United States Agency for International Development

Public Meeting on Democracy, Human Rights & Governance

Evidence and Impact Breakout Session

Tuesday June 2, 2016

Ronald Reagan Building

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

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NICK HIGGINS: This session is, as we discussed in the plenary,

to come up with questions and discussion points to consider in

the DRG Working Group, and to raise a proposed USAID. Our

session will focus on evidence and impact, and it's really

incumbent on all of us through our programs and organizations to

try to build evidence to advance DRG. We -- sorry. I wanted to

touch on sort of what we've accomplished over the last few years

and where we've come.

So these are the three foundational documents which called for

increased evidence in DRG and in DRG programs. It's the

National Academy of Science report, the Evaluation Policy for

USAID, and the DRG strategy. Over the last few years, AID, in

response to this, created a dedicated team to advance learning

within DRG. We increased our outreach to academia and brought

several academics onto that team to work for those at USAID. We piloted new, more rigorous impact evaluation methods, including impact evaluations where we have five that are completed -- we have eight that are completed, eight that are in the field, and 16 that are in design. So what are we learning from this process so far? We are accumulating a body of evidence which we're making available on our website. These are three examples of research that we have financed.

This -- one is an impact evaluation in Russia which validated our approach to election observation and found that that is an effective way to prevent fraud and provide oversight. In Colombia, we financed a research grant that identified the reintegration of ex-combatants is more effective when the personal story of those combatants is relayed to citizens; they're more willing to reintegrate into the community. And in Indonesia we financed a research grant that looked at trafficking in persons and that grant found that efforts to get at trafficking vulnerability or misconceptions were most effective at the community level when handled through face-to-face, direct engagement and discussion.

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So how do organizations like ours learn? We created this
learning process for DRG and this is how we look at the learning
process. It has five phases and we kind of organize our efforts
around each of those phases. And on the generation phase a
cornerstone of our work is learning agenda, thus the learning
agenda which you have in your hand. That is, for 2016, a list
of 12 research questions which we have focused on to organize
our learning activities. Now, as you will -- when you look at
those questions you'll see that there are many other questions
within this broad sector that go beyond those.

One area that we could consider within this group is how we
could collectively work together to advance strategic
investments in research that can be coordinated. On curation,
we're looking to improve our -- the way that we organize our
information internally and to improve the way that we make our
information available externally on our website. But could we
as a community improve the way that we share information and
make our information collectively available? On the analysis
side, we've tried to strengthen our partnership with academia,

but what more can we do to really leverage the capabilities of academia and to help draw on that as we advance our research work?

On dissemination, we're looking at innovative new ways to disseminate key findings of our research efforts to our busy colleagues in the field. We're looking at infographics, animation, other condensed summary and executive summary documents. But what experiences do you have with this, and what are you finding the most effective ways to disseminate the findings of your research efforts to your busy staff? And then on utilization, this effort only works if our colleagues utilize this information at key times in the implementation cycle, so during -- for USAID, this means during strategic planning, during project design, and during key points of oversight, and how do we ensure that the findings of evidence are brought to bear with the right people at the right time to make a difference.

That was a sort of introduction to try and tee up the conversation. I hope I was fairly clear. Here are some

questions that we could consider, and then we'll have a

discussion. What examples do you have from your organizations

and the work that you're doing that -- where you're having

impact, where you have an important finding from your own

analytical work and which should be -- you'd like to share with

the broader community? How could USAID better support your

efforts to conduct research and to design and build evidence-

based approaches and programs? And how might we as a sector

work more effectively together to share -- to generate evidence

and to disseminate that across the community? With that, let's

open it up for questions. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: I'd like for you to perhaps differentiate a

little bit between learning and evaluation and how they relate

to each other, you know, in a practical way as physicians

grapple, I guess, with both of these related issues. Can you

differentiate and let us know the two strands and how they tie

together a little bit more?

NICK HIGGINS: Sure. We look at evaluation as a component of

generation, so we want to understand how a program is working

and we will conduct an evaluation to analyze that, and that is

sort of generating knowledge within our process. Then learning

is this whole continuum, how we are generating knowledge, how we

are organizing it, curating it, analyzing it, thinking about it,

and disseminating that out to the workforce for application.

Sir?

