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ACVFA Recommendations on Monitoring and Evaluation

Introduction

The Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid (ACVFA) believes that the goal of foreign assistance is to alleviate poverty and address critical global issues through the sustainability of projects in which local institutions and organizations achieve self-reliance. Monitoring and evaluation is a means to assess and understand how to achieve these results and to ensure accountability to all stakeholders.

ACFVA held a Public Meeting on June 9, 2009 with two panels: current status of Monitoring and Evaluation at USAID, and best practices in evaluations. These recommendations were developed based on this public record.

ACFVA strongly supports more rigorous monitoring and evaluation, re-establishing USAID as a leader in evaluation, better integration of evaluations with program design, and more operational level evaluators within USAID. We support the current efforts in USAID to reinvigorate its monitoring and evaluation capabilities including: updating of the ADS directives, expanding USAID evaluation staff, creating a public evaluation portal, carrying out more evaluation training (including on-line) and collaborating on evaluations with other assistance agencies such as MCC, State Department, DOD, OMB and OECD.

Better Integration of M&E within USAID

ACVFA understands and supports the significant role of monitoring and evaluation as integral components of USAID programming, strategic planning, budgeting and performance management. Monitoring and evaluation within USAID must be seen as a core programmatic element of a “learning organization” with on-going support from the USAID Administrator and senior managers reflected by their endorsement (and practice) of using evaluations for learning and decision-making. USAID needs to improve its “Managing for Results” approach, by learning through rigorously monitoring initiatives and applying learning from evaluative processes into new approaches and designs. New monitoring and assessment tools should be explored such as use of public opinion polls on customer satisfaction, greater transparency and involvement of beneficiaries, internet postings of project progress by partners and observers, and use of professional associations to formally accredit facilities as a form of practical evaluation.

Adoption of Framework for Evaluations

ACVFA believes that USAID should formally adopt a Framework for Evaluations which should include the following critical lessons:

- Incorporate and link the design and funding for evaluations as an integral part of program planning.

- Include expertise in evaluation methods along with sectoral expertise on evaluation teams.
- Design and tailor evaluation methods and measurements appropriate to the country context and what is feasible within each programmatic context (i.e., political environment, level of economic development, legal systems).
- Take a mixed-method approach that includes multiple measures, both qualitative and quantitative, and insist on greater accountability for results, while understanding that some programs such as democracy building are difficult to fully assess.
- Evaluate implementation processes and their contributions to positive outcomes with particular attention, methodologically and ethically, to processes that facilitate listening to intended beneficiaries.
- Outcome measurements, attribution and causality and design evaluation are all necessary components of evaluation and require separate attention.
- Distinguish different purposes for evaluation: programmatic evaluations which summarize and provide overall conclusions and judgments; and impact evaluations on design, management, implementation and results, while cognizant of the complex, nonlinear dynamics in uncertain environments typical of the developing world.
- The emphasis of monitoring and evaluation should be on analysis and learning and the application of the learning to future work, rather than on the collection of data.
- Making sense of data requires skills and training by evaluators and implementers so that proper and accurate interpretations can be made.
- Conduct a smaller number of high quality evaluations rather than a large number of lower quality ones.
- Build local evaluation capabilities as a form of development, and use evaluations as a tool for promoting accountability and transparency of local organizations and in helping governments make decisions among competing priorities.
- Hold local institutions accountable to the evaluation metrics which they have adopted similar to MCC-like compacts.
- Ensure that all planning and design of projects take into account the lessons and learning that emerge from past evaluative processes.
- Reward development partners who promote organizational and social learning through evaluation; and have dedicated significant staff, resources and time for evaluation, learning and internally capturing and using their developmental knowledge and wisdom.

Instill Learning and Accountability

Smart organizations understand that knowledge matters. We strongly support rigorous and objective evaluations in which failures are acknowledged openly without adverse professional impacts and are shared transparently as part of lessons learned. This can be accomplished through instilling a learning and accountability culture where evaluation is treated as a constructive tool for performance management and learning. Program planners should develop results frameworks that include quantifiable impact targets to the degree possible. Sufficient M&E resources should be allocated to analysis, learning processes and dissemination of knowledge both within and outside the initiative. Monitoring and evaluations should recognize performance that reflects learning amidst uncertainty as distinct from poor evaluation results due

to poor planning or implementation. Staff accountability should be required and standards of good staff performance should be clear.

Evaluators should frame their findings, conclusions and recommendations in ways that will open minds to learning and promote use of the knowledge generated by the evaluation research. Evaluations should include representation from client offices so that program managers and designers use the evaluation results. Tension between evaluators and program managers can be useful so that evaluations are able to capture the attention of decision makers (“speaking truth to power”) who, in turn, can make sure there is follow up and use of the evaluation results.

Many evaluators are good at finding problems, but not solutions. Project failures are usually obvious, but how to fix them is more difficult to assess. The focus of learning is not simply finding what works and does not, but finding the correct solutions and making sure that they succeed over time. Thus, evaluations should produce menus of alternative approaches and organizational focus in which managers can draw clear lessons, solutions and constantly improve performance.

USAID and other foreign assistance implementers should de-emphasize “success stories” and rely on carefully designed evaluations that demonstrate both failures and successful outcomes/results. The constant demand for success stories breeds a culture where managers and implementers focus on “good” outcomes, often by selected beneficiaries, rather than critical analyses of overall program and systemic results.

Focus More on Sustainability

We support more post-project evaluations to better assess sustainability several years after projects terminate. Projects should be sustained through self-reliance by communities and institutions involved which can only be assessed after projects end and sufficient time has passed. The focus of the sustainability should also be on the impact, rather than the sustainability of activities and processes initiated to achieve the impact. Too frequently, programs and projects terminate when funding ends, or priorities of development managers change. Sustainability must be incorporated in the design phase, rigorously pursued during implementation, and carefully evaluated after projects end so that lessons can be drawn based on successful and unsuccessful institutional or organizational development.

Greater Reliance on Local and Outside Evaluators

ACVFA supports more reliance on qualified local evaluators who are fully independent and more evaluations of similar projects from multiple donors within the same country or similar country contexts so that learning can be applied more broadly. We support the concept of an international evaluation organization, such as the International Impact Evaluation Group, so that evaluations are more objective and less donor driven. We also support international efforts to harmonize evaluation methodologies, measurements and indicators so that they are less burdensome to host governments and institutions.

Recommended Organizational Changes

ACVFA supports the creation of an independent office within USAID for Learning, Evaluation and Analysis with a separate budget and adequate staffing. We also support a coordinating group or center for evaluations across all U.S. government agencies that manage and operate U.S. foreign assistance programs. We believe that such a center or coordinating group should be housed in USAID. However, this is not an alternative to building M&E capacity in all parts of the organization, partners, and local organizations, and should be seen as a complimentary process rather than an alternative.

Every Federal agency carrying out assistance programs should have an annual evaluation plan, measurable performance measurements and processes and procedures for learning and application of evaluations to planning, budgeting, country plans and project development. Wherever feasible, evaluation standards and indicators should be the same for similar programs in all Federal agencies, and provide sufficient measurements in managing for results without being onerous.

Finally, we continue to support the “Global Development Commons” and web-based portals where program and project methodologies and results can be rigorously discussed, debated and shared with donors and local partners so that the development process is better understood, more effective and sustainable.