

February 2023

Strengthening evaluation capacity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

Background

The USAID-funded Data for Impact (D4I) project works with countries to increase capacity for rigorous evaluation by engaging with local institutions and evaluators as essential collaborators, systems actors, and learning partners. We strive to reflect the principles for effective programming and equitable partnerships detailed in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening (LCS) Policy by designing our efforts around local priorities, planning and implementing diverse capacity strengthening approaches, and envisioning and measuring the changes in performance that result from these efforts.

This case study highlights D4I's partnership with the Kinshasa School of Public Health (KSPH) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Data for Impact is partnering with KSPH to evaluate the USAID-funded Integrated Health Program (IHP), focused on strengthening the DRC's health system. In addition to learning via collaborative implementation of the evaluation, with D4I's support KSPH is implementing a coordinated set of capacity strengthening interventions selected following a baseline needs assessment. This case study highlights how LCS Policy principles were put into practice, and how interventions were designed with sustainability and the local system in mind.

Context

USAID/DRC asked D4I to evaluate IHP's impact on the health system and health outcomes and to design and implement complementary interventions to strengthen evaluation capacity

with KSPH. The Kinshasa School of Public Health is the flagship public health school in the DRC, whose graduates go on to work with government health agencies, local research organizations, and USAID implementing partners. Intentional, demand-driven engagement with the school meant thinking strategically about how individual capacity among faculty members and students contributes to and benefits from the university's institutional capacity and by extension strengthens the organizations and networks with KSPH affiliates as members.

USAID LCS Policy Principle 1:

Start with the local system. This principle emphasizes the importance of engaging with local actors to understand the current and potential roles that they play in generating health and development outcomes. It also encourages the exploration of the existing and aspirational relationships that shape institutions and society. With KSPH already providing training in evaluation, D4I was able to offer opportunities and resources to bolster this system in response to local actors' priorities.



KSPH staff training in the utilization of Moodle platform and Community of practice. Photo courtesy of Dr Branly Mbunga.



Centering local priorities to design capacity strengthening interventions

Once the decision was made to partner with KSPH for strengthening evaluation capacities, the next step was to design a capacity strengthening plan. As KSPH already provides training in evaluation competencies, it was key for D4I to understand what training KSPH currently did and did not offer and where students and faculty most desired to grow their evaluation skills and to what end. Data for Impact conducted in-depth interviews with KSPH academic department chairs and school administrators to understand existing learning opportunities for students, faculty professional development, perceptions of graduates' capacity for specific evaluation competencies, and existing resources and priorities. Interviewees were identified in collaboration with school leaders.

Findings from the interviews were used to design a set of surveys for faculty and students, with questions about self-assessed competencies for evaluation-related tasks; experiences with grant applications, conferences, and publications; technical areas where individuals would most like to grow their skills; and preferred forums for capacity strengthening activities. Participants indicated wanting to strengthen their capacity to find grant opportunities, write grant applications, network with international funders, and develop skills for leading complex analyses and economic evaluations. The results from the interviews and surveys were compiled into a report and corresponding PowerPoint presentation (access the PPT file:

<https://www.data4impactproject.org/publications/evaluation-capacity-at-kinshasa-school-of-public-health-baseline-assessment-results/>), which were shared with the school community and used to develop a slate of potential interventions. A steering committee of KSPH faculty was formed to consider the suggested interventions and identify

intervention products. The three interventions outlined below were selected, comprising an integrated approach designed to work with and build on existing systems.

1. Provide enhanced evaluation training opportunities. A core set of evaluation learning modules was selected to be developed and made available online via the school's learning management platform. Building on this initial investment in online learning to complement existing training in evaluation methods, KSPH plans to continue to add content over time, including recorded lectures and additional course resources. This intervention began with a pilot phase in which a small number of students were given access to the online materials for testing. Along with other updates made in response to pilot users' feedback, an option was added for learners to receive a certificate after completing the online modules.

2. Create a grant resource library. KSPH identified acquiring more direct funding for evaluations and other research as a fundamental goal of its capacity strengthening work. To achieve this goal, school stakeholders need increased access to information about funding opportunities

USAID LCS Policy Principle 2: Strengthen diverse capacity through diverse approaches.

