E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014 Evaluation Findings

Briefing Note

THE E3 SECTORAL SYNTHESIS: LEARNING FROM EVALUATION

USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment (E3) is nearing completion of the E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013-2014 Evaluation Findings. This in-depth review, which follows a previous E3 study of 2012 evaluation findings, is examining evaluations completed between January 2013 and September 2014 that were related to E3 technical sectors. The E3 Sectoral Synthesis is intended to disseminate knowledge gained from evaluation in order to inform and improve future programming and project designs, as well as generate lessons learned to improve the quality of future evaluations. This Briefing Note presents broad findings from the E3 Sectoral Synthesis, and will be followed by a detailed report in June 2015 to be prepared by the E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project.

The E3 Sectoral Synthesis includes 117 evaluations that were reviewed by a team of 44 sector specialists from 10 offices across the E3 Bureau, who extracted key lessons learned, project results, areas for improvement and innovative practices from the evaluation reports. They also looked at cross-cutting topics such as gender equality and women's empowerment, private sector engagement and governance. The quality of each evaluation report was also reviewed by the E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project using a checklist that was used to rate report quality as part of the Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations 2009 – 2012. By using the same checklist, the E3 Sectoral Synthesis can present findings regarding change over time on factors related to evaluation quality.

The E3 Sectoral Synthesis found that:

- **The quality score of E3 evaluation reports rose from 4.69 in 2010 to 8.02 in 2014**, on a 10-point scale.

- E3 evaluations showed **across-the-board improvements in evaluation quality** since 2010, not just in select factors.

- **Vast improvements** in E3 evaluations were seen **in gender analysis** since 2010, including both **disaggregating findings by sex at all levels** and **addressing differential access or benefits by gender,** which more than quadrupled.

- Recurring **lessons learned** in E3 evaluation reports included the need for **ensuring a focused project scope** and for **flexibility in programming**.

- The most commonly-cited **cause of challenges and failures** in project implementation across all E3 sectors was **not properly accounting for the level of local capacity**.

- Of the evaluations where it was possible to determine overall **project achievement of performance targets**, **around half** reported that **the project had generally met its targets**, while roughly **a third** conveyed that **the project exceeded its targets**, and **up to a quarter** expressed that **the project fell short of its targets**.
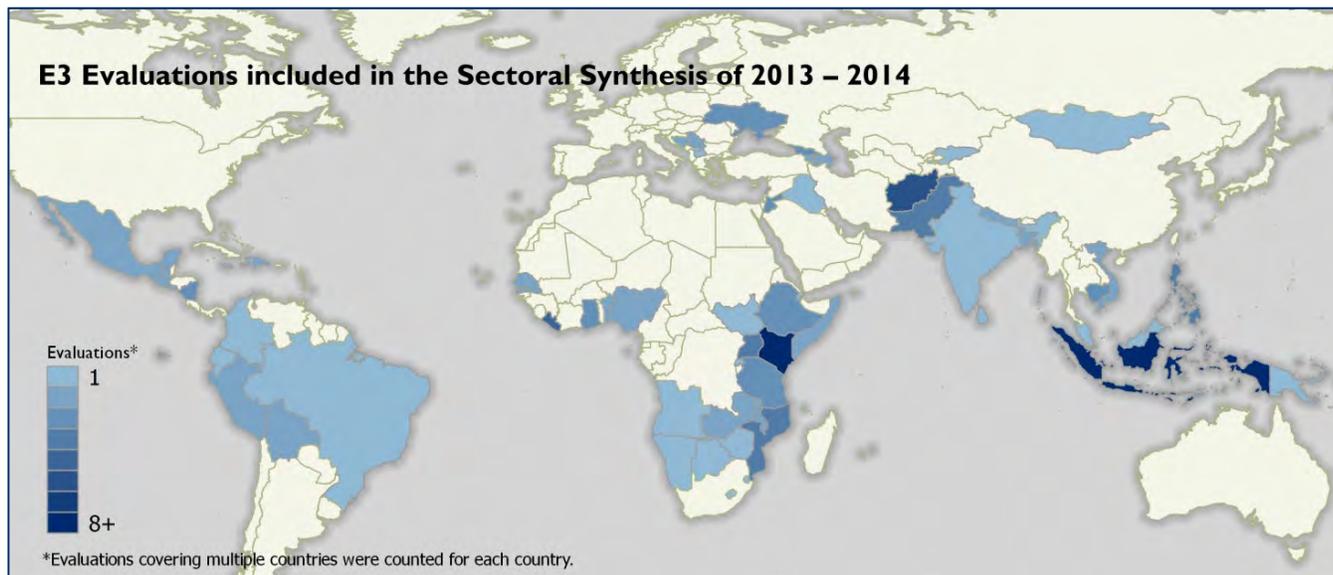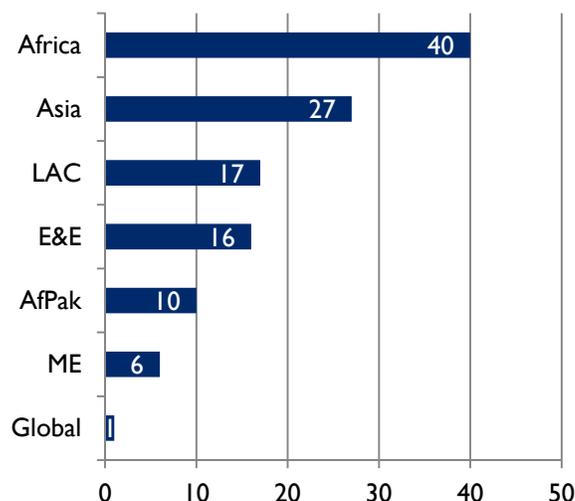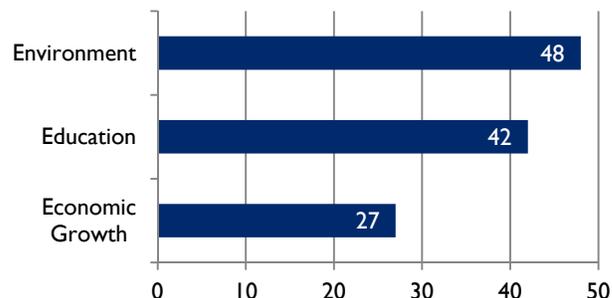
OVERVIEW OF 2013 – 2014 E3 EVALUATIONS

