

An Overview of Six USAID/Russia Evaluations

Prepared by

Gerald R. Wein

Consultant to

**The CARANA Corporation
4350 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 500
Arlington, VA 22203**

For

**The Office of Program and Project Development
USAID Mission to Russia
Task Order No. OUT-PCE-I-808-97-00014-00**

October 2000

**An Overview of Six USAID/Russia Evaluations
October 2000**

I. Introduction

Over the past two years, USAID/Russia has utilized the CARANA Corporation to conduct six program evaluations. The USAID programs evaluated, their key contractors and grantees, and the completion dates of the evaluations were as follows:

Evaluation Completed	Sector/ Objective	Project	Contractor Or Grantee
Oct. 1998	Health Reform	Legal and Technical Assistance Project	Center for International Health, Boston University
Sept. 1999	Environment	Replications of Lessons Learned (ROLL)	Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC)
Nov. 1999	Housing	Housing Sector Reform Project (HSRP)	The Urban Institute (UI)
Feb. 2000	Banking and Capital Markets	Financial Services Volunteer Corps Project	Financial Services Volunteer Corps (FSVC)
Mar. 2000	Fiscal Policy	Fiscal Policy Reform Project	Georgia State University (GSU)
July 2000	Business Development	Five Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) Development Projects	ACDI/VOCA-Winrock Citizens Democracy Corps Center for Institutional Reform, Univ. Maryland Morozov American Russian Center (ARC), University of Alaska

As the SME evaluation included five projects, the six evaluations covered ten USAID programs. Five of the six evaluations focused on on-going projects. The only completed project, the Housing Sector Reform Project, has been superseded by a smaller, new project with a local entity.

The author of this paper served as the team leader for two of these evaluations and as the manager of all six. In his role as manager, he selected the evaluation team members, read background material, organized team planning meetings, proposed evaluation methodologies, provided liaison with the Mission on scheduling and other matters, traveled to the field to assist in planning and briefings, participated in the analysis and drafting, and edited the reports. He is thus thoroughly familiar with both the content and the processes of these evaluations.

This paper has been prepared at the request of several USAID officers, particularly Denis Korepanov and Connie Carrino, who thought that there might be some cross-cutting lessons learned from conducting these six evaluations that would not be apparent from

any individual report. This paper is an attempt to determine whether such lessons do indeed exist. To facilitate this work, the author conducted several post-evaluation interviews with key USAID technical officers (clients) to see what they found useful and not useful in the six evaluation reports. The author also interviewed representatives of several of the organizations whose activities were evaluated.

Not surprisingly, many of the “lessons learned” in doing these evaluations confirm what many might consider “conventional wisdom” about doing evaluations. Those ideas are included in this paper only when there was some particularly interesting evidence or unusual factor to report.

This paper should be viewed as a “think piece” based on the author’s experience leading these evaluation efforts and reflecting as well his prior experience with USAID development efforts. The author has written this paper with a view toward providing observations and ideas that might be useful particularly for Mission management and for the Program Office.

The remainder of this paper is organized into three sections. The first, Section II, presents the author’s observations about particularly pertinent aspects of the Russian environment and about the Mission’s strategy, program and management. The second, Section III, presents a set of observations about the evaluation process. The final brief part of this paper, Section IV, provides several ideas about the Mission’s follow-up to evaluations.

II. Observations on the Russian Environment, USAID Strategy and Program Management

The author did not review USAID’s overall strategy and can claim to have gained only a limited perception of it from the work performed. The following observations are thus based on limited data.

Dealing with Russia’s Unique Environment.

From the beginning of the USAID program in Russia in the early 1990s, policy makers in USAID and the State Department have had the view that USG economic assistance to this country should be short-lived. This view was based partly on the premise that, unlike developing countries where USAID had acquired most of its experience, Russia had an extremely well educated and disciplined labor force, advanced technological skills and an extensive physical infrastructure; Russia lacked only the required market structures and institutions.¹

¹ In this sense, it is interesting to contrast Russia with Western Europe after World War II. The enormous success of the Marshall Plan is often seen as attributable to the fact that the recipient countries possessed the skills, knowledge and institutional base to run efficient modern economies; they simply needed the financial resources to rebuild their damaged physical infrastructure.

The evaluations conducted over the past two years suggest that USAID strategy and programs have effectively taken advantage of Russia's strong human resource base. The heavy emphasis on training and study tours to give counterparts an opportunity to learn and observe Western methods seem to have created many "converts" to market mechanisms. Those Russians have shown an exceptional ability to assimilate new ideas and to become leaders for change within their own institutions. The evaluation teams also noted that contractors and grantees made extensive and effective use of Russians in important technical positions within their organizations. In the USAID housing, health reform, and environmental projects, for example, the contractors were able to train and utilize a team of talented Russians to provide most of the management and technical assistance. The resulting high level of utilization of Russian staff lessened communications problems, reduced costs and contributed to the development and institutionalization of Russian capacity.

