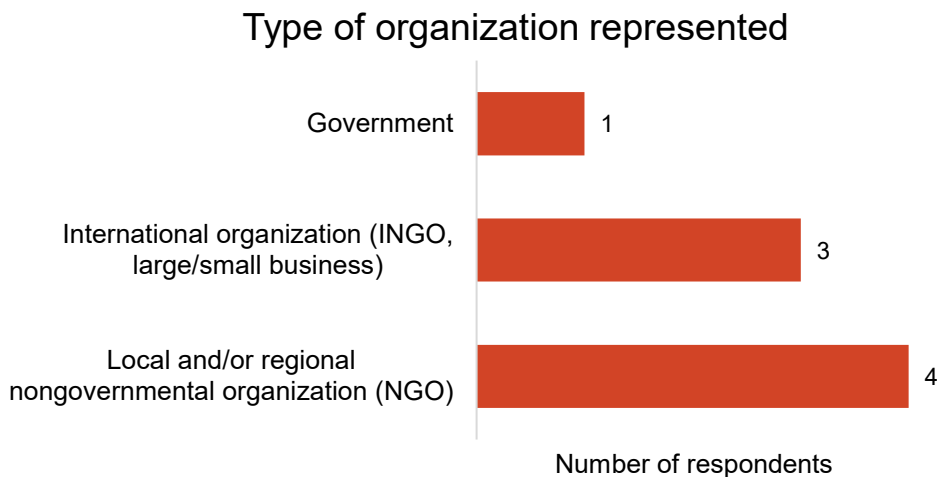
Following the webinar, audience members were asked to complete a brief survey about their experience in locally led MERL. Respondents reported demographic information, their level of engagement with locally led MERL, and were asked to share their views on pathways of and barriers to local leadership for MERL work. A total of fifteen participants responded (8 male, 7 female), most of whom were based in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location and gender of respondents (n=15)



Just over half of respondents (8 of 15) said they were directly engaged in locally led MERL and half of those (4 of 8) worked for LMIC based organizations (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Respondent organization type, of those engaged in locally led MERL (n=8)



When asked about the most important pathway to increasing locally led MERL, respondents emphasized the importance of **incorporating community input in the design phase**, including the selection of metrics that best align with the local community’s desired outcome. Respondents also spoke of the importance of **strengthening capacity, particularly on emerging digital technologies and tools**, to support data capture, analysis, and reporting. Respondents also expressed the **importance of autonomy** for local institutions and **“trusting people.”**

The most noted barrier was inadequate funding to support MERL work. As one respondent put it:

Projects are implemented to bring about well-rounded changes to the target communities desperately in need of support. MERL is the backbone to monitor project implementation activities, track progress for course correction, budget revision, and update for future activity planning and so on. However, it is usually overlooked and is under-budgeted. —Male, Sub-Saharan Africa, local/regional NGO

Additional barriers noted were **distrust, need for mentorship, and assuming that the metrics of interest for international partners are the same as the local community.**

When asked to share their thoughts on the panel discussion, respondents said the webinar was “**insightful**” and “**engaging**” and felt that future webinars or other forums should be held to share additional experiences and that future webinars should provide more opportunity for participant engagement and discussion.

Virtual Engagement

During the virtual engagement, staff from five local MERL organizations shared their experiences on locally led MERL work. Leadership was defined as when an organization holds a central or primary role in the design and implementation of a MERL activity. Per our selection criteria, all five organizations have led MERL activities to differing degrees. Some organizations had considerable experience leading MERL activities in their countries and regionally, and others were beginning to win work that allowed them leadership roles, including serving as prime recipients. Mostly, the MERL activities led by local organizations are research or evaluation studies. Two of the five organizations reported leading activities related to program monitoring, one on a USAID-funded project and the other for a government ministry.

As evidenced by the work of these organizations, opportunities do exist to lead the work from the design phase. There are fewer opportunities to be involved in the conceptualization of MERL activities because the agenda and objectives of MERL activities are typically defined prior to the engagement of the local organization. However, research grants, when available, do allow local researchers to come up with their own research questions and conceptualize an entire research study.