The E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014 Evaluation Findings examined 117 evaluations that are all publically available on the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC). These evaluations cover a wide range of interventions across all E3 technical sectors and reflect geographic diversity.

- **Economic Growth** is represented by 27 evaluations, including 14 related to Economic Policy, 9 for Trade and Regulatory Reform, 3 for Private Capital Management and 1 for Development Credit.

- **Education** is represented by 42 evaluations across a wide variety of sub-sectors.

- **Environment** is represented by 48 evaluations, including 17 related to Forestry and Biodiversity, 13 for Water, 8 for Energy and Infrastructure, 6 for Global Climate Change, and 4 for Land Tenure and Resource Management.

Of the 117 evaluations reviewed, 115 were performance evaluations – including 60 final evaluations, 42 mid-term evaluations and 13 ex-post evaluations. The remaining two were impact evaluations, one of which was conducted during the life of the project and the other was ex-post.

E3 Evaluations Included in the 2013 - 2014 Sectoral Synthesis (n=117)

Sector	Count
Environment	48
Education	42
Economic Growth	27

Region	Count
Africa	40
Asia	27
LAC	17
E&E	16
AfPak	10
ME	6
Global	1

E3 Evaluations included in the Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014

Evaluations*
1
8+

*Evaluations covering multiple countries were counted for each country.

IMPROVEMENT IN THE QUALITY OF E3 EVALUATION REPORTS

In the Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations 2009 – 2012, the Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL/LER) introduced a composite evaluation report "score" that was based on a larger checklist for reviewing the quality of evaluation reports. For the set of 2013 – 2014 evaluations reviewed in the E3 Sectoral Synthesis, scores were again calculated using the same methodology and were then compared to E3 sector evaluations included in the 2009 – 2012 Meta-Evaluation.

The Agency-wide average score for 2009 – 2012 was 5.93, and was mirrored by a similar year-to-year trend as evaluations in E3 sectors.

The 2013-2014 E3 Sectoral Synthesis found that **the quality score of E3 evaluation reports has shown marked improvement**. On a ten-point scale, the average score rose from 4.69 in 2010 (just before the launch of USAID's Evaluation Policy) to 8.02 in 2014.
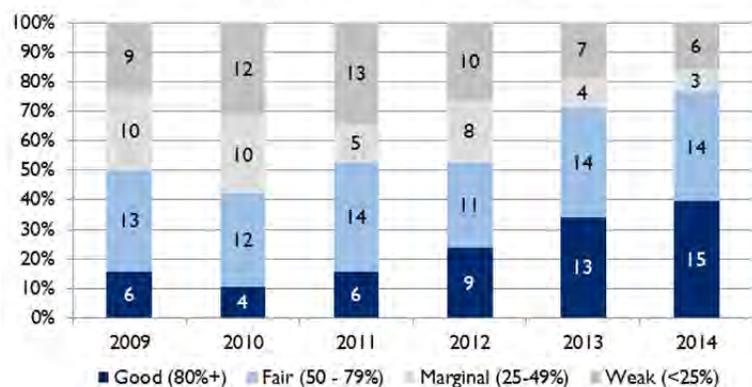
**Trends in Quality of Evaluation Report Scores
All E3 Sectors, 2009 - 2014**

