MERLA:
Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, Learning, and Adapting ✓

Capability Statement

RTI International
3040 Cornwallis Road
Research Triangle Park,
NC 27709-2194

Date: **July 2018**

For more information:
MERLA Community of Practice
MERLA@rti.org

International Development Group
Follow @RTI_INTL_DEV
www.rti.org/idg

RTI's MERLA capabilities

MERLA is the intentional application of results focused **monitoring, evaluation,** and **research** tools and methodologies to inform continuous evidence-based learning that is purposefully used to adapt program and policy decision making. It is founded on a desire for more meaningful and sustained results. In RTI International's experience, this requires coordinated and collaborative development efforts that continuously test promising and innovative approaches and strive for improvements grounded in evidence. Through a MERLA approach, RTI guides performance management, helping donors, governments, program staff, partners, and other stakeholders meet rigorous and dynamic data and knowledge needs.

RTI views monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a broad, iterative, and adaptive process that harnesses and applies data to support learning and improvement across diverse stakeholders—well beyond merely meeting data requirements and deliverables. Under the MERLA approach, M&E findings are used to increase programmatic efficiencies and resiliency.

RTI successfully applies MERLA in multiple client-funded research and development programs in dozens of countries globally, cutting across the technical sectors of health, education, governance, economic development, food security, agriculture, energy, and environmental science.

MONITORING results for greater accountability

RTI's MERLA approach is intentionally focused on results to emphasize the balance between monitoring efforts and evaluation needs. It contributes to effective program management, accountability, learning, and improvement processes.

The MERLA approach is employed throughout the program implementation cycle, from concept development to program close-out. It is used by MERLA Specialists, program staff, and partner stakeholders when jointly developing Theories of Change, which drives the program design and performance management plan.

RTI's ongoing and results-focused monitoring processes allow managers to determine the extent to which an intervention is affecting the intended target population, whether it is occurring according to plan, what activities are working, and what new opportunities or limitations are emerging within the operating environment. Tracking results through frequent check-ins and rigorous data monitoring is critical to planning, decision-making, and re-orientation.

RTI International's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, Learning, and Adapting (MERLA) Cycle

MONITORING & EVALUATION (M&E)

ADAPTING

APPLIED RESEARCH (AR)

LEARNING

Programmatic learning and adapting lead to improved M&E and AR results

M&E data and evidence gaps help frame applied research (AR) questions

Learning informs decision-making in collaboration with stakeholders

Results from M&E and AR contribute to learning

MERLA is effectively operationalized when:

✔ **Data** collected through M&E systems are timely, high quality, and utilized to improve programs

✔ **Applied research** is filling gaps, complementing, and strengthening M&E data

✔ Key M&E evidence and research results are synthesized into an intentional **learning strategy**

✔ Shared learnings are **informing** program design, implementation, and policy **decision-making**

Monitoring framework components are based on:

✔ **Shared understanding** of the programmatic approach, rationale, and strategies

✔ Anticipated causal **relationships** and risks

✔ **Key interventions** and outcomes for success

✔ **Critical assumptions** that can influence program achievements

Our approach to data collection focuses on:

✓ Increasing local capacity to collect, aggregate, verify, and report on quality data

✓ Using proven mobile and web-based digital information and communication technology as appropriate to efficiently aggregate, manage, and utilize data at all levels

✓ Institutionalizing strategic use of program data from national-to-community levels, to guide planning and implementation decisions

We assure data quality by assessing system validation rules, and conducting data checks and periodic data quality assessments. We further provide targeted technical assistance and continuous supportive supervision to M&E focal points, targeting areas of low data quality and poor performance against targets.

We use best-fit data visualization tools to provide new insights and learnings from our data. By using interactive dashboards and clear graphics, we help our partners, stakeholders, and staff strengthen their understanding of the story of the data to make more informed decisions.

The MERLA approach's strength lies in its ability to provide timely performance information that facilitates program improvement and performance outcomes.

Rigorous monitoring contributes to enhanced program evaluation.

EVALUATING for improved impact

Evaluation is the periodic assessment of programmatic relevance, performance, efficiency, and impact—both expected and unexpected—against the intended goal and objectives. Evaluation identifies overarching programmatic effectiveness and worth.

Evaluation focus areas include:

> Trend analysis

We assess key indicator data over time to identify trends and progress toward achieving client approved targets. When feasible and appropriate, we analyze disaggregated data—for example, by geography, sex, and age—to examine distinctions.

> Data comparisons

When possible, we collect high-level outcome indicator data from program and non-program areas for comparison. We strategically use methodologies to minimize the expense and burden on respondents. Comparison analysis enables us to demonstrate to donors, governments, partners, and other stakeholders how RTI program performance compares to areas outside our scope of work.