USAID/Russia deserves credit for encouraging and facilitating this high utilization of Russian talent. In two of the American volunteer programs that were evaluated, the USAID mission had forced the grantees to turn much of the in-country program management over to Russians – a move initially resisted but now strongly endorsed by the grantees involved. A separate CARANA evaluation recommended that a similar shift from American to Russian in-country program management be considered for the FSVC volunteer program.

At the same time, the evaluations suggest that the obstacles to Russia's transformation to a Western-style democratic, market economy are considerably deeper and more complex than many anticipated. The centralized Soviet system taught generations of officials, including those who ran the pervasive state businesses, to respond to a "perverse" set of incentives. For example, the Soviet system established output targets for managers at all levels, and success was defined as meeting or over-achieving these targets regardless of cost or whether the output had utility from a broader societal or market perspective. At the same time, ordinary citizens acquired no experience with many of the basic "economic functions" (e.g., saving, paying taxes, renting or purchasing housing) common to the rest of the world. Thus, the legacy of the Soviet Union's "suspension of market forces" and the imposition of centralized decision-making and control left behind a set of deeply-rooted and widespread behavioral patterns that surface throughout the Mission's portfolio and that are antithetical to the transition to a market economy.

- In USAID/Russia's housing program, the institutions to support a housing market did not exist. There were no appraisers, real estate agents, mortgage lenders, etc. Even more fundamental than this, most Russians had no experience with owning or renting housing. Efforts to privatize the housing stock were frustrated by the refusal of large numbers of Russians to accept ownership, even when their units were offered essentially free of cost. To understand this behavior, almost unimaginable in a market economy, one needs to understand that the Soviet system taught Russians to think of housing as something that government provides for free, much as Americans treat "free" public education. Viewed from this historical perspective, it is not surprising that many Russians rejected the

opportunity to become homeowners; they feared that home ownership would force them for the first time to pay for maintenance, utilities and capital improvements.

- In the Mission's environmental project (ROLL), the evaluation team found that counterparts could explain the potential of the technologies introduced and could report the number of participants that had concluded courses. However, the evaluation team found counterparts appeared to be puzzled by evaluators questioning whether any of the participants implemented things they had learned, much less about whether there had been an environmental impact from their having done so. The Soviet system did not encourage its citizens to ask the "so what" question.
- The Mission's programs to reform fiscal policy and to develop banking and capital markets have had to deal with the fact that, to a considerable extent, Russian institutions and families have had fundamentally different economic roles than have their counterparts in the market economies. Soviet banks did not borrow and lend; stock markets did not exist, and families generally did not save, invest, acquire assets or pay taxes. Thus, efforts to introduce new practices often face levels of inexperience and fear that, despite Russians' high levels of education and training, are far more profound and difficult to surmount than in developing countries.
- Many observers have suggested that there is a "lack of rule of law" and that compliance with laws and regulations is almost always negotiable. The evaluation teams found considerable evidence to support this hypothesis. It is widely recognized, for example, that tax rates are so high that businesses could not pay them and remain in operation. However, the pressure to reform these rates, which should be overwhelming, is moderate since no one is paying them. Businesspeople know how to "negotiate" better rates, and tax officials often benefit personally from the status quo.

The Soviet system has thus left its mark on the thinking and behavior of the Russian people in ways that those of us coming from market economies often must experience to understand, but which must be taken into account if we are to be successful in our efforts to introduce change. Old policies and institutions are reinforced by a web of behavioral patterns within government and across the society. While those systems may be inefficient and ineffective, many people benefit from their continued existence and/or fear that change will make them worse off.

Given the depth and complexity of these issues, in many ways more difficult than those USAID and its predecessors faced under the Marshall Plan or in the developing world, the progress made by the six USAID programs included in this review is encouraging. It is a tribute to the adaptability of both the Russians and the Americans that each has been able to recognize and adjust to fundamentally different ways of working. At the same

time, these complex issues imply that early hopes for a rapid turn-around in Russia were unrealistic and must be replaced by far greater patience and fortitude.

USAID's Strategic Focus

The six reviews carried out suggest that the programs are focused on high priority areas – areas that are indeed key to the transition to a democratic, pluralistic society with a market economy. The evaluations also suggest that the Mission's programs are making a difference, albeit not always at a rapid pace.

The evaluations also provide ample evidence that the Mission has monitored its program closely, learned from experience and made thoughtful and reasonable adjustments to its strategy.