Score Range: 0 - 10 · Sources: 2009 - 2012: Meta-Evaluation of Quaity and Coverage of USAID Evaluations
2013 - 2014: E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 - 2014 Evaluation Findings

This **increase of nearly three and a half points** from 2010 to 2014 shows remarkable improvement in the quality of evaluation reports and represents a serious effort across E3 sectors to strengthen the performance of the evaluations they undertake.

E3 evaluation reports have shown improvement across many factors that are associated with evaluation quality. The Agency's 2009 – 2012 Meta-Evaluation looked at 38 quality factors and placed them into four performance levels based on the number of rated evaluations that scored positively: good (80 percent or more), fair (50 to 79 percent), marginal (25 to 49 percent) and weak (less than 25 percent).

**Trend in Evaluation Quality Factors Clustered by
Performance Levels for
E3 Evaluations: 2009 - 2014**

Sources: 2009-2012: Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations
2013-2014: E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 - 2014 Evaluation Findings

The number of factors ranked in either the "good" or "fair" performance levels has shown steady improvement in E3 evaluations, increasing from 6 "good" and 14 "fair" in 2010 to 15 "good" and 14 "fair" in 2014. This across-the-board improvement demonstrates broad advances in the quality of E3 evaluation reports, not just improvement in select factors.
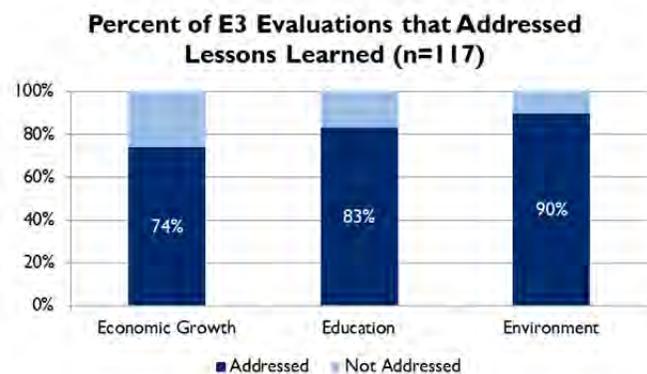
KEY THEMES ACROSS E3 EVALUATION REPORTS

E3 sector specialists who reviewed the 117 evaluation reports extracted a wide range of project-specific as well as cross-cutting findings and lessons learned. A number of Bureau-wide themes emerged during the analysis. This section provides an overview of the broader findings with applicability across the Bureau, including examples from individual sectors. The full E3 Sectoral Synthesis Report will contain detailed analysis by each E3 sector.

LESSONS LEARNED

E3 evaluation reports were reviewed to identify lessons learned related to project design, project implementation, and technical approaches. A large majority of evaluation reports specifically addressed lessons learned, ranging from 74 percent in Economic Growth to 90 percent in Environment. The cross-cutting themes related to lessons learned are presented below.

Beginning with project design, the importance of a **focused project scope** was frequently cited. Fifteen evaluations reflected on how broad or focused a project should be, noting that mandates that are too broad can result in a failure to meet project objectives, a breakdown during implementation, or require a midstream project overhaul or redesign.

Percent of E3 Evaluations that Addressed Lessons Learned (n=117)

Economic Growth: 74% | Education: 83% | Environment: 90%
■ Addressed ▪ Not Addressed

However, evaluation reports also noted the value of **cross-sector integrated design**. Fourteen evaluations found that in order to fully address the complex development issues being tackled projects should be built upon holistic designs. Examples of fields that were found to be more successful when integrated include: tourism, environment, and economic growth; crop production and plant disease; water, sanitation, and sustainability; and raising awareness and behavioral intervention.

Evaluations also noted the need for **flexibility in programming**. Lessons learned in seven evaluations suggested ensuring flexibility within a project's scope of work to provide implementers and other key partners the ability to respond to inevitable changing circumstances.

The issue of **planning around the capacity** of stakeholders, local systems, and implementing partners generated many lessons learned. Eighteen evaluations commented on the need to address the capacity of project stakeholders including local institutions, communities, and the host country government during the design phase. Eight of these reports specifically discussed the need for **capacity assessments of stakeholders** to be undertaken during the design phase. Twelve evaluations noted that capacity development activities should be implemented over longer timeframes or should be accompanied by routine follow-up, to **ensure that capacity improvements are sustained**.

