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Remote Developmental Evaluation

A Guide for Funders and Practitioners

Developmental evaluation's (DE) focus on adaptation and flexibility makes it well-suited for complex environments, innovative programs, and untested approaches. Since 2010, DE has gained popularity due to its learning-focused approach, and its use continues to increase worldwide. Traditional DE relies on the evaluator(s) being embedded physically with program teams, using that presence to build trust, communication, access to information, and opportunities to support learning and adaptation within the program. As such, remote DEs were considered exceptionally challenging. **Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced an unprecedented global shift to remote work, pushing DE implementers to do what they do best—adapt and innovate—to face the challenges of continuing remotely.**

What's in this Guide?

After experiencing its own transition to remote due to COVID-19, the USAID/Indonesia DE Jalin team initiated this guide to capture learnings more broadly on remote DEs. The guide identifies challenges in conducting remote DEs, shares emerging best practices for overcoming them, and highlights other considerations for remote DEs. Six DEs operating remotely were interviewed and contributed their experiences: three Social Impact is conducting (including USAID/Indonesia Jalin), and three with other implementers. These six demonstrate a range of scenarios for why and how to implement DE remotely. Some were always designed as remote, while COVID-19 forced others to transition from in-person to remote.

New to DE? Start Here!

Developmental evaluation (DE) is an approach that supports continuous adaptation in complex environments, and differs from typical evaluations in a few ways:

1. DEs have a (usually full-time) Developmental Evaluator **embedded** alongside the implementation team;

2. DEs emphasize iterative, **real-time data collection** and regular **reflection** to support adaptation; and,

3. DEs are **methodologically agnostic** and adjust methods, analytical techniques, and topics or questions as the project evolves.

You can learn more about DE from the Developmental Evaluation Pilot Activity (DEPA) funded by USAID. DEPA's resources include a guide for DE implementers, a guide for DE funders, and a series of case studies.

Meet the DEs

Field-based DEs

Gates Foundation Jilinde

WHAT? Encourage flexible structures and evidence-based changes to help model successful, large-scale oral PrEP intervention programs in low-resource settings.

WHERE? Kenya

STRUCTURE? Single evaluator

DE IMPLEMENTER? JHPIEGO

WHY REMOTE? Transitioned to remote in March 2020 in response to COVID-19.

REMOTE SUCCESS: Generated adaptations that allowed implementing partners to resume service delivery and increase the number of clients reached through service delivery.

USAID Circle/ Boresha Afya

WHAT? Catalyze rapid learning and decision-making to improve the quality, utilization, and scalability of integrated primary healthcare services.

WHERE? Tanzania

STRUCTURE? DE office with seven staff

DE IMPLEMENTER? Social Solutions International

WHY REMOTE? Transitioned to remote in March 2020 in response to COVID-19.

REMOTE SUCCESS: Conducted interviews, outcome harvesting, and analysis to gain insights on uptake of DE-focused services.

USAID/ Indonesia Jalin

WHAT? Facilitate continuous learning and evidence-based recommendations on innovative approaches to reduce maternal and newborn death rates.

WHERE? Indonesia

STRUCTURE? DE office with six staff

DE IMPLEMENTER? Social Impact

WHY REMOTE? Transitioned to remote in March 2020 in response to COVID-19.

REMOTE SUCCESS: USAID's use of materials to promote co-creation within the Indonesia Mission.

Headquarters-based DEs

UNICEF

WHAT? Help improve UNICEF's efficiency and efficacy in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHERE? USA, HQ-based (New York)

STRUCTURE? Two evaluators: one internal and one external

DE IMPLEMENTER? Social Impact

WHY REMOTE? Established remotely due to UNICEF's COVID-19 remote work policy and mandate to engage with global stakeholders.

REMOTE SUCCESS: Secretariat's use of recommendations in managing the COVID response and stakeholder engagement.

USAID Digital Strategy

WHAT? Improve the efficiency and efficacy of four teams implementing USAID's 2020-2024 Digital Strategy.

WHERE? USA, HQ-based (Washington, DC)

STRUCTURE? Single evaluator

DE IMPLEMENTER? Social Impact

WHY REMOTE? Started up remotely due to COVID-19 planning to transition to in-person, but will now remain virtual.

REMOTE SUCCESS: Facilitated and studied the effectiveness of activities designed to enhance coordination across Digital Strategy initiatives.

UNFPA

WHAT? To help UNFPA move towards adaptive management, as the next stage of results-based management.

WHERE? Global, both HQ and field-based.