- The ROLL project, for example, provides a sound way of spreading technologies proven to be successful in earlier projects and simultaneously strengthens the Russian environmental movement, all at very low cost.
- In its housing sector reform program, the Mission allowed its contractor sufficient flexibility to adjust its strategy -- to suspend efforts that were not taking hold and to initiate new activities to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities.
- The Mission has adjusted its strategies for fiscal reform, health reform and creation of a positive business environment from the central government increasingly to regional and local authorities.
- In SME development, the Mission insisted that business volunteer programs work with and contribute to the development of Russian business development institutions.

One concern that the evaluations raise is whether the USAID programs, even together with those of other donors, are sufficient to move Russia far enough and fast enough to make reforms sustainable before assistance is reduced or halted. Reviewing the evaluated programs from this perspective, the Mission's investment in SME development programs is probably the most encouraging. Tens of thousands of businesses have been started, and many of these seem to be doing quite well. Hundreds of business support organizations, many of them the direct result of USAID programs, support those businesses with training, consulting and some help in addressing the many obstacles in the business environment. There is, of course, much more to be done and much that donors can do to help, particularly in the creation of a better policy, legal and regulatory environment. But the good news is that there is strong indigenous momentum pushing the economy toward further business development and a likelihood that growth will continue even with reduced donor inputs.

In other sectors and programs reviewed in these evaluations, the progress achieved with the help of USAID projects, many of them quite “successful” in terms of what could reasonably be expected, seems more fragile and tentative, making sustainability a issue.

- With regard to the much-needed reforms in health services delivery, the evaluators were impressed with the inroads toward reform that the small BU grant program was achieving. Yet, stepping back and looking at the sector as a whole, these reforms (coupled with those of the Mission’s earlier health reform program) barely dent the surface of the problems. The health reform process does not appear to be self-sustaining.
- In the environment sector, the fact that the ROLL grants, although small, encourage the spread of many technologies and strengthen a large number of groups across the country, perhaps suggests a somewhat more encouraging picture.
- In the housing sector, the Mission’s large, multi-year investment (complemented by large investments from other donors) has clearly helped to develop essential market structures. The evaluators gave the USAID-Urban Institute program very high marks, undoubtedly well deserved. Yet, even here, the bulk of the housing stock is still government owned, and key reforms such as the development of a mortgage market, the creation of condominium associations and the privatization of maintenance are in their infancy. One wonders whether the reforms are sufficiently rooted to grow and become the basis of the sector’s future path.
- In the development of banking and capital markets, the 1998 financial crisis underscored the fragility of these institutions and markets.
- USAID fiscal reform programs have provided competent advice and registered some successes. It is clear, however, most of the road to fiscal reform is as yet untraveled.

These concerns underscore the need for USAID and other donors to “stay the course,” to continue assistance long enough and with sufficient intensity to ensure that new policies and structures are deeply rooted. In this regard, the reductions in USAID/Russia’s budgetary resources, which are increasingly marginalizing the Mission’s efforts, are indeed regrettable.

The Mission’s Program and Project Management

The evaluators found that Mission technical officers were well informed about what the projects are doing and the problems encountered. Mission oversight is quite substantial and includes meetings, email messages, occasional site visits and extensive reporting. Contractors and grantees generally had favorable things to say about their Mission technical offices. The Mission’s extensive oversight undoubtedly reduces vulnerability.

At the same time, Mission management may wish to explore whether the level and nature of oversight may be burdensome and unduly restrictive to grantees and contractors. Several evaluation teams considered the level of required reporting to be excessive, taking more of the grantee or contractor's time and effort than was productive.

The relationship between the Mission staff and their contractors and grantees is generally positive and effective. That relationship is essentially a vertical one, with the Mission's technical office as the focal point determining the direction of the various programs under it. Contractors and grantees are not encouraged to feel, and generally do not feel, that they are full partners with USAID.

The Mission also sets the tone and provides the framework for communication and collaboration among its various contractors and grantees. Although the evidence was mixed, the evaluations generally found that contractors and grantees have had little incentive to work together in a collaborative fashion and do not typically see themselves as part of the same team effort to achieve common strategic objectives. The evaluators saw some evidence of overlap and/or competition between programs (e.g., within the fiscal policy reform effort and between the fiscal, banking and housing reform efforts).

In its relationships with contractors and grantees, its seeming reluctance to bring those institutions together as a team and its use of local employees, USAID/Russia's management structure and philosophy resembles the traditional mission management modalities rather than "re-engineering." The evaluation teams did not see evidence that Strategic Objective (S.O.) Teams are playing a significant role. Although other Missions' experience with re-engineering has been mixed, USAID/Russia may nevertheless wish to consider whether it might be an appropriate management path for the future.