MALE SPEAKER: Yes, a question about who owns the knowledge. I

was thinking about this, having been in situations where you see

a parade of academics -- I was thinking, like, after the

genocide in Rwanda, and they seemed to extract information and

go away with it. I guess my question is, who is learning and

how's it being disseminated, particularly among -- with the

discussion not only about local systems, but also local

partners? How is USAID thinking about this in the DRG space,

and about the local actors being involved in the research and

the evaluation?

NICK HIGGINS: Yes, good question. I think in a lot of the

evaluations we finance there are local academics, local

evaluators that are involved in the studies, but I think we

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could certainly do more to focus on the utilization of evaluations by host country beneficiaries' counterparts. That's a really good point. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Thanks. As a consumer of information and lessons that are learned through evaluations, two things that make it difficult for me are, number one, when you go to the deck or any place on USAID's website, the lessons from evaluations are -- I mean, you have to dig so deep, first to find an evaluation that even sounds interesting enough to read, and then, you know, going through hundreds of pages to figure out what the important lessons are. And then if I'm, say, a person who's interested in what we've learned in DRG, I have to go to USAID's website and all the independent organizations and other donors, and there's not a place where there's easily accessible information that's put, you know, in words and, you know, short, concise bits that are actually consumable by real human beings.

NICK HIGGINS: That's an excellent point. Yeah, I totally agree.

[laughter]

NICK HIGGINS: Sir?

MALE SPEAKER: Let me ask about internal dissemination. It
seems to me that a lot has been disseminated in recent years
about, you know, the "doing development differently" approach of
problem-driven and local ownership and partnership that needs to
get internalized and become a part of how the USAID staff in the
field operate. And I think that's a work in progress, and
sometimes you see things coming out of missions that don't have
the same resonance as things that come out of PPO [spelled
phonetically] when you're having a conversation in Washington.
I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on how you're doing
that dissemination internally as well as externally.

NICK HIGGINS: Yeah, that's an excellent point. We're all busy
and our colleagues in the missions are juggling a lot of demands
on them, so part of the hope is that we can distill the findings
of our evaluations and other research efforts and make them

available in a way in which our colleagues can easily utilize,

and part of that is through training. We're looking at ways in

which we can enhance the use of evaluation findings in our

training programs. We have trainings that are sector-specific

as well as other trainings that are method-specific such as

impact evaluation-related trainings and whatnot. But we are

looking at ways, and in addition we're conducting utilization

workshops, where we do try to look at evidence and think of how

it can be utilized in the context of project design, for

example. But I think it's a very valid concern. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: I was wondering about how DRG looks at

overarching strategic findings and evidence. Does anyone

actually look at cross-applicability of evidence and impact

findings from one program and see how it may affect other

programs, or is it just, you know, individual program-based

findings and dissemination of those findings? Does anyone

actually maintain a strategic view across DRG portfolio?

NICK HIGGINS: Well, in a way, that's what our division is

trying to do. We are -- instead of looking at particular

countries -- a field office will have particular evaluation and
research needs for their program, and our division is trying to,
through the learning agenda, raise our sights, identify learning
priorities that are at a higher organizational level, and
organize research around those learning questions. And they're
not particular to a country and in some cases they are cross-
sectoral in nature. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Somewhat related to that, I'm wondering if
these learning agenda questions -- will they be -- will we start
seeing them integrated in some of our external evaluations that
are commissioned of our work as part of the efforts towards
building evidence along those thematic areas?

NICK HIGGINS: We -- the -- our hope with the learning agenda
was that we could use it as a way to guide the research
interests of the field. Field missions will pursue research
which is relevant to that team and they should do that, but it
is our hope that through the learning agenda we can incentivize
research that will contribute to our priority learning
questions, and it's our intention that each year we would renew

the agenda, drop certain questions, add new questions. I -- so

there's a possibility you could see a question from the learning

agenda show up with a scope, but there are also -- the agendas

are intentionally -- the questions are intentionally broad,

broader than maybe a country-specific project. Thank you.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes, I just wanted to follow up on the

earlier comment about, you know, many of the evaluations being

really long and difficult to get through to find the findings,

and ask whether you have, you know, tried doing executives --

just one-page executive summaries and maybe making those

available through the Development Experience Clearinghouse so

one could go in and see those one-pagers and decide which ones

you want to go to. And then the other question was in terms of

making the -- what's in the evaluations more accessible for

people in the host countries that the evaluations are about,

whether USAID has invested in translating some of these

evaluations to the, you know, various languages that are used in

the countries where they're taking place.