STRUCTURE? Two external evaluators

DE IMPLEMENTER? Independent consultants

WHY REMOTE? Phase I primarily remote with some in-person components due to budget and global scope. Phase II entirely remote due to COVID-19.

REMOTE SUCCESS: Data collection was more expansive and cost-effective, while barriers to follow-up and ongoing interactions were reduced.

Overcoming Remote DE Challenges

Remote DE brings challenges distinct from other forms of remote evaluation. A developmental evaluator (hereinafter "evaluator") is intended to be more involved in the work of the implementation team they evaluate (hereinafter "team") than a typical evaluator. While evaluators must remain independent, they must also integrate enough to easily access a team's processes, formal and informal data, and decision makers. In the initial embedding, evaluators seek to access documents, join team meetings and communications, and begin observations/other data collection. Also in this critical phase, the evaluator socializes his/her role and the concept of ongoing adaptation to their team. Face-to-face interaction accelerates this embedding and trust-building. The evaluator benefits from close interaction with teams to guide reflection and adaptation processes and monitor the progress of any changes.

Remote settings challenge many DE components. An evaluator launching a remote DE must build trust, relationships, and access without the advantage of a physically accessible team. Evaluators who are forced to transition to remote — as many have done due to COVID-19 — must adjust their approach to compensate for the lack of in-person communication. These limitations have potential to ripple throughout the DE, as limited collaboration and connection can make it difficult to facilitate a high level of reflection, adaptation, and innovation.

On the following pages, evaluators have shared examples of these challenges and steps they have taken to overcome them.

CASE STUDY

Remote and Thriving: DE of the USAID Jalin Project's Remote Accomplishments

USAID uses DE to support its Jalin project, which works with the Indonesia Ministry of Health to reduce maternal and newborn deaths. In three months after COVID-19's onset, the DE successfully undertook continuous monitoring of COVID-19 disruptions, maintained stakeholder engagement, and conducted assessments and learning sessions of Jalin activities – all remotely. In a highly disrupted COVID-19 environment, the Jalin DE's contributions proved that remote DE activities are not only possible, but also can make major impacts: USAID/Indonesia used materials Jalin developed in a strategic review to promote co-creation within their Mission.

"Pre-existing problems have only become magnified by COVID. The DE's value-add in connecting the regional teams and activities with USAID and the Ministry of Health has only become more valuable now."

CHRIS THOMPSON, USAID DE JALIN CHIEF OF PARTY

COMMON REMOTE DE CHALLENGES

EMBEDDEDNESS
Becoming a part of the team's formal and informal routines, operations, and communications

TRUST
Building a transparent relationship where the team believes that the DE and the evaluator add value to its work

ENGAGEMENT
The method in which the evaluator and the team connect and collaborate to accomplish the goals of the DE and the project

DATA COLLECTION
How the evaluator can capture both formal and informal information from the team, stakeholders, and beneficiaries

DELIVERABLES AND LEARNING PRODUCTS
Turning collected data into accessible and practical outputs to inform decision making

EMBEDDEDNESS
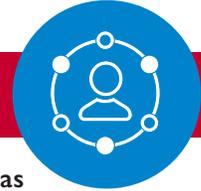
Developmental evaluators should be integrated into the projects they are supporting – and as early as possible. One evaluator described embedding as having two components: technical and behavioral.

Technical embeddedness reflects access to team communications, systems, and knowledge management platforms. No interviewed evaluators had trouble gaining this access (clearances, logins, emails), and several counted it an essential component of their remote success. When evaluators use their team's platforms for emails, calendars, calls, and chats, teams are far more likely to perceive them as a true collaborator – so much so that the UNFPA evaluators reported some stakeholders asking how long had they been full-time employees in the organization.

Behavioral embeddedness, or the extent an evaluator is integrated into team(s), is more difficult. The sooner an evaluator joins meetings and accesses work materials, the more a part of the team(s) they become. One evaluator observed, "I am most embedded in teams I have the most meetings with." Even being copied on emails or observing meetings can be mutually beneficial: it normalizes interactions between evaluators and teams while giving evaluators context for information that may not make sense otherwise. One of remote DE's biggest challenges is capturing teams' informal, nonverbal communications and dynamics. As an evaluator put it, "When a meeting is in a room, you have spatial and nonverbal cues (who sits next to, chats with, or avoids whom). That can really influence how work is done, whose opinion gets valued and whose

> "Conducting remote observations may take more time and requires justifying and explaining the need for getting information, which requires trust among the staff."
>
> **RIA WARDANI, USAID DE JALIN DEPUTY CHIEF OF PARTY**

gets ignored. My visibility on that is 80-to-90% if not 100% lost now." This lack of visibility can be exacerbated if an evaluator does not have champions within the implementation team or funder to advocate for including the evaluator.