Impact Assessment

Assessing the impact of development projects is best done on the basis of good baseline data, a clear understanding about objectives, and explicit quantitative impact indicators. Like most development projects, the six USAID/Russia projects that CARANA reviewed fell considerably short of the ideal. The most extensive and meaningful indicators were found in the Mission's Housing Sector Reform (HSRP) Program. In this program, the contractor and the Mission developed a large set of indicators, many of which reflect desirable changes in the institutional, legal and programmatic structure within that sector. These indicators show that the HSRP program was extremely successful. One deficiency in those indicators was that none clearly measured the depth of the reforms, i.e., the extent to which they were adapted across Russia and influenced the huge housing inventory. Such an indicator or group of indicators would be useful to show whether the extensive groundwork laid by this project was truly having the impact on housing investment, maintenance, pricing policies, market development and other changes that the program was designed to bring about.

Data to assess impact adequately were rarely present. Data on businesses developed, jobs generated, etc. through the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) development

programs do provide some measure of impact. However, the evaluation team did not find those data sufficiently credible for evaluation purposes.

It should be noted that collecting data to assess impact adequately may well entail costs and efforts that are not justified. This is particularly true when activities are of short duration, as are many of the evaluated USAID projects.

For reasons that are well known, the Mission also places heavy emphasis on the reporting of anecdotal “success stories.” Mission management may wish to consider whether these efforts have become excessive, i.e., too time and cost-consuming.

Aside from HSRP, projects mostly generate data on inputs and outputs. These data include numbers of workshops and seminars, people trained, volunteers placed, grants given, laws and regulations drafted, etc. Of course, indicators such as laws and regulations drafted are significant: those laws and regulations are often a critical step to reform. Indeed, the evaluation teams found that USAID-sponsored efforts to draft such reforms played a role in accelerating the reform process.² However, many of these reforms had yet to be enacted at the time of the evaluations, making impact assessment difficult.

The limitations of the data available from project sources meant that the evaluation teams usually needed to make judgments based on extensive interviews and/or surveys.

Mission Programming Practices

The evaluations noted that a considerable number of the assessed grants and contracts were only two years in duration, whereas the norm for USAID programs in other countries is probably about four years. There may well have been special circumstances that made this shorter contractual period appropriate for the Russia program, but it clearly has had its costs. In almost all of the programs evaluated, two years was too short a period for implementing institutions to plan and implement a reform program and too short to produce and to measure meaningful results. These short contracts and grants also increase the time and expense for competition, planning and other management activities.

III. About the Evaluation Process

Scopes of Work (SOWs)

It is obviously essential that the evaluators clearly understand what the Mission hopes to learn from any given evaluation, and these expectations must be articulated clearly in the SOWs. The SOWs were generally well prepared and identified the key issues that the Mission wished the teams to address.

² Efforts to draft reform legislation were prominent in the Legal and Regulatory Technical Assistance Project, ROLL, HSRP, FSVC and the Fiscal Policy Reform.

Each of the evaluation teams met with Mission staff at the outset of fieldwork to clarify their questions about the scopes of work and to determine whether there were additional objectives, concerns or points of view that needed to be considered. In two of the six evaluations, the evaluators discovered different and essentially contradictory expectations for the evaluation within different individuals or groups within the Mission. This is a serious problem for evaluators when, as in these cases, it is essentially impossible for evaluators to meet both sets of expectations. These problems were resolved in one case by getting the individuals with different expectations to meet and agree to one set of evaluation expectations and, in the other, by seeking guidance from Mission management. In two other instances, specific concerns that Mission staff expected to see discussed in the report were not mentioned to the evaluation teams until the draft reports were reviewed. Although these types of problem cannot be totally eliminated, these cases illustrate the need for the evaluation staff to see that all interested parties within the Mission take the preparation of scopes of work seriously, that conflicting points of view are surfaced and resolved and that concerns are articulated in the scope of work or in briefings at the outset of the evaluation.

Aside from telling the evaluators what is to be done, the SOWs include levels of effort and tentative schedules. In several cases the evaluation contractor felt that the work required could not be done professionally within the initial level of effort and budget levels, leading it to propose specific changes prior to the commencement of work. Additionally, the contractor found in several cases that it had underestimated the level of effort needed for data collection, analysis, and drafting and revising its reports. In these cases, the Mission found that the evaluation contractor had done its work responsibly and agreed to modifications.

Methodology

The Mission gave the contractor ample latitude to develop its methodology for carrying out the evaluations. The discussion of methodology between the contractor and the Mission sometimes began during the planning phase, particularly if the proposed methodology implied a need for additional financial resources. In all cases, methodology was discussed in teams' "kick-off" meetings with the Mission.

As noted earlier, the evaluators read all pertinent project documents, including the implementing contractor or grantee's progress reports to USAID. While these were helpful, the teams sought independent verification of results and impact through extensive interviews with personnel working on the projects, counterparts, personnel working on complementary projects and other observers.

Two of the six evaluations, those reviewing the BU health policy project and the FSVC banking and capital markets project, utilized surveys to supplement the data otherwise available. The surveys, which relied largely on email to distribute questionnaires and to collect responses, allowed the teams to reach a much larger target group of interviewees. In the survey done for the FSVC evaluation, many of the questions asked respondents to quantify answers which were then organized into a series of tables within the report.