The importance of **community engagement** was another common lesson learned, with 27 evaluations noting that constructive engagement with local stakeholders is critical to successful implementation. Eighteen evaluations described the need to ensure **community buy-in and ownership** throughout project implementation. Strategies cited to foster community buy-in include active involvement of stakeholders in project activities and decision-making, which not only builds capacity but also strengthened investment in project processes and outcomes. Twenty evaluations also
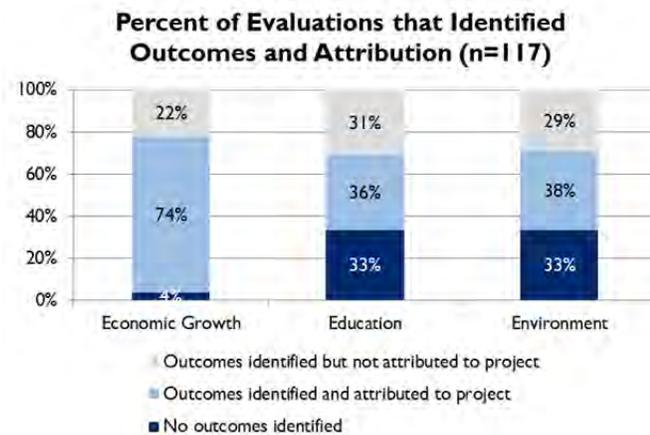
described a direct link between **community ownership and project sustainability**, noting that in order for activities to continue long-term, communities must be committed to sustaining them.

Fifteen evaluations mentioned the value of **knowledge exchange** through facilitating or creating technical networks and relationships, in order to supplement formal technical assistance efforts, empower stakeholders, and allow for cross-pollination of ideas. These networks can have a lasting impact by creating networks that continue beyond project implementation.

Finally, **challenges with performance management systems and approaches** resulted in many lessons learned. Issues ranged from an overreliance on standard indicators that do not inform programming, to the failure to analyze or utilize monitoring data collected. Lessons learned included developing useful custom indicators at the implementation level and developing performance management plans that use monitoring data to affect programming during the life of the project.

PROJECT RESULTS

Evaluation reports were reviewed as to what type of information they provided on project outcomes, if any. Eighty four of the 117 evaluation reports reported that the project achieved some sort of outcome, with 53 of those outcomes described as being at least partially attributable to the project. Evaluations relating to Economic Growth were the most likely to claim attribution, at 74 percent, with just over a third of Education and Environment evaluations claiming attribution. While the types of outcomes varied widely across sectors, the analysis identified cross-cutting themes for the E3 Bureau that are highlighted below.

Percent of Evaluations that Identified Outcomes and Attribution (n=117)

- Outcomes identified but not attributed to project
- Outcomes identified and attributed to project
- No outcomes identified

Capacity development was one outcome that was reported in evaluations from all sectors. For example, increased capacity was a reported as an outcome for 16 of the 28 Education projects that were credited with producing outcomes.

Outcomes related to **improved collaboration** were also particularly common in the case of Forestry and Biodiversity projects, where they were described in 7 of the 13 evaluation reports that mentioned project outcomes.

Project sustainability was one of the most commonly-cited outcomes achieved for all 3 of the evaluations that reported on Land Tenure and Resource Management outcomes, as well as 6 of the 13 evaluations reporting on outcomes from Forestry and Biodiversity, and 2 of the 3 for Private Capital Management.

Policy reform outcomes were also linked to four projects in Forestry and Biodiversity as well as three projects in Economic Policy and two in Trade and Regulatory Reform.

For those 53 evaluations stating that outcomes could be attributed to the intervention to at least some degree, the **causal linkages** connecting project outputs to outcomes varied widely. Anecdotal data

from stakeholders, interviewees and focus group participants were used to verify linkages to outcomes in 21 of the evaluation reports reviewed, but 22 of the evaluations treated the project's linkage to the stated outcomes as self-evident, providing little or no verification. In none of these instances did evidence cited as a basis for attribution meet the standards established for USAID impact evaluations of having a counterfactual. The remaining 10 evaluations provided data that did not support the premise that the project had produced the stated outcome.
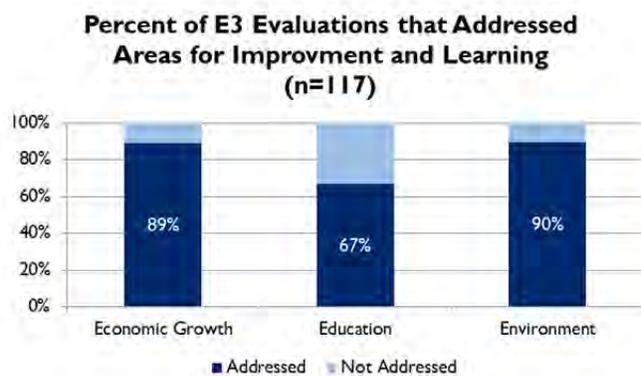
Two of the 117 projects under review were classed as impact evaluations and did provide evidence of change by looking at a comparison group over time. Additionally, six of the Education projects, two Economic Policy projects as well as one each from Trade and Regulatory Reform and Forestry and Biodiversity presented pre- and post-measures to demonstrate improvements in outcome measures, but did not include a counterfactual to support attribution claims by eliminating other possible causes of the changes that were demonstrated.