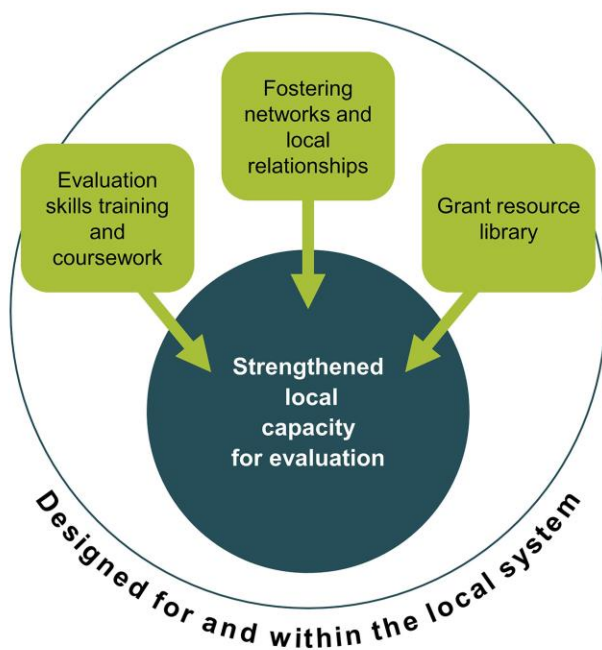
A **fit-for-purpose approach** to design a package of interventions in collaboration with KSPH faculty and with input from students that considered what systems, resources, and capacity already existed and what was desired. The set for capacity strengthening interventions intentionally built upon existing platforms within the school in a low-cost and sustainable way.



and to supporting materials for grant applications (like biodata templates and institutional capacity statements). In response, a grant resource library was created, comprising both a catalog of funding opportunities and a repository of documents.

3. Develop forums for networking and information sharing. An online community of practice was created with the aim of increasing communication within KSPH, especially among the school's academic departments. The accompanying discussion board is open to the KSPH community and moderated by a core set of administrators. Users can post technical questions, job opportunities, and other items of interest to evaluation learners and practitioners working in the DRC and beyond. Data for Impact also provided financial support to upgrade the existing server at KSPH to accommodate increased traffic to the online training modules and community of practice.

Figure 1: Three-pronged set of capacity strengthening interventions designed with KSPH



These three initiatives were supported with a dedicated budget for capacity strengthening, which included staff time for D4I and a dedicated capacity strengthening lead at KSPH, a subcontract with Tropical Health, funding to support the initial assessment, and funds to upgrade the server to support increased traffic to KSPH online platforms.

USAID LCS Policy Principles 4 & 5: Align capacity strengthening with local priorities; appreciate and build on existing priorities.

By engaging the KSPH school community early and iteratively, D4I was able to incorporate plans for capacity strengthening activities into the evaluation workplan that were aligned with the priorities of KSPH and built on the school's existing strengths and platforms. Through interviews and surveys, D4I gained an understanding of KSPH priorities both for the institution and affiliated individuals—and was able to co-design interventions to support these local priorities. As the KSPH steering committee gave input on capacity strengthening plan design, some of the originally suggested interventions (especially training topics) were modified for better localization. For example, D4I had originally suggested providing trainings on mobile survey data collection, but this was one area where KSPH felt they did not need additional training and instead felt that focused training on evaluation capacities would complement and reinforce the IHP evaluation.