These data, which surprised the evaluators, helped to dispel some prevalent myths about weaknesses in the FSVC program. The experience with these surveys was very positive and suggests that evaluators can conduct such surveys with moderate effort and without much cost.

With evaluations based largely on a review of the information available and interviews, reports inevitably rely heavily on the judgments of the evaluators. The quality of the evaluation team – including particularly its technical competence, experience with USAID projects, leadership, commitment to fairness and willingness to work hard -- is thus the most critical factor in determining the usefulness of most USAID evaluations.

Mission Support for Evaluation

The Mission's evaluation personnel often offered useful suggestions on methodology and were "watchdogs" for the independence of the evaluation (from influence by interested parties). Mission evaluation personnel monitored the progress of the evaluation teams, typically meeting weekly with evaluation team leaders when the latter were in Moscow and maintaining email contact at other times.

On the last evaluation in this series, two of the Mission's Russian evaluation officers and two of their Program Office colleagues accompanied the team on different parts of the team's fieldwork.³ USAID staff essentially participated as observers, although the evaluators encourage them to provide their reactions to interviewees' comments. This experience was positive both for the evaluators who benefited from the insights of USAID personnel and for the USAID personnel who had the opportunity to see projects in operation and to observe and experience many of the difficulties faced by evaluators. The limited participation by USAID personnel in no way interfered with the interviews or the ability of the evaluators to write their report.

Technical officers typically provided project documentation, background information on implementation issues and guidance on people and organizations to contact. They also briefed the organizations that were to be evaluated and ensured that the evaluators received their full cooperation.

The evaluators benefited greatly from access to other key Mission officers. Teams typically met both at the beginning and the end of their in-country work with the Mission Director and Deputy Director and with key members of the Program Office. The evaluation manager also had periodic contact with the Procurement Officer who checked to see that reports were in compliance with scopes of work and whose willingness to make several contract modifications were critical to these evaluation efforts.

Collaboration between the Mission and the various evaluation teams was excellent. The Mission treated the evaluation contractor and its teams as professionals and as partners – viewing the teams as committed as was the Mission to full, fair and efficiently managed evaluations. Unquestionably, the Mission's attitude; responsiveness; close monitoring of

³ Only one USAID staff member was present at any of the field interviews.

evaluation progress; insistence on thoroughness, accuracy and clarity, and understanding of delays that were sometimes necessary, contributed significantly to the contractor's ability to deliver the highest quality products of which it was capable.

Size and composition of evaluation teams

Obviously, the size of the project and the complexity of the issues to be assessed are among the important considerations in determining how much time and money to invest in an evaluation. It requires more resources to evaluate complex sectoral programs like the HSRP than small projects like the BU health reform project or ROLL.

Once planners have determined the key issues and how much preparation and fieldwork are needed, there may still be an important trade-off between having more team members or giving a smaller team a longer period to complete the work. In some cases, the complexity of the program being reviewed means that the evaluation team requires diverse capabilities and thus a larger team.

USAID/Russia's scopes of work have typically stipulated the number of international and Russian team members, the expertise they should possess and the total number of labor-days that can be provided. In several cases the contractor made a case to USAID for additional time to carry out the work, and such requests were considered and generally approved. The types of expertise and number of team members stipulated in the USAID scopes of work were reasonable, as was the division between international and Russian employees. Nevertheless, in the future, USAID might consider explicitly indicating in its evaluation scopes of work that the contractor may suggest an alternative staffing plan for USAID consideration. This would be helpful to the contractor since the best people available to do the evaluation may have different combinations of skills and different time availabilities than that stipulated in the scope of work. It might also give the evaluation contractor the flexibility to increase the participation of Russian consultants when they have the needed skills and experience.

In each of the evaluations CARANA conducted, there were an equal number of international and Russian experts on the evaluation team, and this seems to have worked well. The international staff typically brought greater technical expertise and experience with technical assistance projects in the sector, more experience in conducting evaluations and better ability to write reports in English. The Russian staff provided knowledge of Russian problems, institutions, key people and cultural practices. They also greatly facilitated travel and interview scheduling.

Finding international experts who had the requisite skills and experience and who were interested in participating in the evaluation often required fairly extensive searches. This problem was exacerbated by the time constraints; probably more than two-thirds of those who were qualified and interested were not available at the time that a given evaluation was planned. To the extent that USAID can do so given its multiple constraints, it would be useful to provide the evaluation contractor with as much lead time as possible prior to

the evaluation. The fact that CARANA had an office in Moscow greatly facilitated the task of identifying qualified Russians to participate in these evaluations.