NICK HIGGINS: Those are excellent questions. Yes, we are

instituting executive summaries more than we have done in the past. Often the evaluations did not necessarily include a concise executive summary at the start that really highlighted the key findings, and so we are moving in that direction and I think all of our new evaluations that are financed out of the DRG Center do have that. On the translation, in some cases in the field where the research is locally commissioned they have translated evaluations, as I understand, but in the Center we have not done that, and we should consider that. Good recommendation. Sir?

MALE SPEAKER: I've directed a project on health leadership management governance in the Bureau for Global Health and I've been lucky enough to have an AOR who's been involved in a lot of the cross-sectoral working groups on democracy rights and governance. I've appreciated the fact that DRG has done a number of different forums, including one on public financial management. But could you talk a little bit about how you're working across sectors in terms of both utilizing the evidence from and applying the lessons to those other sectors?

NICK HIGGINS: Yeah. We do have a cross-sectoral program team
in the DRG Center that specializes in coordination with other
Bureaus and other sectors, and they look at the whole range of
programming and evaluation and research is one component of that
work. We do support a number of cross-sectoral related
evaluations and where we do see findings we have shared those
outside of the DRG sector. But it's an area where we see a
future expansion in DRG work, and there's an increase, there's a
great need for further research in that area.

MALE SPEAKER: My question is about countries that went or are
going through democratic transitions. I think they would
benefit a lot from looking at other countries that have gone
through the similar process in the last 10 or 20 years or
whatever. Are there easy resources that, say, look at countries
that have gone through transitions to learn from that experience
what went well or what, you know, are the reasons for success,
what are the reasons for failure, and how can other countries
learn from those transitions? Have you done research like that,
or is it readily available?

NICK HIGGINS: Our division has not, but other entities within

USAID have. The Europe and Eurasia Bureau did a retrospective

on the past 20 years of assistance in that bureau and identified

best practices and lessons learned from their assistance during

a lot of democratic transitions in the post-Soviet space in

particular. No, we -- yeah, thanks. That's a good point.

MALE SPEAKER: It would be [unintelligible].

NICK HIGGINS: Yeah. That's an excellent point. Thanks.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Do you find that there are challenges

collecting information about the impacts of the programs? Like

some of the agenda questions are, like -- yeah, it's, like,

measuring impact and -- yeah, I'm so sorry, I can't phrase the

question properly --

NICK HIGGINS: No, that's okay.

FEMALE SPEAKER: -- but, like, what are some practices and

methods that are currently in place to collect information about

how successful programs are, and are there any challenges with

that process of collecting information?

NICK HIGGINS: Sure. There are challenges on all fronts. The -

- we are, like I mentioned earlier, implementing impact

evaluations which are sort of the gold standards, in a sense, of

knowing that the effect of our assistance had -- was

attributable to our assistance. And we are -- but there are

challenges with implementing those evaluations. We are

supporting a variety of methods to try and triangulate and have

a broader sense of effect, of our collective efforts as a

community and USAID. But -- yeah.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Just building on that and the concept of the

cross-sectoral, the very best impact evaluation that we have on

the case for independent media was a study by the Gates

Foundation on voluntary male circumcision in seven countries in

Africa. Seriously, it's the case that I use; it's the biggest

impact case I can make because they looked at all the different

variables that affected it and were able to identify something

that wasn't an evaluation of our program at all.

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So I do think looking cross-sectorally, then finding ways on those really big studies which are so rare for us to be able to do, but to find ways to isolate questions about different democracy and governance inputs in those big cross-country and cross-sectoral research, it would be a really powerful tool for making the case.

MALE SPEAKER: I ask this question as one of the academics that writes 200-page reports that are hard to make one's way through and figure out what they mean. I was involved in the National Academy study that sort of kicked this off, this process. We're sort of, you know, eight years, I think, into a real, concerted focus on DRG evaluation, which means that there's still a lot in the pipeline, but there's also --

NICK HIGGINS: Right.

MALE SPEAKER: -- a set of studies that have really come out and that -- a serious focus on measuring outcomes. So this is partly a question to USAID but as much a question to all the

partners in the room, and it really is about utilization, which is, are we learning things that are leading people to want to make different choices in program designs? Then you would have made any absence of that evidence. And I'll give an example, just from my own experience doing impact evaluations. We began to do impact evaluations of community-driven development programs for the World Bank about six years ago, and folks who are familiar with CDD [spelled phonetically] programs, they have complex theories of change. Basically, you're empowering communities; you're giving them resources and as a result, all sorts of good things are going to happen. Democratic institutions are going to bloom; people are going to get along in post-conflict environments; growth is going to take off. All good things go together if you have a sort of community-based, sort of democratic process of spending resources.