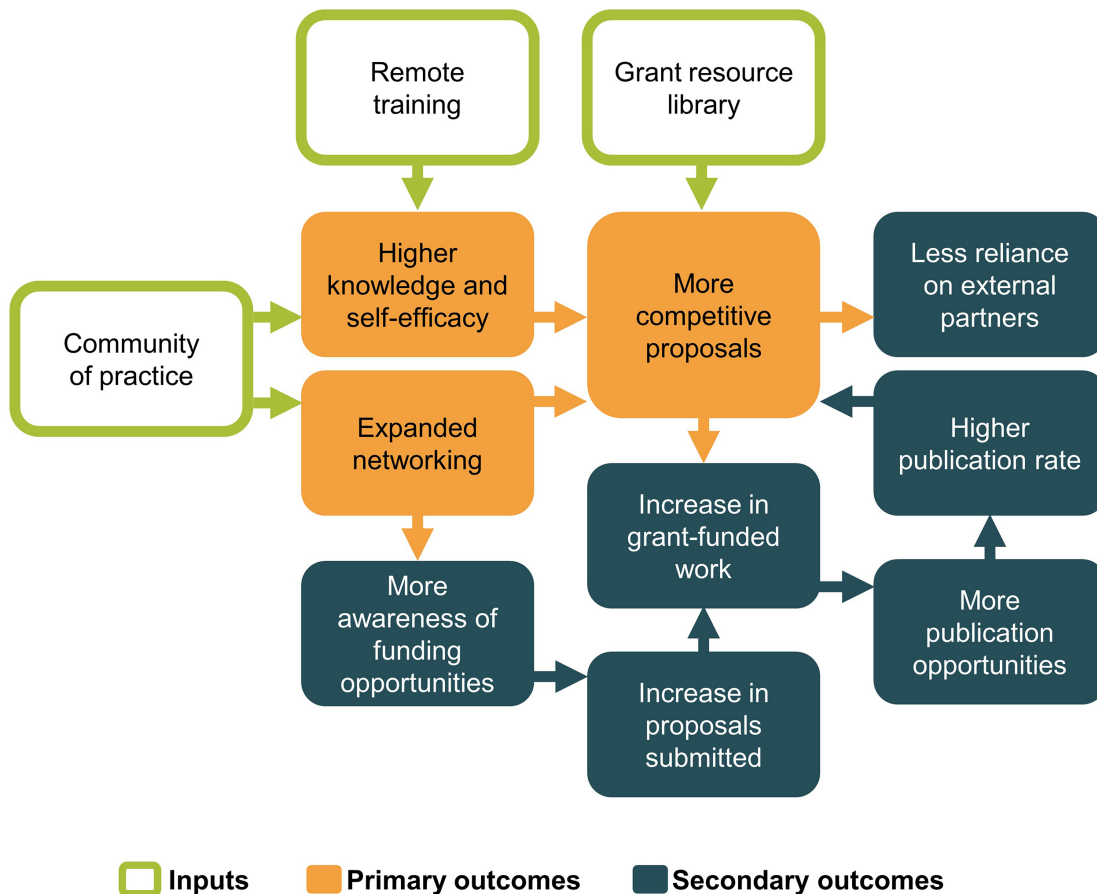
Results framework

Although D4I and KSPH started working in partnership to plan and implement local capacity strengthening activities in the DRC several years before the USAID LCS was issued, these efforts reflect several principles underlying the policy. The first principle, “Start with the local system,” is embodied in the model developed to map the inputs, primary outcomes, and secondary outcomes from the capacity strengthening plan (see Figure 1). The model, based on an understanding of KSPH’s resources and role in the local system, also highlights improved

performance and other results stemming from capacity strengthening. This illustrates **Principle 3: Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners**. The interventions are expected to lead directly to three primary outcomes among local actors (KSPH and affiliates):

- 1) Increased knowledge and self-efficacy for targeted evaluation skills
- 2) Expanded networking activity
- 3) More competitive grant proposal development

Figure 2: Results model for the KSPH capacity strengthening plan





Expanded networking is expected to help foster new partnerships for future grant applications, which may ultimately increase the amount of external funding received. The acquisition of new grant-supported work, in turn, has the potential to increase publication rates among KSPH affiliates, meeting the school's goals of increasing their publication activity and reducing reliance on external partners, including international ones.

Measuring improved performance

Performance, or the extent to which an actor can achieve intended outcomes effectively and consistently, is fundamental to capacity assessment. Since many performance outcomes from evaluation capacity strengthening can take a long time to achieve, identifying measurable indicators for improved performance in the short term is important. The KSPH results framework outlines iterative effects, helping to facilitate planning for performance measurement that is both meaningful and feasible.

The survey that was conducted near the start of the capacity strengthening process will be repeated at the end of the five-year evaluation to determine if the intended outcomes have been achieved. As noted, KSPH priorities include increasing direct grant funding and increasing publication of peer-reviewed journal articles, among other outcomes. While measurable progress on these high-level outcomes will be challenging to realize over a short project cycle, the survey will also capture intermediate effects including changes in self-efficacy. The new resources built via the capacity strengthening work will continue to exist within the school, as they are not dependent on D4I's support. Investments in the server are intended to support long-term access to the training materials, resource library, and COP platform, enabling KSPH to continue to work toward their long-term goals and strengthen capacity among current and future students, faculty, and alumni.

What facilitates local capacity strengthening in this context?

- **Engaging local actors in a collaborative design process:** While there have been previous efforts with outside organizations working with KSPH to strengthen capacity at the school, these activities struggled to obtain buy-in from local actors and effect sustainable change. By engaging the school community early and often, D4I was able to meet KSPH where they were and understand how they wanted to grow their strengths, instead of imposing external priorities.

USAID LCS Policy Principle 3: Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners. The results framework for D4I's partnership with KSPH illustrates how strengthening activities are intended to result in incremental change that will contribute to KSPH's overall goals to increase evaluation competencies leading to expanded funding and publication activity and illustrates how the components of the approach are mutually reinforcing.