As the international experts recruited for these evaluations spoke little or no Russian, it was essential that the Russian evaluators be reasonably fluent in English so that all team members shared a common language. Many of the Russians who became team members, in addition to their technical knowledge, were sufficiently fluent in English to translate for the American team members. However, the evaluation teams found that Russian team members often lost their ability to participate as evaluators if they were also translating. Thus, using the team's Russian staff as translators was generally not a good use of the team's technical resources.

Both CARANA and USAID paid careful attention to the selection of the two dozen consultants who participated in these evaluations. In the case of HSRP, for example, probably over 50 people were contacted before the final selections were made. Consultants were chosen to participate in these evaluations largely on the basis of their technical knowledge and experience. Attention was also paid to their communication and interpersonal skills. The results of this careful selection process were quite positive. No concerns were raised about any team's technical competence. In several cases, CARANA found that consultants' writing skills insufficient, leading (as explained elsewhere) to considerable editing. In addition, two consultants proved to lack good interpersonal and communications skills and alienated a number of people whom they interviewed. CARANA made adjustments to minimize the negative impact of these individuals.

Each evaluation team also included, either on the team or as the manager, someone very familiar with USAID policies, programs and procedures. The participation of a person who knows what USAID can and cannot do, how the organization works, how programs are planned and implemented, procurement rules, and how to write for the organization significantly influenced the management, content and presentation of this body of work. It seems also to have contributed to an effective collaborative relationship between USAID and the evaluation teams and to reports and recommendations that are useful.

Mission approval of team members.

In each of the evaluations that CARANA carried out, USAID retained the right to approve team members, and the Mission exercised that role in a very constructive manner. The Mission took that responsibility seriously, and it rejected a number of proposed candidates that USAID staff felt were not adequately experienced or who might have conflicts of interest because of prior involvement in the program or in similar programs in Russia. In most cases, this review of potential candidates was handled informally and expeditiously between CARANA's evaluation manager and the Mission's relevant technical office, facilitated by the Mission's program evaluation staff. In no case did Mission staff place any pressure on CARANA to hire specific individuals to carry out this work.

In one case, the HSRP evaluation, USAID's desire to preclude individuals who had had any prior contact with the project or the contractor created some difficulty. Because of the size and complexity of the project and the relatively short evaluation period, CARANA had hoped to include individuals who had some familiarity with the project. However, it proved impossible to find such people who had not also worked at least in some limited manner on a project activity. After reviewing many candidates, CARANA eventually selected two very capable international consultants who had little or no Russian experience. However, the project had been so significant in Russia that no candidates with sufficient housing sector experience could be found who did not also have at least a casual relationship to the project. In this case, the Mission agreed to accept a candidate who had had a very small role in the evaluated project.

Schedules

Evaluators should, of course, review pertinent documents *before* interviewing Mission, contractor, or counterpart personnel. Unless it is necessary to get the evaluators out of their usual environment to fully engage them, it is more cost-effective to do this review prior to travel to the field. Methodological development, travel and interview schedules, and the development of interview protocols also can be done or at least initiated prior to travel. Whenever possible, the CARANA evaluation teams met with the U.S organizations being evaluated in the U.S. prior to travel to Russia. These meetings proved to be extremely useful in orienting the teams and preparing them to use their time in Russia effectively.

Each of the six evaluation teams initiated their fieldwork with a visit to Moscow. These visits, usually one week in duration, afforded the teams the opportunity to extend the planning effort fully to Russian team members, to meet with key USAID staff, to meet with the evaluated organizations' resident staff, to meet with key counterparts and to make field travel plans. Field visits to other Russian cities were one to three weeks.

Interviews

Where to go and whom to meet. Where to go and whom to meet obviously depend on the project and the issues to be explored. In several of the recent evaluations, USAID indicated which sites it wanted evaluation teams to visit. More often, the Mission left these decisions to the evaluation team. CARANA teams found that USAID technical officers and the grantees and contractors being evaluated were very helpful in identifying key sites, developing travel schedules and setting up meetings. There is, of course, a risk that those being evaluated will steer the team toward people and institutions that will give favorable reports on the project. However, teams that have done the appropriate background reading and thought through the issues and questions in the scope of work will not be misled easily.

Making interviews effective. Obtaining the information that the evaluators need from interviews is often difficult. Obviously, the first step is to determine in advance what those needs are and to plan interviews accordingly. In the FSVC evaluation, the team

developed a number of pro forma tables that would help to present results and then formulated questions that would fill in the cells of the table.

CARANA teams developed *interview protocols* to assist team members to guide the discussions toward key issues in the scopes of work. Testing the protocols (which is of course standard operating procedure) proved to be essential to eliminate ambiguity and unnecessary questions and to ensure that interviews could be conducted within a reasonable time frame.