The evidence doesn't support that theory of change in any way, shape, or form, but as we've presented those results with sort of World Bank staff from around the world, one quickly gets a set of debates about "well, CDD looks very different where I do it." You know, we've addressed these concerns and redesigned

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this basic structure to where there's something different about

the context, and it's eminently plausible that it's true that

there's something different about a particular context or one

aspect of program design.

But the evidence is sort of cumulating that there's some real

sort of gaps in the evidence base for the logic model that's

been laid out for CDD, and so -- I mean, my question, first and

foremost, is are there things that you're learning about that

are leading you to make different decisions about program

design? Because ultimately the value of this whole exercise is

going to depend not just on people accessing these reports but

these reports actually informing choices that are made either in

the program design process on the part of partners or on the

procurement process in the RFP design process on the part of

USAID. So I'm interested if there are examples of anything

you've read, or impact evaluation work that you're done that has

caused you think profoundly differently about a model that you

were operating with on a regular basis.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I'd like to know how we go about, in terms

of the impact evaluations that we do, both refining and
complementing our reliance on opinion surveys, perception
surveys, which are part and parcel of the project of
understanding impact. But perceptions of change don't
necessarily mean there's actually change, or the reverse; there
may be no perceptions of change, but there actually has been
quite a bit of change.

NICK HIGGINS: We are -- yeah. Let me do a few questions and
then -- yeah?

MALE SPEAKER: Sorry, I was trying to get this before. My
question is about participating in inclusion also, which is
funny. I notice that -- I wanted to compliment the inclusion of
the idea of youth and women, the participation and inclusion of
youth and women in this agenda, and I wanted to ask specifically
about, you know, what kind of research has already been done and
what else is planned on those topics.

MALE SPEAKER: Thanks. Just wanted to suggest a couple things.
First is that obviously the evidence base needs to build most

relevantly on what projects are trying to accomplish, and there is a significant difference between, if you will, more traditional DRG projects that aim at, for example, democratic transition and the cross-sector efforts which are oriented a little bit differently, and what they intend to do is essentially accelerate and amplify impacts in other sectors in much the way that Justin suggested. So I think what I want to suggest is that you pick up the kinds of content that the DRG summits have focused on recently, and that will be about process indicators of participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability in terms of the ways that they promote impact country ownership and sustainability. That's really quite a different frame and could easily get lost in a more traditional impact assessment frame, and it doesn't actually look at outcomes sought by other sectors accelerated through DRG components.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I had a question about participation inclusion as well in terms of measuring the impact of inclusion of women and innovation in that. For the last 10 years I was involved in -- for the last five years in a collaborative management of

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natural resources project by USAID where we had to increase

gender participation. Sometimes it was just a checkmark in the

box and that's how we got the impact evaluation. At the end of

the project, it looked like we had 50 percent women involved,

but in reality their voices weren't really as sharp as we were

imagining it to be. So I want to know more about how this -- if

you're thinking about it and what kind of innovations are being

implemented or inserted in these sort of mechanisms to bring it

to the next level.

NICK HIGGINS: Okay.

FEMALE SPEAKER: We must have a whole shrew of women. In the

same line, I think with evidence and impact, having a very clear

definition from the get-go is so important. Being in the gender

space and empowerment being some nebulous word that's out there

that everyone is using, we launched the first survey ever to

actually understand what adolescent girls and young women are

saying about empowerment. It was so interesting because only in

English does that word even exist. You can't have a concept of

something if that word doesn't exist in Arabic and Chinese and

so many other words. When we asked them then what they thought

that meant, it translated to human rights. So I guess my

question is, as you're looking at DRG, I mean, you know, having

sub-definitions of what rights mean, what governance means, what

democracy -- I think, you know, are you also looking at these,

setting clear definitions even for what you are trying to

collect?