Building on nine years of successful work under the **Program/Project Management Training** (PPMT) contract, RTI implements the **Worldwide Training IQC** (WWT) with the USAID Office of Human Capital and Talent Management/Center for Professional Development. We work in partnership with strategic Bureaus, Offices, and field-based Missions to address their learning and training needs throughout the entire training design cycle, from assessment through learning application and reinforcement. RTI-ILS (integrated learning solutions) Group provides blended learning and technology-enabled distance learning services and products, including production and facilitation of web-based seminars and teleconferences, and USAID-specific custom online courses that provide additional in-depth instruction beyond topics covered in the instructor led courses.

The **Guinea StopPalu Project** prevents the spread of malaria through rigorous health facility monitoring support—monthly district level data quality and improvement meetings, where facility level data entered into national HMIS systems are cross-checked. This type of support is contributing to significant improvements in the timeliness and accuracy of data reporting.

Qualitative evaluation methods can yield new insights on quantitative data, investigate how or why changes occur, and inform future evaluations or research. Our expertise includes qualitative performance evaluations, needs assessments, and specific studies such as a political economy analysis, gender analysis, or sustainability impact.

Evaluation findings can yield interesting topics for **applied research** such as in-depth qualitative explorations or research to identify good practices or barriers contributing to success. Our MERLA Specialists and technical staff review findings together with program managers to discuss **learnings and adaptation**.

Quality M&E data drives relevant research and critical decision making.

Conducting applied **RESEARCH** to complement data and fill evidence gaps

Applied research supplements M&E data, providing information on program targets, with comprehensive information on the contextual or situational nuances that flesh out the how, why, and so what of numerical monitoring data. RTI designs and implements program applied research to:

✔ Complement and enrich M&E data

✔ Fill identified evidence gaps

Most M&E data are quantitative in nature, providing information on program targets, but lacking more comprehensive information on the contextual or situational nuances that flesh out the why, how, and so what of numerical indicator data.

Through mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) surveys and studies, we measure and assess social behaviors, program costs, target achievement, and other critical policy considerations. We also generate evidence for pilot activities and innovations where data are not available through regular M&E activities. Highlighting pilot activities and successful innovations are key to making the case for scale up and replication in other settings. Exploring variations that may work better enables rapid learning and growth.

Our statisticians specialize in sampling design and selection, quasi-experimental research, and other facets of quantitative, statistical, and qualitative analysis. Scientific rigor allows us to deliver tangible, evidence-based results.

Decision-makers use evidence to inform learning.

Early grade reading assessment (EGRA) conducted at SDN Rongoh Tamiang Hulu Aceh Tamiang, USAID Indonesia **Prioritizing Reform, Innovation and Opportunities for Reaching Indonesia's Teachers, Administrators, and Students (PRIORITAS) Project**

ICT Solutions: DHIS2 (District Health Information System-2) is a flexible, web-based, open-source information platform that is rapidly becoming the global standard for program information management across international development sectors. RTI specializes in DHIS2 hosting, configuration, and support. We host our M&E information system to seamlessly integrate with relevant national data for implementation and monitoring purposes, providing immediate access to information reported locally, and mitigating risk for data divergence between unlinked databases.

The Philippines LuzonHealth Project conducts applied research for assessing the successes and limitations of project implementation, which cannot be measured by planned M&E. LuzonHealth's research activities provide insight for improving implementation and informing policy to reduce teenage pregnancy.

LEARNING to dive deeper into the WHY and HOW

Continuous learning is a critical component of MERLA, contributing to progress toward programmatic objectives. Developing capacities for reflection, research, analysis, and dialogue ensures learnings on what works and what does not is informing programs. This in turn allows for assessment and adjustment of approaches and activities as needed to achieve desired outcomes.

To encourage programs to incorporate learnings, RTI employs a **Pause and Reflect** approach, using proactive, thoughtful, and purposeful engagement with partners, stakeholders, and other experts. This approach encourages feedback loops and captures learnings from **M&E** and **research** findings.

Beginning at startup and throughout implementation, RTI facilitates constructive and collaborative dialogue to promote learning, including:

✔ Defining common programmatic themes and questions

✔ Identifying critical gaps and needs

✔ Exploring ways to fill gaps and meet needs

✔ Recognizing opportunities to improve program design, management, and M&E

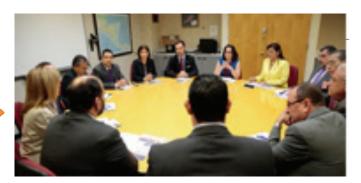✔ Supporting programs to incorporate and **adapt** recommendations

RTI's learning experts integrate participatory learning methodologies, innovation, and technologies to strengthen professional capacities worldwide—including in complex development environments. This approach is proven to augment programmatic results, help stakeholders enhance their capabilities, and increase performance and programmatic resilience.

RTI is a leader in expanding the use and utility of cutting-edge information and communication technology applications. Through capacity strengthening, we support programs to use information systems to collect, analyze, disseminate, and apply data. Peer-to-peer exchanges and thoughtful use of information technologies facilitate reflection, documentation, and cross-application of what works, what does not, and what can be scaled up.