Some of the CARANA teams found that the use of a protocol by no means ensured that the information they sought would be obtained. The teams encountered many counterparts who had their own view of what they wanted the evaluators to know, and they often would not be deterred. In one interview for the SME evaluation, for example, the institution being visited had invited representatives from six of its collaborating partners to attend the meeting, and each had prepared a presentation. Although most of that information was irrelevant for the purposes of the evaluation, the CARANA team was forced to listen to this presentation before it could even introduce its members. The SME evaluation team experimented with sending the protocol to interviewees in advance as a means for focusing the meeting. This technique also failed to deter many interviewees from choosing a different agenda.

Minimizing interview bias. All of the evaluations found that interviewees have a strong tendency to report favorably on the programs being evaluated and, to a lesser extent, to withhold negative observations. As in other countries, Russians tend to fear that evaluations could be damaging to them or to the USAID-financed organizations being evaluated.

To counter this tendency, the evaluation teams found it useful to emphasize to interviewees that the evaluators were not out to make anyone look bad and that the primary objective was to make programs more effective in the future. (Indeed, this was the way the CARANA teams viewed their jobs.) The teams found that, even when an interviewee had said that everything had been perfect, s/he might well have many suggestions when asked how things might be better in the future. The teams sometimes suggested to interviewees that this was their opportunity to speak (through the team) to USAID and to plant new ideas about how to make programs more effective. In another case, several interviewees were asked to think of themselves as the director of USAID and asked how they would invest the available scarce resources. Some of the evaluation reports' best recommendations originated in responses to these types of questions.

Several CARANA evaluation teams found it useful to ask interviewees to rate performance (e.g., the grantees preparation, personnel selection, communication, reports, impact) on a numerical scale. This technique helped to draw-out respondents on areas needing improvement and facilitated the evaluators' job of integrating the responses of many interviewees.

The CARANA evaluators found quite consistently that they learned more from interviews when several evaluation team members were present. Team members learned from the questions that their colleagues asked and sometime picked-up different things in the response.

To identify these different perceptions and get the most out of interviews, the CARANA teams found it very useful following each meeting to try immediately to discuss and to summarize what they had learned. Often, these discussions led to tentative hypotheses that influenced subsequent interviews.

CARANA's experience also suggests that, when it is necessary to split-up an evaluation team to obtain greater geographic or institutional coverage,⁴ some additional team planning is required to ensure that each mini-team shares the same objectives, understanding of the issues and interview questions, and approach. It might be useful, for example, to discuss each interview question and the types of responses that can be anticipated, the way in which responses might be used in the report, tables that might be created to summarize responses, etc. The CARANA experience in Russia suggests that it is desirable that the entire team first work together as a unit for several interviews. These preparatory activities enhance the team's ability following the fieldwork to integrate the data they have collected.

Even with good team planning, splitting-up the evaluation team is likely to create a need for additional time following the interviews so that the mini-teams can share their data and integrate their findings. This can be arduous and time-consuming. In the SME evaluation, where the six-member evaluation team split into three mini-teams, the team needed to reconvene for four full days in order to review and analyze the data they had collected on the five programs being reviewed.

Briefing Mission Staff on Evaluation Results

The Mission evaluation staff arranged for each of the evaluation teams to brief Mission management, technical and program staff prior to the teams' departures for the U.S. These briefings, organized by the evaluation staff of the Program Office, were well attended by Mission staff. Mission staff reported that they found the briefings very useful. The evaluation teams also found these sessions useful, as they provided an opportunity to test conclusions and recommendations and occasionally to acquire supplemental information that enhanced the subsequent reports.

For each evaluation, the Mission evaluation officers and the evaluators discussed whether or not to include the contractor or grantee being evaluated in the briefing. The key issue was whether the team would be as frank as USAID wished it to be if the evaluated organization was present. In all but one (or possibly two) of the recent evaluations, the decision was made to invite the contractor or grantee to participate, and this did not

⁴ When evaluation teams are large, it may also be desirable to split-up teams to avoid arriving at meetings with a group that overwhelms interviewees.

significantly limit discussion. This experience suggests that briefings for USAID on results should normally include the evaluated organizations.

The last evaluation, SME Development, was an exception to that practice. As the SME evaluation reviewed the performance of five grantees or contractors, the evaluation team and the USAID evaluation officers felt that it would be inappropriate and potentially embarrassing for the grantees and contractors to discuss critical findings about several of those organizations with the other organizations present.

Reports

Drafting in the field vs. drafting in the U.S. Of the six evaluations that CARANA conducted, three of the evaluation teams (BU health, ROLL and HSRP) wrote their draft reports in the field and left copies with the Mission for comment. The other three teams (FSVC, Fiscal and SME development) wrote their reports in the U.S. and sent them to the Mission for review.

Writing the report in the field has the advantage that the Mission gets its report sooner, as it is highly unlikely that a team will work as quickly to get the report completed once it is back in the U.S. Writing the report in the field also has the advantage that the full team is available, including the Russian team members.