All organizations indicated that, while capable of leading MERL activities, they welcomed opportunities for partnerships that allow for continued capacity strengthening, skill development, and organizational growth. Both technical and managerial administrative needs were cited, but the exact type of growth needed to move towards leadership roles tended to be unique to the organization.

Strategies and approaches to advance locally led MERL

- **Retaining a strong reputation for quality was critical to helping gain MERL leadership**, according to all the organizations we spoke to. They prioritized quality across all stages of their work, had defined quality assurance processes, and were willing to turn down work if they felt the conditions or schedule would hinder their ability to deliver quality work. High-quality work was reported to have led to repeated engagement in work and referrals that enabled the organizations to grow.
- **Prolonged partnerships** with donors and international research partners help build trust and relationships, **which can result in new opportunities and increased leadership** on MERL activities. Two local MERL organizations that worked on several rounds of research with their respective partners provided examples of how this helped them gain leadership. For one organization, the partnership—which included intentional mentorship and training and repeated opportunities to engage with international researchers and practice skills—enabled staff to acquire

new technical expertise and subsequently provide that service for the organization. Another organization used their relationship with an international evaluation expert, developed by working together over multiple impact evaluation survey cycles, to build a winning team and proposal that gave them a leadership role in an evaluation assignment.

- **Working with international research teams** has helped strengthen capacity. These engagements have **provided opportunities for staff to learn about new methods and tools or acquire a new skillset**. Some learning can happen from simple participation in the study, for example, when implementing a study that uses a different methodology or a new data collection technology. Mentorship can be organic, but intentional training and mentoring is especially beneficial.
- Several organizations additionally **received intentional capacity strengthening** through some of their work agreements, which, when combined with opportunities to practice skills, were beneficial. The methods of capacity strengthening most mentioned were training and mentorship on the application of specific research methods. **Mentorship was provided through technical review of key research documents, engaging with local organizations so they are familiar with the evaluation methods being used, and engaging frequently throughout implementation**. These **capacity strengthening activities were at times built into the agreements**, as was done in some cases by D4I and other international partners.
- **Defining organizational goals and a strategy helped to focus efforts** to gain more MERL leadership. With a strategy and advanced planning, some organizations were able to implement strategic hiring and partnerships that enabled them to win work in a leadership role.
- **Research grants** were cited as one of the few mechanisms **that permits full leadership of a research activity by local researchers**, including the conceptualization and design of the study. Organizations that secured research grants noted they also provided opportunities for practicing skills, developing the capacity of more junior team members, and gaining visibility through dissemination activities.
- **Affiliation with a local university or with clinical and laboratory research facilities** provided some advantages.
 - Being part of an academic institution typically means there are **additional resources** (e.g., salaries) to support activities such as publishing, developing policy briefs, participating in conferences, and other outreach activities that are rarely funded through contract work. This helps amplify the visibility of the organization and cement the reputation of the researchers.
 - **Universities provide access** to a breadth of researchers and technical experts who can contribute to MERL activities.
 - Clinical and laboratory research facilities help attract international researchers for clinical or drug trials or other evaluations. This provides regular opportunities to learn and apply evaluation methods and to strengthen the capacity of new staff.
- Some organizations sought additional income sources, beyond MERL consulting services, to fund organizational growth and professional development opportunities. Other income sources included providing short courses or training services or renting out facilities and computer labs.

Type of support local organizations received to improve capacity

- Significant capacity strengthening has been **experiential through collaborations on international research studies**. Simply participating in a study can provide learning opportunities through the implementation of a different methodology or working with new data

collection tools, for example. The local organization staff who spoke with us frequently mentioned that mentoring was beneficial. Some of the mentoring is organic from engagement and communication across teams, but there were also instances of planned capacity strengthening.

- Several organizations received **trainings or mentorship on the application of specific research methods** as part of their contractual arrangements. Some were able to **lead a new task** (e.g., special analyses or dissemination of results) with guidance from international researchers. Because these capacity strengthening efforts are tied to a research study, the capacity strengthening activities tend to be confined to the methods used in the study.
- Some organizations additionally reported having received **support to publish manuscripts or attend conferences**, which helps expand visibility and networks.
- For some organizations, relationships with universities based in HICs has provided **access to fellowships or scholarships** for their staff. Local organizations affiliated with academic institutions are the ones who benefited from these educational opportunities.
- **Community of practice**—the World Bank (with others) established an evaluation community of practice in Nigeria to strengthen monitoring and evaluation capacity and was subsequently able to engage some of the participant organizations in supporting M&E activities on World Bank projects.
- Two organizations received external **funding in support of the organization** for staff development to cover operational costs. MERL organizations that are affiliated with universities often obtain some financial support (e.g., to cover salaries or facilities) from these institutions.