NICK HIGGINS: Good point. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: I guess I want to go back to what the gentleman

over there was talking about. Some of the USAID evaluations

focus, it seems like, only on the impact, and a lot of lessons

learned require you to actually understand the root causes of

why something worked. You should be able to trace it back to

the local context, the interaction of actors, factors, and

issues, and what exactly caused the successful outcome. You

know your program worked, but you don't know why it worked

exactly, and that's what will actually enable you to translate

that insight and actually make use of it in the context of

another program. So, as a systems thinking practitioner, I

guess what I would suggest is to focus on that kind of causal understanding of evaluation rather than just measurement of the impact at the end.

NICK HIGGINS: That's a really good point. We do try to -- I think -- one way to look at the impact evaluations is they are specific cases which we can understand how our assistance created an effect. But to -- if you view that within a broader context of, say, performance evaluation and other analysis surveys you get a fuller picture of the environment in which that assistance was delivered. Although we try to apply sort of the scientific method in the impact evaluation approach, there is an art to this work, as you know, and it really requires judgment and a deep understanding of the specific country context, and we acknowledge that.

On some of the questions that were asked on surveys, we are -- we have supported sophisticated surveys that are -- have a high sample and are rigorous, more rigorous that a lot of the surveys that USAID has supported in our sector for many years, and I think as we go forward we would like to see higher quality

surveys, and for our unit to provide guidance on that for our field officers going forward. On the other questions of other evaluations that relate to youth or gender, I mean, there's a large evaluation universe just within USAID. Many of these are outside of the DRG space and we need to do a better job of understanding that and having visibility on that on the findings which go back over many years, so there's work to do there. I mean, what we can do, and it's certainly within our control in the near term, is to organize the research that we are conducting and have conducted through our center, and to focus on distilling those findings and sharing those with the broader community.

Any other observations or thoughts? Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: I think it's great that you're going to continue to do training with the officers in the field, particularly in the learning agenda. I would also encourage for continued education on the evaluation policy. We continue to experience challenges, particularly in sharing and developing the scope of work of the evaluation and advanced notification of

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the evaluations. We will find out as the researcher is on the ground that they are going to have an evaluation of our program and that doesn't really allow for an opportunity for us to provide the greatest learning experience that we could have, so I'd just encourage continued training on the evaluation policy itself because I don't know that it's implemented exactly how it was intended to be.

NICK HIGGINS: Okay. That's a good point. Ma'am?

FEMALE SPEAKER: So I wanted to pick up on the systems thinking question and again reiterate that DRG programs are nonlinear, and it really leads us to thinking we have to think outside the box, even evaluation, and I'm not -- you know, we've done RCTs as well, impact evaluations, but again, they answer a certain type of question. In this context and in the spirit of this conversation today, I'm wondering if we can think about -- more holistically about how we can integrate both RCTs and developmental evaluation approaches or outcome mapping approaches into our programs so that we can have complementary data.

And within that, I know that the USAID global lab is
experimenting with their Merlin [spelled phonetically] program a
lot of different types of tools which are essential for the type
of programs that we do in the DRG sector. So my question to you
is how can USAID programs -- you know, DRG, USA global lab,
other areas that are funding research -- collaborate more
jointly, and how can we be part of that conversation so that we
can think through what are the best programs that we have that
could have complementary evaluation approaches so that we can
get richer, deeper, more complementary evidence?

NICK HIGGINS: That's a great question, and I think the way to
advance that is to have that as a recommendation and an ask of
USAID. This group can put that forward. That's a great idea.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I hate to keep beating this drum, but I have
to echo a few things, but really focusing in on how thinking
more about how DRG programs can incorporate complexity also
calls into question participatory design and procurement
processes. It challenges our assumptions that, you know, we

know that if we do X, then Y will happen. So then what does

that mean for procurement processes? You know, USAID is -- has

a very strict procurement process that doesn't have a lot of

participatory involvement, but in this kind of sector, I think,

you know, it calls us maybe to look again.

NICK HIGGINS: Yeah, that's a good point, and the organization

is trying to evolve, and we have more opportunities for this co-

creation where we can sit down together with the implementing

partner and sort of hash out a design. So I think there's an

awareness of that, you know. There's an awareness that staff

within USAID don't have all the answers and that we need to get

out to the community through assessments and through other

creative approaches like co-creation to get the best designs.

That's a good point.

Thank you. Any other final comments? We'll write up these

comments and observations and points and pass those forward.

Thanks for your time.

AUDIENCE COMMENTER: This, by the way, I just want to call out,

that's the nicest [inaudible].

[laughter]

[applause]

NICK HIGGINS: Yeah. This is Barb and she specializes in this;
it's pretty cool.

[end of transcript]