To support embedding, five interviewees valued an orientation period to formally acculturate evaluators/teams, and strongly recommend having such orientation in person if possible, even if the remainder of the DE is remote. DEs that had no in-person opportunities wished they could have done so (in a non-COVID environment), and DEs who transitioned to remote attributed their success in part to the relationships established in the in-person phase. The two UNFPA evaluators confirmed that their relatively limited in-person work during Phase I of their DE was "critical because for that reason they saw us as facilitators and fellow team members rather than as external evaluators."

CHALLENGES
- Technical—access to systems
- Behavioral—integration with teams and people
- Orienting others to DE

SOLUTIONS
- Need immediate access to technology platforms
- Push to include evaluator in as many remote interactions as possible, with champions who quickly incorporate the evaluator
- Allocate sufficient time for orientation and provide ongoing ; in-person can be better if possible

REMOTE DE ADVANTAGE: embedding an evaluator remotely reduces costs considerably compared to in-person.

TRUST

Alongside and beyond embedding, DEs must establish teams' trust with the evaluator and belief that the DE and evaluator will be beneficial and not punitive. The main challenge to building and maintaining trust in remote DEs, as framed by three interviewed evaluators, is that teams can forget the DE post-embedding because "they don't walk past you in the hallway…they don't see you around the office, in meetings, just here and there." Also, building and maintaining trust is harder remotely because evaluators must explain the DE in writing and through a screen, and by nature that is slower and more formal.

Evaluators overcame this challenge through a high volume of intentional and creative interactions, often supplemented on a smaller scale with outreach through WhatsApp or a chat. One evaluator "[shows] up early to meetings so that there can be a little chit-chat…more intentional but not uncomfortable moments of informal sharing before the meeting starts." Though this process is more work, evaluators report that the additional effort is well worth it.

CHALLENGES
- Building trust remotely in the evaluator and the DE
- Maintain awareness of the DE in a remote environment

SOLUTIONS
- High volume of intentional and creative communications
- Make effort to simulate informal interactions

REMOTE DE ADVANTAGE: Evaluators may be viewed by stakeholders as being more independent and trustworthy when not embedded in person.

Considerations for Remote DEs

To maximize remote DEs' effectiveness, evaluators recommend also considering the following components:

1. **What will be the remote DE's structure?** Will the evaluator be the only remote person, or will much of the implementer's work occur remotely as well?
2. **How flexible is the implementation timeline?** Are there tight timelines or schedules that are unlikely to be able to shift? How flexible is the client?
3. **Are remote approaches suitable for the data needed?** How aware is the client of potential limitations of remote data collection? Should some elements of the scope be revised or reduced to better match remote work?

4. **How important will be non-verbal cues, team dynamics, and informal connections?** If the DE focuses on decision-making and team processes, will remote DE be able to capture this information?
5. **What will be the evaluator's focus?** Will remote DE help an evaluator maintain focus while giving enough exposure to be flexible?
6. **What is the budget for the DE?** How might cost savings from the remote DE be used to lead to better overall outcomes (investment in non-traditional deliverables, technology, etc.)?
7. **What is the best online platform for remote DEs?** What is the capacity of evaluators, implementers, and other stakeholders for online technology?

"The thing with virtual DEs, there's more of a better chance to target and stay focused on teams, people, and tasks within your scope because you're not pulled into different areas as much."

USAID DIGITAL STRATEGY EVALUATOR

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement reflects an evaluator's day-to-day reality in connecting with teams and providing technical assistance. As DE requires high levels of engagement, building strong communications structures is essential for remote DEs. As remote brings a higher level of formality, a major challenge is finding the right tone in communications. As one evaluator noted, "There is no stopping by desks or seeing people in the cafeteria…to schedule a meeting it has to be a formal email and…it's hard to make it friendly without seeming aggressive or constant follow-up."

Maintaining participant focus virtually is another major challenge. DE requires time for reflection workshops and other collaborative activities, yet CIRCLE and Jilinde struggled to keep participants engaged in virtual DE sessions after two-to-three hours, requiring extra effort from facilitators. "In virtual meetings, they are physically present, but not psychologically or mentally present," said a Jilinde evaluator. Along with the USAID Digital Strategy evaluator, Jilinde evaluators also flagged post-event follow-up as its own significant challenge, and one "more likely to happen in a remote DE." Despite meetings and sending action items, remote DEs require extra work to get individuals to deliver on those actions: the emphasis is simply "not the same as from face-to-face meetings."