Writing the evaluation reports in the field also has several disadvantages. First, it means that the team needs to stay in the field longer, requiring additional per diem costs and sometimes causing conflicts with consultants' other professional or personal commitments. Further, drafting in the field may mean that the report is not be as well written and organized as it might be if written back in the U.S.

Feedback from USAID and the evaluated organizations

Evaluation teams provided draft reports simultaneously to the Mission and to the organization(s) being evaluated. Typically, USAID staff and the evaluated organizations were given one week to comment, although this period was sometimes extended because of holidays or other factors. Both groups provided their responses in writing to the Mission's evaluation officer who compiled and sent them on to the evaluation team. Comments were sometimes combined in a single message and sometimes forwarded in as many as half a dozen messages.

As far as the evaluators know, the Mission evaluation officer did not attempt to screen or synthesize those comments. This is probably appropriate, as it leaves to the evaluators to determine whether and how to respond to each comment provided.

In general, the comments on the draft reports were thoughtful and balanced and extremely helpful in eliminating misinterpretations of data, identifying points that had been missed or that needed to be clarified, and finding syntax, grammatical or typographical errors. Not surprisingly, some of those comments sought to explain or

deflect evaluators' criticisms of the project, the implementing organization or of USAID. The evaluators considered these comments carefully, and changes were made where deemed appropriate. In no case did USAID pressure evaluators to make changes that they believed would be inappropriate. Indeed, although the evaluators frequently altered the text to better explain why failures had occurred, there are numerous instances in the reports where the evaluators left essentially intact critical comments that one of the involved parties had asked be eliminated.

As noted above, in two cases USAID's comments on draft reports included suggestions that the evaluators add critical comments to the report about some aspect of the evaluated organization's performance not previously mentioned to the team. The evaluators found it difficult to deal adequately with new issues presented that late in the evaluation process, i.e., after the fieldwork was completed, the evaluated organization had commented on the draft report, and the evaluation team was focused on finalizing its report to meet Mission deadlines. Exploration of those issues was not as complete as it would have been had the problems been brought to the team's attention earlier in the evaluation process. In addition to exploring the issue to the extent possible, the evaluators felt compelled by a concern for fairness to go back an additional time to the evaluated organization so that it had the opportunity to respond to the criticism.

To avoid such problems in the future, the Mission's technical staff and the evaluators need to ensure that key issues are surfaced during initial evaluation team briefings. On the Mission side, technical officers often feel adequately prepared for evaluation kick-off meetings because they thoroughly know their projects and because they often helped to prepare the scope of work. However, the experience of these evaluations suggests that it would be useful for technical officers to prepare an outline of the points/concerns that they need to convey to the evaluators.

Editing. The CARANA evaluation teams carried out these six evaluations with the objective of leading a process and developing a report that would be useful to USAID/Russia in planning and implementing future activities. To achieve this objective, it was felt that the reports had to be accurate, thoughtful, balanced (i.e., fair), and very readable, with clearly articulated findings and recommendations.

The experience with these evaluations suggests that careful selection of staff pays off in terms of high quality technical assessments and adequate to quite good initial drafts. However, CARANA found that each of the reports required significant editing. The editor sought to eliminate grammatical errors, to ensure that sections written by different authors followed similar styles and patterns, to make the organization of the reports clear and easy to follow, to state criticisms tactfully, to provide sufficient evidence to support assertions, to make key findings and recommendations stand out, and to make the reports attractive and readable. These efforts appear to have contributed to the widespread acceptance of the findings and recommendations and to the considerable impact that the reports' seem to be having on the Mission's program.

IV. The Mission's Follow-up to Evaluations

This report has included a considerable number of ideas that the Mission might wish to consider in planning and implementing future evaluations. In addition, although recent interviews with a number of the Mission's technical officers suggest that they have taken recent evaluation recommendations very seriously, Mission management might wish to institute a somewhat more organized process to follow-up on completed evaluations. The main objective of such a system would be to see that important recommendations are not overlooked; a secondary objective would be to provide feedback about the evaluators and the evaluation process in order to improve subsequent Mission evaluations.

There are many options that such follow-up system might take. As a first step, the Mission might want to routinely schedule a meeting on each completed evaluation to discuss the evaluation's findings and recommendations, to reach at least preliminary decisions about recommendations (i.e., which would be implemented and which dismissed) and to formulate a simple plan for follow-up actions. The Mission's periodic project reviews might then be used to review the steps taken and progress achieved. The Program Office evaluation staff might be assigned responsibility to see that evaluation recommendations still pending are raised in those quarterly review meetings. This additional role for the Mission's evaluation staff would involve them in the entire evaluation-impact monitoring process and give them an enhanced understanding of the types of evaluation issues and recommendations most likely in future evaluations to produce a beneficial program impact.