Managers incorporate learnings to enhance results.

The US Government's **Feed the Future Project** in Senegal, Naatal Mbay, seeks to improve food security and economic opportunities for smallholder farmer households by developing sustainable and commercially responsive value chains. RTI focuses on participatory data collection to encourage **learning and data use** by local partners. Farmers are trained to collect their own data through their organizations, covering all aspects of the production cycle including planting and harvesting practices, storage, and marketing and sales. At the end of the season, each farmer organization holds a seasonal learning session, enabling them to discuss the data with their peers, evaluate their own performance, revisit their assumptions, and make decisions about changes for the following season's cycle, such as changing the seed varieties or shifting harvest schedules. The seasonal learning sessions are held at the organizational, regional, and national levels, encouraging collaboration, learning, and adapting across the project's zones of influence. RTI project staff aggregate the data collected by the organizations for project reporting, as well as document the adaptations made by the farmers and the subsequent impacts on the focus value chains, modifying activities to meet project goals.

On the **Higher Education Project** (HEP) in El Salvador, the RTI took a crucial step in translating the findings of the internal performance evaluation into actionable program adaptations. The project team used a **pause and reflect** process to discuss each of the recommendations that arose from the evaluation and determine follow-up actions. This process of using the evaluation findings for concrete decision making and adaptation illustrates RTI's integrated MERLA approach.

ADAPTING for improved programmatic and managerial results*

Learning, and transferring and translating learnings into practice, are a continuous process. They are contingent upon participation and collaboration across and between sectors, partners, and key program stakeholders. Dissemination of recommendations for adaptation occurs at various levels:

✓ **Program**—to refine activities, strengthen management, and close stakeholder feedback loops

✓ **National** and **global**—to influence policy, processes, and good practices

✓ **RTI**—to promote learnings and good practices across programs, and strengthen new business opportunities

The MERLA approach is aligned with and recognized as an innovative strategy for applying USAID's CLA (**collaborating**, **learning**, and **adapting**) framework. Application of CLA ensures that progress towards objectives is guided by continuous learning and iterative adaptation of implementation findings.

CLA activities are both planned and ad hoc, allowing managers and stakeholders to share and revisit lessons and ensure evidence is incorporated in planning decisions about continuation, scale up, programmatic change, and strategic collaborations. RTI believes that building a culture of intentional and systematic CLA takes both time and resources, including in-person interactions. Once trust is established, results improve, sharing increases, feedback is more forthcoming, stakeholders are better able to meet programmatic objectives, and resources are secured to support future knowledge exchanges and collaborative activities.

Following uptake, M&E data reflects ✓ ✓ improved programmatic impact.

In 2017, RTI formed a **Community of Practice** (COP) to further develop and nurture our MERLA culture across development sectors. The goal is to create a cohesive MERLA strategy to improve MERLA practices on all projects. Towards this, we cultivate and share resources and expertise across RTI, drawing on multiple capacity and skill areas. The COP provides RTI with an opportunity to look within to find shared values, institutional knowledge, and support. It includes deliberately organized Pause and Reflect sessions to share experiences and promote recommendations. This facilitates broader understanding of our experience, increases learning, and ultimately improves and empowers evaluation research and adaptation practices. It further enables managers to tap knowledgeable and experienced members, reaping the benefits of their collective global efforts to strengthen individual programs.

The **Sahel Resilience Learning (SAREL)** activity in Niger and Burkina Faso provides M&E, collaboration, and learning support to strengthen the evidence-based learning and adaptation capacity of partners and key stakeholders. With multiple opportunities for exchange, partners openly shared successes and challenges. RTI helped develop a template to capture and codify resilience activities and good practices to be used as future managerial job aids when reviewing and adapting program design and activities. SAREL was a **USAID CLA Case Competition** finalist in 2016.

July 2017, RTI conducted a problem driven, applied PEA (political economy analysis) concerning questions of fiscal decentralization, on the USAID-funded **Governance for Local Development** (GOLD) Project in Senegal around questions of fiscal decentralization. The GOLD Project works to strengthen effective local governance by increasing the capacity of local governments and community participation. A collaborative team of RTI researchers, a local fiscal decentralization expert, and local project staff worked together to uncover the challenges related to fiscal transfers from the national to local government. The team conducted desk research, held an internal workshop to identify and assess issues and stakeholders, conducted interviews, and analyzed the findings. They identified eight core themes from the PEA research and developed **actionable recommendations** related to each one. A central theme was the multiplicity of government actors at the national level involved in decentralization, fiscal transfers, and support to local governments, many of whom have overlapping mandates and varying commitments to decentralization. A related theme was lack of clarity on the criteria for fiscal transfers and the impact of political influence on allocations to local governments. The GOLD Project team prepared a concept paper for the USAID Mission that incorporates PEA findings and proposes actions that GOLD could take to assist in improving processes and systems.