The evaluations were also reviewed as to whether the project exceeded, met, or fell short of its performance targets overall. Of the 86 evaluations that discussed performance targets, 76 included enough information to determine the overall achievement of the project. The majority of these evaluations (52 to 54 percent between Economic Growth, Education and Environment) reported that the project had generally met its targets, while roughly a third (21 to 35 percent) conveyed that the project exceeded its targets, and a minority (12 to 25 percent) expressed that overall the project fell short of its targets.

Percent of Projects that Exceeded, Met, or Feel Short of Performance Targets (n=76)
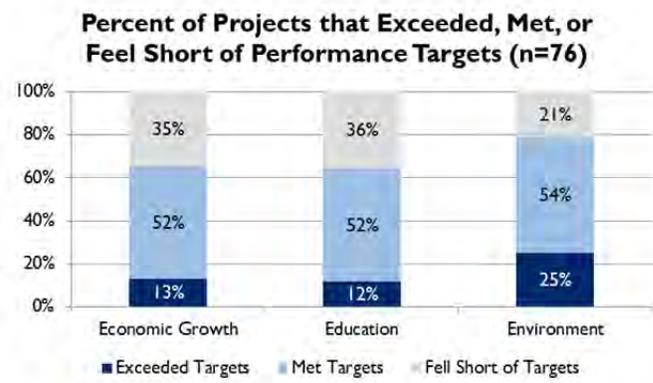
AREAS FOR LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

As supported by the USAID Evaluation Policy, learning is one of the primary purposes of conducting evaluations for the Agency. To identify areas for learning and improvement, the E3 sector specialists also reviewed the evaluation reports for examples of challenges to or failures in project design and implementation. A large majority of evaluation reports provided information on challenges or failures across E3 sectors, with slightly more frequency in Economic Growth (90 percent) and Environment (89 percent) than in Education (67 percent). Although the nature and form of these specific challenges and failures cover a broad spectrum, there is a substantial degree of overlap in the root causes identified in the evaluation reports.

Percent of E3 Evaluations that Addressed Areas for Improvment and Learning (n=117)

The most commonly-cited cause of challenges and failures across all E3 sectors was **not properly accounting for the level of local capacity**. This was specifically reported in 28 of the 117 evaluations, and affected almost every aspect of project planning and implementation. Additionally, 19 evaluations reported a serious failure in **achieving buy-in** from beneficiaries, partners or local communities.

Another of the most commonly-cited issues, discussed in 25 of the evaluation reports, was in **establishing unrealistic service delivery expectations** during project design or early implementation, resulting in missed targets and repeatedly lowered expectations. This included overconfidence in delivery targets, recipients and resources.

Similarly, **challenges with project monitoring** were frequently cited in evaluation reports. Twenty seven evaluation reports described weak or unsystematic monitoring. In these cases, project staff found clear measures of success to be elusive, and subsequent projects were unable to draw on prior data for lessons learned. Additionally, 19 evaluation reports detailed how unrealistic monitoring requirements interfered with the ability of implementing partners to produce the intended outcomes. In some cases, implementers felt that they were forced to expend time and resources to achieve performance targets and reporting requirements that were not well aligned with the intended project outcomes.

Project timing issues relating to the start and end dates of implementation were linked to challenges and failures across all sectors, and were specifically addressed in 24 evaluations. In these cases, project startup was seen as being too rushed, with insufficient time devoted to planning and laying the preliminary groundwork, or projects were only beginning to show results when they concluded. In 4 cases where project results were slow to materialize, the evaluation reports explicitly stated that an additional 6 or 12 months could have improved the project's long-term uptake and outcomes achieved, while the others were less specific in their analysis and recommendations.

A **lack of planning for project sustainability** beyond the life of the project was cited in 23 of the evaluation reports as a weakness. Evaluations reported that having otherwise successful projects conclude without a clear path forward fostered distrust among beneficiaries.