- **A fit-for-purpose, integrated approach:** The capacity strengthening plan took into consideration input from faculty and students and offered an approach that was working at multiple levels, in addition to being nested within the context of a larger impact evaluation to provide additional mentoring and collaborative working opportunities.
- **Considering sustainability at the onset:** The design process recognized that if the capacity strengthening interventions were to be effective, information and resources needed to be locally accessible beyond the life



of the D4I activity. Training, resources, and opportunities were designed to be locally owned and accessed, and low-cost solutions were prioritized. Training modules were added to the learning management system that KSPH had already begun using for remote instruction during COVID-related restrictions.

- **Building on relationships with trusted partners:** The D4I partner leading this activity, Tulane University, has a decades-long relationship with KSPH. In creating the resource library, evaluation training modules, and the COP, D4I contracted with Tropical Health, an organization with whom faculty at KSPH had worked previously and felt had the right expertise.
- **Bringing in a third party to balance power dynamics:** Locally led development requires authentic engagement, which can be more difficult to achieve when capacity strengthening is embedded in evaluation co-implementation. In addition to thinking beyond learning-by-doing and budgeting separately for capacity strengthening, bringing in an external actor with no accountability for the IHP evaluation may have mitigated the power dynamics that could otherwise limit capacity strengthening progress. With a sole focus on co-designing an effective response to the school's priority needs, Tropical Health was able to offer support without expectations about preexisting capacity, needs, or performance.

Challenges

Lessons learned throughout the process of designing and implementing a capacity strengthening plan in the DRC can inform future implementation stages as well as capacity strengthening in similar contexts. The following challenges were noted in D4I's collaboration with KSPH:

- **Competing interests for the time of local actors:** Local partners typically have competing responsibilities. In this collaboration with KSPH, the steering committee members were key to providing input on the capacity strengthening intervention design. However, steering committee members' time was not budgeted for and was added to the list of their existing responsibilities. Future efforts should consider how to engage individuals from local institutions without introducing a burden.

USAID LCS Policy Principle 6:
Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of support for local capacity strengthening. The initial phase of collecting baseline data and designing a capacity strengthening plan was led by a D4I capacity strengthening lead but in close collaboration with KSPH. As the work progressed, the capacity strengthening lead role shifted to a KSPH faculty member, who may have been able to more effectively increase the buy-in and reach of the capacity strengthening interventions with the school community.



- **Fostering an online community where one did not previously exist:** One of the noted challenges at KSPH has been engaging the full school community in the COP discussion boards. While there is currently an active community of users, the pool of users is small. The local capacity strengthening lead at KSPH is considering how to continue to rollout and engage the new platform, especially with faculty who may not be as comfortable with online forums.
- **Sustainability of capacity strengthening interventions:** Although cost and sustainability were given key consideration in the design phase, some questions remain about the hand-off process and the school's responsibilities as platform administrators once the support from D4I ends. Without D4I support, KSPH will no longer have a funded position for a staff or faculty member to administer, update, and increase awareness of the COP, especially among new students and faculty, which may limit future use.
- **Considerations for gender:** Gender integration is a crosscutting priority for D4I. The baseline assessment survey conducted with KSPH collected participant demographic information; however, the results and summary report were not disaggregated by gender as there were so few female participants and in general far fewer females in the KSPH school community.

Summary

The partnership between D4I and KSPH outlined in this case study provides concrete examples of how to design, implement, and measure locally led capacity strengthening aligned with USAID's LCS policy. KSPH, as D4I's local partner, has been involved in each stage of the capacity strengthening work and offered input on priorities and feedback on the capacity strengthening plan and operational details. A key aspect was the dedicated budget for this capacity strengthening work, including the time of a local lead from KSPH. Challenges offer lessons learned for future capacity strengthening work, especially considering involving local actors without introducing an undue burden for their time and effort. Continued attention to the sustainability of capacity strengthening interventions and their effects on the performance of KSPH in locally identified priority areas, such as publication activity and the receipt of direct grant funding, should be the focus of continued monitoring and assessment efforts.



KSPH faculty member.
Photo courtesy of Tory Taylor.



For more information

D4I supports countries to realize the power of data as actionable evidence that can improve programs, policies, and—ultimately—health outcomes. We strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of local partners to collect, analyze, and use data to support their move to self-reliance. For more information, visit

<https://www.data4impactproject.org/>