

BalanceD-MERL Maturity Summary

The term D-MERL refers to the often disjointed components of the program-cycle and discrete and/or overlapping activities in program design (D), monitoring (M), evaluation (E), research (R), or learning (L). The BalanceD-MERL consortium posits that the incorporation of four key principles (relevant, right-sized, trustworthy, and responsible) into D-MERL activities can result in more rapid learning, better use of findings, and improved program decision making. This matrix presents four levels of maturity for each principle. These descriptions aim to get you thinking about how balanced your D-MERL is, as well as what is required to create sustained improvements in D-MERL within your organization.

Relevant			
<p><i>D-MERL is relevant when it is informed by development theory¹ and it considers and is shaped by the characteristics of the local operating environment, including people (participants, partners, primary intended users,² etc), context, and strategy. Relevant D-MERL responds to and is shaped by intentional learning that focuses on how these characteristics evolve over time.</i></p>			
Unbalanced D-MERL	Emergent D-MERL	Balanced D-MERL	Sustained D-MERL
<p>The objectives for D-MERL, as well as the approaches being used, are unclear. This is due to a lack of understanding about D-MERL, lack of stakeholder³ identification and understanding of context, as well as insufficient emphasis on knowledge management and other organizational program support systems.</p>	<p>Limited context and stakeholder analysis negatively impact D-MERL, as well as the participation of primary intended users. Inconsistent integration of activities, together with limited investment in knowledge management, means the program does not respond quickly to changes in context.</p>	<p>D-MERL activities are integrated into the program and are informed by local context and stakeholder analysis. The primary intended users share responsibility for the program. They balance proactive learning objectives against what investment is made in how knowledge is used, ensuring that the program is efficiently adaptive to changing conditions.</p>	<p>D-MERL activities are focused, understood and are useful to management. Extensive knowledge of and engagement of primary intended users means that D-MERL improves programs and organizational strategy. This ensures the organization is efficiently adaptive to changing conditions.</p>
Right-sized			
<p><i>D-MERL is right-sized when there is a match between resources (people, time, and money) and goals. Right-sized D-MERL engages in co-ordinated and efficient activities, processes, and methods. Right-sized D-MERL processes and data are non-duplicative of each other and meet program management and compliance needs.</i></p>			
Unbalanced D-MERL	Emergent D-MERL	Balanced D-MERL	Sustained D-MERL

¹ Development theory draws from several social science disciplines and approaches to outline how desirable change in society is best achieved.

² 'Primary intended users' refers to specific individuals who will use learning from monitoring, evaluation, or research and have the capacity to effect change in policies and procedures.

³ 'Stakeholders' refers to the multiple and varied individuals and groups that may affect or be affected by the program, including but not limited to participants, partners, primary intended users, and donors.

Data needs and methods have not been researched and do not match D-MERL objectives. Together with business processes ⁴ supporting D-MERL, they are inappropriately resourced (people, time and money). Program management is compliance focused.	Data needs and methods are supported by literature and are beginning to better match D-MERL objectives. The program is starting to integrate processes and align them with resources and appropriate level of effort. Focus is shifting from compliance to management.	Data needs and methods are matched to D-MERL objectives. Business functions that support D-MERL are integrated and have appropriate resourcing and level of effort to ensure sound D-MERL. The primary focus is on improving efficiency and better program management.	Data needs and methods are regularly monitored and assessed for alignment with resources and level of effort, resulting in innovation and contributions to the literature. Business functions are monitored and optimized.
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Trustworthy

D-MERL is trustworthy when it is conducted according to standards of rigor appropriate to context, constraints, and/or intended use of the data. Trustworthy data and methods are appropriately valid, reliable, and objective, ensuring integrity of both the process and results. Trustworthy D-MERL is conducted by competent staff and supported by leadership.

Unbalanced D-MERL	Emergent D-MERL	Balanced D-MERL	Sustained D-MERL
D-MERL design and planning does not ensure rigorous methods and data. Program staff lacks the competence ⁵ required to inform appropriate selection of study design and assure quality data and analysis.	D-MERL data methods and analysis plan are defined but inconsistently executed. Program recognizes limitations of methods, but is unable to implement needed improvements. Program is working to ensure D-MERL competence is available.	The systems and competence are present to ensure quality D-MERL planning and consistent execution. This produces rigorous data and analyses that are trusted by all stakeholders.	Competence requirements are fully met, enabling and provoking inquiry that extends beyond the original scope. Organizational systems and processes ensure data quality and analysis is regularly audited. ⁶ This results in the highest quality data and regular improvement.

Responsible

D-MERL is responsible when it goes beyond the “Do No Harm”⁷⁸ principle to engage respectfully, ethically, and sensitively with the primary intended users and partners. Responsible D-MERL is transparent and accountable.

Unbalanced D-MERL	Emergent D-MERL	Balanced D-MERL	Sustained D-MERL
Leadership is not proactively supporting transparent and accountable D-MERL. The result is D-	Leadership is increasingly supporting D-MERL efforts which are accountable to the needs of stakeholders, enabling	Leadership proactively supports D-MERL efforts that are responsive and sensitive to all stakeholder needs, ensures	Leadership champions D-MERL that is standardized and pro-actively audited. D-

⁴ ‘Business processes’ refers to a collection of related tasks or activities that accomplish an organizational goal, such as the steps taken to complete a deliverable or product.

⁵ ‘Competence’ refers to the *ability* to do something successfully. One may have sufficient knowledge and skills yet still lack the *ability* to apply them, for a variety of reasons.

⁶ ‘Audit’ refers to a formal review of policies and procedures to determine whether they are being adhered to and having their intended outcomes and to identify improvements needed.

⁷ The “Do No Harm” principle refers to the deliberate focus to reduce negative impacts and maximize positive impacts of development and humanitarian assistance.

⁸ Wallace, M. “From Principle to Practice: A User’s Guide to Do No Harm.” Cambridge: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2015.

<http://cdacollaborative.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/From-Principle-to-Practice-A-Users-Guide-to-Do-No-Harm.pdf>

<p>MERL that is not responsive and sensitive to the cultural, ethical and social constructs (needs) of stakeholders. Unclear accountability for findings hinders honest reporting and action.</p>	<p>and respecting their participation. The ownership and governance of data is not always clear, resulting in inconsistent transparency, reporting and action.</p>	<p>accountability (vertical and horizontal) and transparency in the ownership, reporting and use of all findings.</p>	<p>MERL is accountable to the full range of stakeholders needs and their environment. Ownership of data is clear and governance ensures transparent reporting <i>and</i> use of all findings.</p>
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DRAFT VERSION