Finally, **contextual issues outside of the project's control** were also reported as a major challenge in 20 of the evaluation reports. These factors include a host of political, social, economic and environmental obstacles.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The E3 Sectoral Synthesis also examined the use of innovative practices. In reviewing the evaluation reports, the E3 sector specialists were given the following definition of innovation used by USAID's Development Innovation Ventures:

"novel business or organizational models, operational or production processes, or products or services that lead to substantial improvements (not incremental "next steps") in addressing development challenges. Innovation may incorporate science and technology but is often broader, to include new processes or business models."

Percent of E3 Evaluations that Addressed Innovative Practices (n=117)
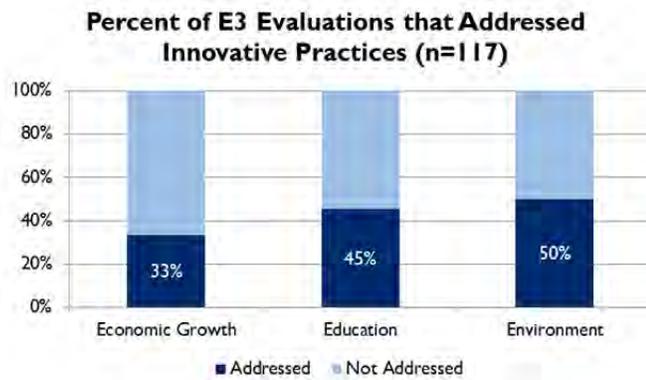
Innovative practices in project design, project implementation or technical approach were addressed in 44 percent of the evaluation reports (52 of 117), with little variation in frequency between sectors. Of

these, innovations were most often described as proven models that are being implemented in a new context.

One broad category identified in the evaluation reports is **inter-organizational innovation**, referring to new relationships between actors and new ways that stakeholders engage with one another. Inter-organizational innovations tended to be more from the perspective of the implementing partner and how they engaged with different actors. Within this broad category, there were a few recurring themes:
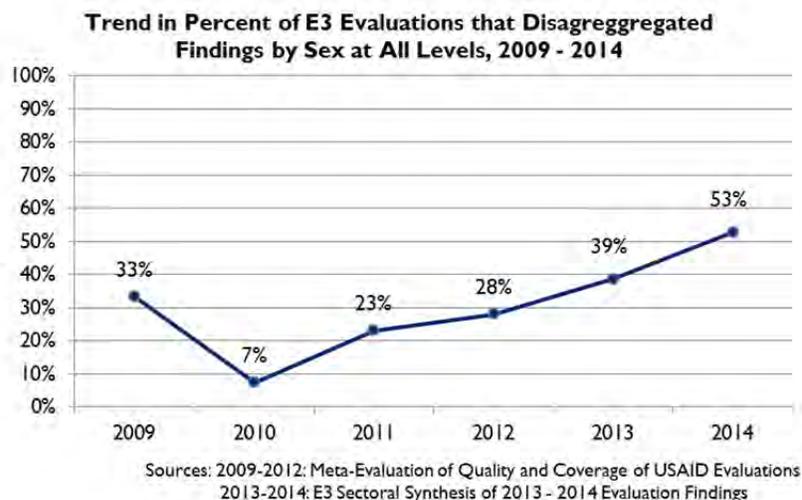
- **New relationships and entities**: Innovation was noted when projects connected entities who had not previously worked together. In some instances, the project created entities whose purpose was to coordinate between groups. This was an important theme in private sector development efforts.
- **Relationships were based on co-managing of initiatives**: For instance, one Forestry and Biodiversity project was successful in getting different governmental departments to work together on biodiversity conservation issues. Other times, projects supported community-based management that connected disparate groups; this was especially evident in evaluations of natural resource management projects.
- **Engaging new funding sources**: This often, but not always, takes the form of public-private partnerships.

Innovation also related to **new processes** that beneficiaries have taken on themselves. In Forestry and Biodiversity, 5 out of 17 evaluations reported new approaches being adopted or modifications to existing approaches, such as by adding income generation to a sustainable natural resources management project. Five evaluations in the Education sector cited innovative approaches in both teaching methods (e.g. use of visual aids in classrooms) and education administration (e.g. a new way of selecting scholarship recipients). Relative to other sectors, Education had a higher share of new processes or approaches as compared to "inter-organizational" innovations.

Evaluation reports also described 18 **product or service innovations**. Half of these were related to information and communications technology (ICT) innovations such as providing laptops for classrooms, software development and information portals. Non-ICT innovations included products and services such as fuel-efficient woodstoves; improved agricultural practices; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) technologies; and teaching tools.

## GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Addressing gender issues in evaluations is crucial to understanding the often surprising or unanticipated impacts of development interventions. Experience has shown that donors must be particularly mindful to attend to differences between men and women in access to and the benefits from development projects in order to achieve

Trend in Percent of E3 Evaluations that Disagreggregated Findings by Sex at All Levels, 2009 - 2014

2009: 33%
2010: 7%
2011: 23%
2012: 28%
2013: 39%
2014: 53%

Sources: 2009-2012: Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations
2013-2014: E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 - 2014 Evaluation Findings

gender-sensitive programming.

The Sectoral Synthesis shows that E3 evaluations have made considerable improvements in incorporating gender analysis and sex disaggregated data as compared to the Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations 2009 – 2012. **The percent of E3 evaluations that disaggregated findings by sex at *all* results levels rose from a low of 7 percent in 2010 to 53 percent in 2014,** for those evaluations where it is appropriate. For the 2013 – 2014 period, 78 percent of evaluations disaggregated *at least some* findings by sex.

Similarly, E3 evaluations have shown marked improvement in identifying, discussing, or explaining the differences in how men and women participated in or benefited from the project. **The percent of evaluations that addressed differential access or benefits by gender more than quadrupled, from 15 percent in 2011 to 67 percent in 2014.**
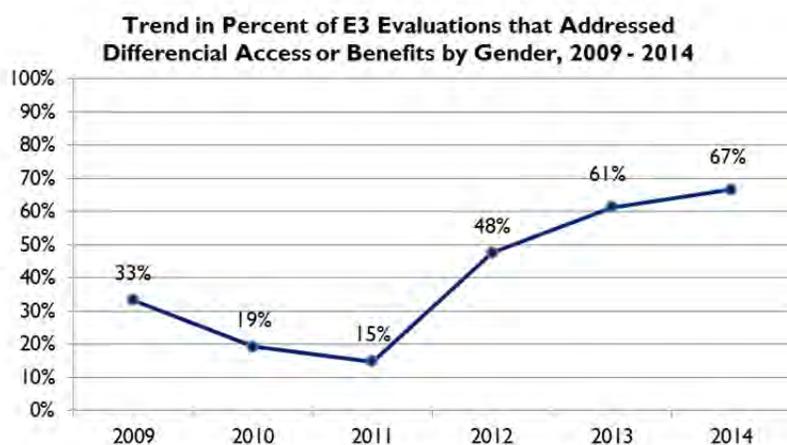
Trend in Percent of E3 Evaluations that Addressed Differencial Access or Benefits by Gender, 2009 - 2014

Sources: 2009-2012: Meta-Evaluation of Quality and Coverage of USAID Evaluations
2013-2014: E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 - 2014 Evaluation Findings

Within the 62 out of the 117 evaluations included in the 2013 – 2014 Sectoral Synthesis that discussed differential access or benefits by gender, there were a wide range of findings, including topics such as men's and women's participation in village forums and the degree of empowerment shown by women after project interventions. Several also looked at gender differences in access to jobs created as a result of project interventions.

Seventy six of the 117 evaluations (65 percent) analyzed gender equality and/or female empowerment aspects of project outputs and outcomes. Of those, 49 analyzed both outputs and outcomes. Common gender equality and women's empowerment outcomes included increases in jobs and income, improved educational performance, and decreases in household responsibilities such as time spent carrying water with an increase in access to a clean water supply.

Most evaluations (64 percent) also **showed evidence that the projects had been designed and/or implemented in ways that integrated gender equality and/or women's empowerment**. For instance, the evaluation of one Education project noted that it was designed to increase girls' enrollment and retention in school by building latrines for girls, starting girls' clubs and undertaking other interventions specifically targeted at girls. In the same vein, an evaluation of a Global Climate Change project indicated that a gender advisor was included to conduct gender analysis of differences in the drivers of deforestation as a way of integrating gender perspectives into policy dialogues.

While evaluations have shown marked improvement in addressing gender equality and women's empowerment since the 2009 – 2012 Meta Evaluation, these issues have not yet been integrated across the board. In 41 cases where the evaluation report did not analyze the gender equality and/or female empowerment aspects of outputs and outcomes, the reports tended not to provide an explanation regarding why. For 7 out of 41 evaluations that did discuss why these aspects were not analyzed,

explanations included the project still being in an incipient stage, limited availability of gender data for the project's specialized subject population, the fact that the project addressed a gender-neutral topic, and one that simply stated that the project did not conduct a gender analysis of its activities.

PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

Private sector engagement is characterized by partnerships between USAID and private sector entities. Evaluations in the Economic Growth sector were most likely to address private sector engagement, with over 92 percent of evaluation reports describing some kind of private sector engagement. This was followed by Environment at 65 percent and Education at 40 percent.