Challenges to furthering locally led MERL

- The majority of **MERL opportunities available to local organizations continue to be for discrete tasks**, such as data collection and analysis on studies designed by international researchers.
- **Local organizations are often not aware of plans for MERL funding opportunities** until adverts for data collection are posted locally or they are contacted by international partners. Donors have typically engaged with non-local organizations by the time local MERL organizations become aware of the opportunity. The processes and mechanisms for these awards are not clear or easily accessible to local MERL organizations. Furthermore, the qualification requirements for key staff on MERL requests for proposals sometimes exclude local organizations whose affiliates lack international experience.
- The **short duration of contracts means local MERL organizations are constantly looking for new work or preparing proposals**. This detracts from other endeavors such as capacity strengthening or exploring partnerships.
- **Funding overhead costs is very challenging** for some research organizations, and this hinders their ability to invest in capacity strengthening, publishing, networking, and other organizational growth activities. The staff of two organizations noted increasing pushback from HIC contractors to include organizational overhead fees (typically a percentage of the contract value) in budgets. It is especially taxing for private research firms whose only source of income is these contracts.
- **Keeping experts, including senior staff, engaged full time is only feasible when work volume is high**. Skilled technical consultants are hard to find. In-country expert consultants tend to have full-time jobs, consult on the side, and therefore have limited availability.
- **Local organizations do not always have the cash flow to front funds** for staff, travel, and activities, but not all contractors or funders allow for sufficient advances, and many stipulate payment after deliverables are final. This can impede local organizations from taking on projects.

Discussion and Conclusion

The panel discussion webinar and virtual engagement provided opportunities to hear directly from locally based organizations who have established and are seeking leadership roles in MERL work, including for MCHN, on what they perceive as potential pathways and challenges to local leadership in MERL.

Important pathways identified included increased trust and reliance on local actors in all stages of MERL work from design to data use, seeking a balance of interests in MERL partnerships, commitment to capacity strengthening for MERL skills and ensuring MERL actors have access to emerging technologies and methods, and recognizing the importance of and investing in peer-to-peer networks and opportunities for mentorship and locally based support for MERL skills. Accessible contract mechanisms for local organizations and the development of organizational growth strategies were also highlighted.

Responses from the post-webinar survey echoed the pathways and priorities shared by the webinar panelists. Survey respondents also expressed appreciation for hearing directly from local actors and emphasized the need for more opportunities for such knowledge exchanges in the future.

The primary barriers to locally led MERL are contractual and communication processes that exclude local organizations from winning the work, a lack of engagement with local organizations during the design phase, and a short duration of contracts, which limits meaningful capacity acquisition and engagement.

This work includes some key limitations. A limitation of this report is that the organizations included in both the webinar and virtual engagements are long established and recognized in MERL work at the national and/or global level. Most organizations are based in their respective national capitals and have networks that include HIC organizations. The challenges and experiences of smaller, more newly established, and/or community-based organizations may be different.

In addition, for the webinar, the panel included a representative from USAID as a funding organization, which, while designed to allow for the exchange of critical ideas and knowledge, may have also introduced imbalanced power dynamics to the conversation.

Recommendations

Strengthening LMIC-based MERL leadership involves concerted efforts across the spectrum of actors, including donors, HIC-based prime implementing partners, and LMIC-based MERL organizations. The recommendations below, derived from discussions with stakeholders and informed by the knowledge exchange webinar and virtual engagements with LMIC-based organizations, provide targeted guidance for each group. These recommendations aim to foster an environment that promotes and sustains local MERL leadership throughout the project lifecycle, from co-creation to knowledge translation, ultimately leading to more effective, equitable, and sustainable development initiatives.