All interviewed evaluators overcame these challenges with intentional efforts to: seek out informal conversations, use creative communication and presentation platforms, and explain the DE/their role up front and succinctly. The USAID Digital Strategy evaluator used platforms like Google Slides and Mural that increase collaboration and participation and facilitate brainstorming, strategic planning, and co-creation. Social media has also proved successful for Jalin and Jilinde, whose DEs required stakeholder reflection sessions. When these DEs became remote, evaluators successfully held reflection activities through WhatsApp. The UNICEF evaluators (post-embedding) regularly had client check-ins and conference calls; and reported that this level of engagement was "critical to keeping momentum going in a remote setting."

> "Previously it was very difficult. We have a monthly meeting… We used to meet just a few people because of competing physical engagements. But with virtual, we get almost everybody participating . . . so we just plan in advance and we get many people."
>
> **CIRCLE DE TEAM**

Remote DEs also provide an engagement advantage, as it can enable broader participation and reduce geographic boundaries. Both CIRCLE and Jilinde reported increased attendance at virtual meetings.

CHALLENGES
- Building strong communications
- Balancing formality with relationship-building
- Maintaining participant focus remotely

SOLUTIONS
- Adapt meeting structures to remote: shorter, more engaging
- Use collaborative communication platforms, including social media
- Leverage advantages of remote to invite broader participation

REMOTE DE ADVANTAGE: Remote DEs can engage a broader audience at minimal additional cost.

> "I believe you can still do DE remotely. It can be very effective. Why? Because a physical presence is not necessary for DE. The questions you want to answer shouldn't require a physical presence or observation."
>
> **GERALD USIKA, DEPUTY CHIEF OF PARTY, CIRCLE DE**

DATA COLLECTION
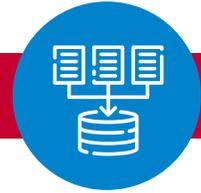
Effective DE relies on steady information flow to inform ongoing adaptation. The biggest data collection challenges evaluators named may apply to any remote evaluation: lack of oversight for quality assurance, and time delays.

Four of the six DEs interviewed cited time delays as a data collection challenge. One reason is the increased formality of remote work, compared to in-person where informal interactions can happen regularly (water cooler chats, impromptu meetings in a hallway, etc.). The evaluators in both UN-funded DEs reported that data collection was delayed by having to go through a formal scheduler. In one case, it took over three weeks to set up a 10-minute informal discussion that could have happened impromptu at almost any time in an in-person setting. Another reason for delays is that getting responses from stakeholders is more challenging remotely; both the USAID CIRCLE and Jalin DEs noted that remote observations required extensive coordination, thus delaying the process. Teams overcoming this challenge have adapted by having flexibility with scheduling and adjusting their workplans and processes to give buffers for a slower pace: the CIRCLE DE, for example, has changed their processes to only update their findings, recommendations, and adaptations tracker quarterly rather than monthly, reflecting this increased level of effort.

> "We often talked with [stakeholders] several times throughout the process, and that's when remote becomes absolutely of the essence."
>
> **UNFPA EVALUATORS**

Quality is also an issue, as data submitted remotely has fewer controls. To adapt, Jilinde's local partners submitted photos of data reported for the month using WhatsApp when in-person site visits became impossible, but even this did not address all data quality challenges. Even when DEs can engage with stakeholders directly, virtual interactions struggle to transmit informal elements, such as nonverbal, interpersonal, or spatial information. That said, evaluators acknowledge this type of information's value depends on a DE's purpose. UNFPA's evaluators adapted by increasing the volume of data collection events to get perspectives from a broader swathe of the organization.

Remote DE also brings data collection advantages like being less obtrusive. One evaluator noted, "[being] a fly on the wall, it's easy. People really forget that you're there for participant observation; it works better remotely." Also, because increased participation comes at minimal cost, remote DE offers the possibility of data collection that is more flexible, allowing for circular feedback loops in a geographically disperse environment rather than a single data collection activity.

CHALLENGES
- Delays in data collection with remote coordination
- Maintaining same access to information
- Ensuring data quality remotely

SOLUTIONS
- Build flexibility into workplans and plan for delays
- Establish quality control systems supplemented by capacity building

REMOTE DE ADVANTAGE: Easily reconnect with stakeholders, making data collection more collaborative.