Public-private partnership was the most common type of private sector engagement across sectors. Trade and Regulatory Reform evaluations included references to public-private partnerships more frequently than did other types of projects, especially with evaluations of trade hub and export-focused projects. Another example of private sector engagement was highlighted in Development Credit in the field of **financing and investment**. Economic Policy showed the most variation: private sector engagement was

Percent of Evaluations that Addressed Private Sector Engagement (n=117)

seen not only in private-public partnerships but also in the **banking sector, employment and jobs,** and in **local market development and supply chains**. Evaluation reports from the Education sector provided insight into the ways in which **employment opportunities and vocational training for youth** were incorporated by building relationships with the private sector.
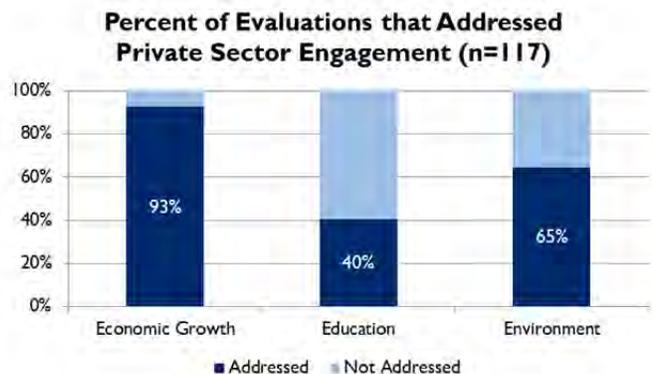
Where the private sector was not successfully engaged, seven evaluation reports outlined a number of "opportunities missed" and made recommendations for increased engagement with and inclusion of the private sector in future programming. For example, in Forestry and Biodiversity, several evaluations of sustainable tourism projects recommended greater collaboration with the local tourism and hospitality industries. In Energy and Infrastructure, evaluations stated that engagement with the private sector was particularly challenging in promoting investment while alleviating risk for the private sector.

GOVERNANCE

Evaluation reports were reviewed as to how projects addressed issues of governance in either project design or implementation, in accordance with the following definition, based on the USAID Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance:

"The exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It involves the process and capacity to formulate, implement, and enforce public policies and deliver services."

Governance issues were most frequently addressed in the Environment evaluations (81

Percent of E3 Evaluations that Addressed Goverance Issues (n=117)
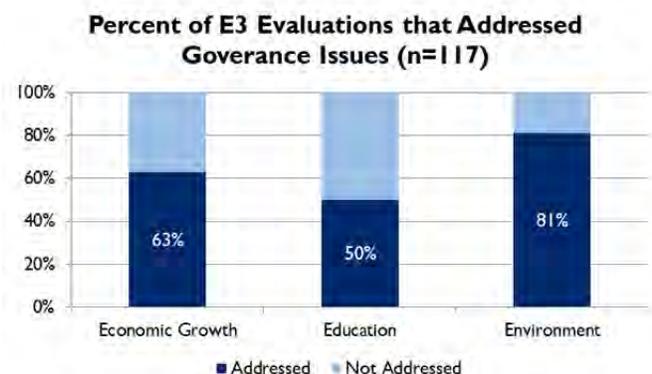
percent), followed by Economic Growth (63 percent) and Education (50 percent). Approaches to improving governance took a variety of forms.

Efforts to improve governance often involved **collaborating with host country institutions** at the local, regional and/or national government levels. Collaboration included strengthening pre-existing institutions through training or provision of technical assistance as well as coordinating implementation efforts with host country institutions. This theme was addressed in 28 evaluations across all sectors, but was most common within Education projects, which frequently work with the Ministry of Education or teacher training colleges to improve education service delivery.

Activities supporting **policy reform** were cited in 14 evaluations as approaches for strengthening governance, as well as **strengthening civil society** and supporting **public-private sector collaboration,** which were both cited in 7 evaluations.

Eight evaluations addressed **challenges resulting from a lack of governance engagement**. These included failures of the project to engage early in the process with key stakeholders and then not having sufficient buy-in to implement activities, as well as delays in project implementation when a local institution does not deliver their component of the project on time.

CONCLUSIONS

The E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014 Evaluation Findings has demonstrated that Bureau attention to evaluation quality on an ongoing basis pays off. As the study shows, the quality of E3 evaluation reports visibly improved both overall and on multiple specific evaluation report dimensions, and the study's aggregate qualitative findings provide important lessons for future programming. These findings should encourage a continuing focus on evaluation quality and periodic monitoring using the types of analytic tools on which this study relied, not only in E3 but across all Bureaus and in overseas Missions as well.

For more information on the E3 Sectoral Synthesis of 2013 – 2014 Evaluation Findings, please contact Bhavani Pathak, bpathak@usaid.gov.