Donors

- Include capacity strengthening activities in MERL contracts and grants with clear objectives, benchmarks, and budget lines.
- Develop a communication strategy to share MERL updates and upcoming priorities with local MERL organizations.
- Support the MERL community of practices to improve networks, communication, and capacity.
- Release opportunities through mechanisms that enable local organizations to lead.
- Provide grants that enable local organizations to conceptualize and lead MERL activities.
- Ensure that local MERL organizations are engaged and provide input through all stages of the MERL activity.
- Encourage the inclusion of local MERL organizations in implementation project consortiums to support MERL functions. Being on a consortium can help local MERL organizations gain familiarity with donor reporting systems and MERL requirements. When capacity strengthening is intentionally included, the local organizations can gain targeted support from other consortium partners in areas where they want to grow.

HIC-based organizations contracting LMIC-based MERL organizations

- Prolong engagement with MERL organizations throughout co-creation and implementation of research activities. This allows for local input in all phases of research, and closer collaboration allows for more mentorship and learning opportunities. Longer-term contracts also reduce the burden of looking for new work, freeing staff to be more engaged in technical work.
- Include local MERL partners in project consortiums. This provides an opportunity to be directly engaged with the client and in all MERL work from the start. If capacity gaps exist at the local organization, consider if the gaps can be filled by other consortium members and serve as learning opportunities.
- Provide targeted capacity strengthening and mentorship based on identified needs, while allowing local partners to lead aspects of research where they want to grow.
- Provide grants that enable local organizations to conceptualize and lead the work.
- Build bridges and help establish partnerships and networks locally and internationally. Help organizations identify synergies and how they can work together. Link local organizations to external capacity strengthening opportunities and to other USAID mechanisms working to strengthen the institutional capacity of local organizations.
- Enhance the visibility of local MERL partners. Ensure they participate in meetings and technical discussions with clients and stakeholders and dissemination events.

LMIC-based MERL organizations

- Increase visibility. When working as a sub-contractor, request involvement in technical discussions with clients and in dissemination activities; discuss co-authorship of reports and manuscripts.
- Engage implementing partners to understand the type of MERL support they may require and discuss partnerships and collaboration on current or upcoming projects.
- Take the time to develop an organizational growth strategy, set achievable goals, and specify actions and timelines.
- Identify areas for capacity strengthening that benefit the organization in line with an organizational growth strategy. Ask whether capacity strengthening opportunities can be included in contracts. The nature of the capacity strengthening can be negotiated based on targeted areas of growth and can include trainings, leading specific tasks, or supporting tasks where you have less experience, learning by doing with guidance or mentorship.

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Appendix A. Post-webinar Questionnaire

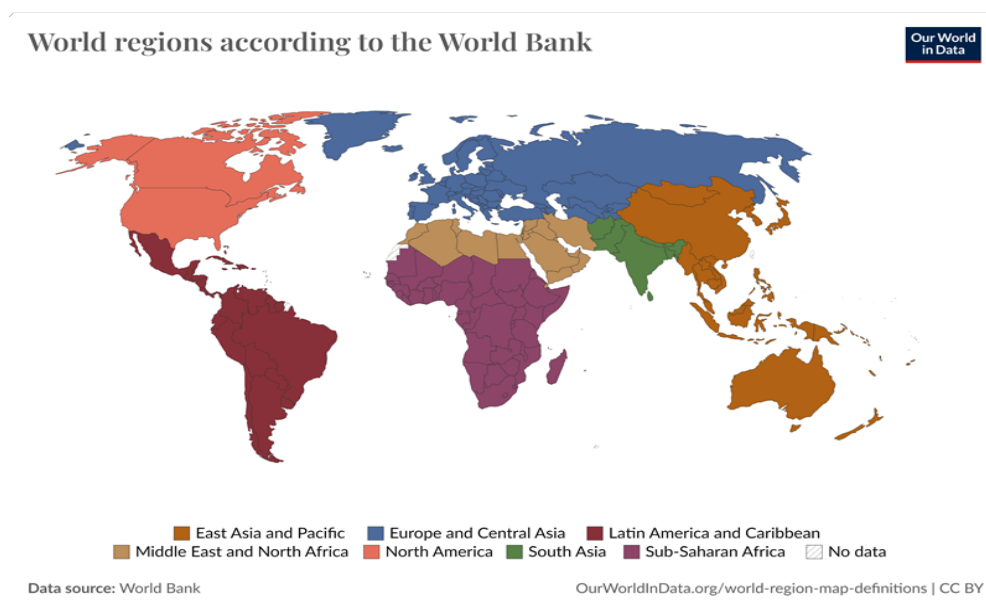


Experiences in Locally Led Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL)