DELIVERABLES/LEARNING PRODUCTS
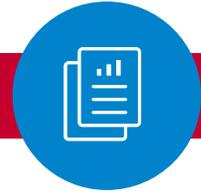
DEs tend to deliver intermittent, shorter-form deliverables rather than traditional evaluation reports, often developed with higher levels of stakeholder input. Several evaluators agreed that remote DEs can lead to delays in finalizing deliverables due to challenges with getting stakeholders on the phone, needing additional time for input from team members, and the lack of face-to-face interaction to encourage dialogue and rapid feedback. In response, evaluators proactively increased communication to better approximate a face-to-face relationship and kept timing flexible to account for inevitable delays. The USAID DE Jalin reported, "This challenge has been addressed by establishing additional or more frequent touch points (e.g. phone calls, emails, feedback forms) to both ensure shared understanding and that work products are inclusive of all of the task's components."

Consistent with core DE principles, remote DEs should also consider which products will have maximum utility. For instance, the USAID DE Jalin noticed that its clients in the Ministry of Health and USAID had less bandwidth to review written products due to COVID-19. As a result, the DE offered shorter, visual, and innovative products to help clients monitor the progress of their work, preparing infographics, online maps, and videos. The Jilinde DE reduced its scope to focus on the most relevant topics.

However, a DE's true goal is to support the change process that occurs after a deliverable is completed. Evaluators note it is harder to advocate for uptake or guide the change process in a remote DE, with one observing how, "When you can knock at their office door, it is harder for them to ignore you." To overcome this challenge, evaluators recommend increasing communication: "You have to make several, several communications. Because it is through the phone and they are not in the office. If you make a recommendation and want to discuss, you have to ask several times because they are not there."

> "Before, in-person, we had much more intense, broader implementation of DE. When COVID came, it has been leaned down to become purposeful, and it's very focused on a specific deliverable."
>
> **ABEDNEGO MUSAU, JILINDE DE EVALUATOR**

CHALLENGES
- Delays in finalizing deliverables with stakeholder input
- Finding the most useful form of deliverable

SOLUTIONS
- Close communication with clients about deliverable use and timing
- Creative deliverable approaches for remote access

REMOTE DE ADVANTAGE: Surplus resources from a remote transition may be reallocated to develop higher-quality and innovative deliverables.

Setting Up a Remote DE

When considering how to best convert a DE into a remote format, funders and practitioners should consider the following areas:

	IN-PERSON SETUP	REMOTE SETUP
EVALUATOR SKILLS	• Strong verbal and written communication to build trust • Diverse set of monitoring, evaluation, and learning skills	• Fluency in technology and visualization • Comfortable with using online platforms for engagement and record-keeping • Engaging virtual facilitator
EMBEDDING AN EVALUATOR	**Technical:** • Get access to team documents, website, email, etc. **Behavioral:** • Most DEs would hold an initial launch workshop to orient stakeholders • Face-to-face meetings when possible • Evaluator located with team	**Technical:** • Essential that technical embedding and access happens quickly • Prioritize evaluator access to team calendars and meetings • Ability to merge management and information systems **Behavioral:** • Have a champion facilitate introductory emails, calls, and video chats to get to know people at all levels • Hold orientation or acculturation sessions early (and often)
BUILDING/ MAINTAINING TRUST	• Active listening in all meetings, interviews, and conversations • Be conscious of biases • Spend time evenly across stakeholders • Encourage frank discussions	• Increase frequency and intentionality of communications (formal and informal) • Pay closer attention to tone in communications that are written or through a screen • Create safe spaces to raise concerns informally
ENGAGEMENT	• Take advantage of situations for unstructured conversation • Have an objective sounding board and regular check-ins • Highlight quick wins • Integrate while staying independent	• Use extra effort to create spaces for sharing and other informal dynamics • Keep meetings shorter to maintain engagement • Observe more meetings • Use social media and interactive platforms from G-Suite, Microsoft, Mural, etc. for meetings and sharing information • More follow-ups required to keep team members engaged
DATA COLLECTION	Methodologically agnostic approach uses a variety of data collection tools	• Consider data quality assurance methods for remote data • Build partner capacity if evaluator(s) can't collect data directly • Ensure buffers for delays due to lengthy coordination with respondents
DELIVERABLES	Deliverables are utilization-focused and small-scale to make them accessible to intended audiences	• Be prepared to adapt deliverable timelines or inputs to respond to delays. • Increase communication to ensure deliverables are adequately tailored to stakeholder needs.
TIMELINE	Evaluator supports the full implementation timeframe	• Develop a flexible workplan to account for stakeholder responsiveness
BUDGET	• Budget incorporates cost of physically embedding • Budget also includes travel costs • Traditionally full-time evaluators	• Working remotely can free up funds from embedding and travel. Instead, increase spending on communications, period of performance, and enhancing work products.

Acknowledgements

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