Thank you for attending the D4I webinar **Panel Discussion: Knowledge and Learning Exchange on Locally Led Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL)**. We would like to know more about your engagement and experiences with locally led MERL. Please take a few minutes to complete this brief survey. Your responses will be kept anonymous and used to understand the landscape of local leadership in MERL.

* Required

1. In what region are you based? (Select the best option below.) *



- East Asia and the Pacific
- Europe and Central Asia
- Latin America and Caribbean
- Middle East and North Africa
- North America
- South Asia
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Other

2. Gender: How do you identify? *

- Non-binary
- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other

3. Are you engaged in MERL work that is locally led? *

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Other

4. What type of organization do you work for? *

- Local and/or regional nongovernmental organization (NGO)
- International organization (INGO, large/small business)
- Local government agency, ministry, or parastatal
- Local and/or regional university or research institution
- International university or research institution
- Donor (bilateral, multilateral, and/or HIC-based foundation)
- Other

5. In what capacity are you (as a local organization) engaged in locally led MERL work? (Select all that apply.) *

- Informed - Your organization receives information regarding a MERL activity and may share your views. The funder may or may not consider or act on these views.
- Consulted - Your organization shares your views with the funder. The funder has committed in some way to consider or act on these views and to communicate how your input is being used.
- In partnership - Your organization is part of a formal system that provides an opportunity to work with a funder to make decisions jointly.
- Delegated power - Your organization takes the lead in making decisions and taking action for a MERL activity within jointly agreed upon parameters.
- Local leadership - The funder supports a MERL initiative that originates with and is managed by your organization.
- Other

6. Have you been involved in activities that enhance the leadership of local organizations in MERL activities? (Select all that apply.) *

- Informed - Through your MERL work, you support local organization(s) to receive(s) information regarding a MERL activity and may share their views with the funder.
- Consulted - Through your MERL work, you support local organizations to share their views with the funder. The funder has committed in some way to consider or act on these views and to communicate how the input is being used.
- In partnership - Through your MERL work, you support local organizations as part of a formal system that provides an opportunity to work with a funder to make decisions jointly.
- Delegated power - Through your MERL work, you support local organizations to take the lead in making decisions and taking action for a MERL activity within jointly agreed upon parameters.
- Local leadership - Through your MERL work, you support a MERL initiative that originates with, and is managed by a local organization.
- Other

7. Provide some examples of these activities.

8. From your experience, what is the most important pathway to increasing local leadership of MERL work?

9. From your experience, what is the greatest barrier to increasing local leadership of MERL work?

10. Please share any additional comments or feedback regarding the June 6th webinar.

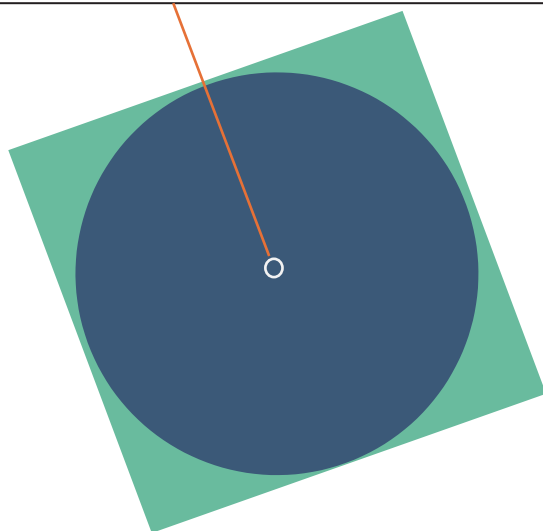
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This publication was produced with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of the Data for Impact (D4I) associate award 7200AA18LA00008, which is implemented by the Carolina Population Center at 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. SR-24-234 D4I