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GUIDE

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for

USERS OF THE DETRI EXIT INTERVIEW

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FOREWORD

DETRI is the Development Education and Training Research Institute of the American University, Washington, D.C. Under an A.I.D. contract, DETRI administers an exit interview to those participants departing the United States from Washington, D.C.

The exit interview has been used as an evaluation tool by A.I.D. and its predecessor agencies since international training programs began over twenty years ago. It was originally a procedure whereby project managers evaluated their own participants. This had the built-in bias of most self-evaluation. There was no uniformity of method and the coverage of departing participants was incomplete. Some participants were interviewed several times for the same purpose. In addition, the lack of a uniform questionnaire and of standardized interview procedures made systematic data collection, analyses and comparisons impossible.

The DETRI Exit Interview program was established by the Office of International Training to overcome the difficulties and shortcomings of the original internal exit interview procedure.

Since the DETRI procedure began in July 1967, over 7,000 participants have been interviewed. Two annual reports and numerous special reports that have been issued, point to significant findings which have resulted in improved management of the participant training program.

The DETRI interview is not a substitute for the final meeting between a program officer and his participants. Program officers discuss the substantive aspects of training and settle last-minute administrative matters. DETRI concentrates on the participant's satisfaction with program planning and orientations; his experiences with housing, travel and other administration arrangements; his feelings about certain non-technical programs and his reactions to social-personal experiences.

The participants' assessment is not the sole factor to be considered in evaluating a training program. Other perspectives, such as the program officer's rating of training facilities, and evaluations by university faculty, the USAID Training Officer and the technical advisers, plus the host country supervisor must also be considered.

The purpose of this guide is to answer questions of those who have received completed questionnaires and have wondered how the information could be useful for planning future programs. It is also intended to reassure those who believe the participant's feelings imply some criticism of them. The exit interview necessarily contains an element of quality control of program officers and training facilities, but its primary purpose

is to provide constructive, rather than critical feed-back for management improvement.

The DETRI instruments and procedures themselves can always be improved; both are revised periodically. Wordings are changed to get clearer answers; questions that statistical analyses show are not giving significant data are deleted. This *Guide for Users of the DETRI Exit Interview* was designed expressly to answer some of the questions raised most frequently about the whole procedure.

I. Questions and Answers About DETRI

These are some of the questions asked most frequently:

Question 1: What is the difference between what DETRI covers about the participant's training program and what the DTS, Program Specialist or USAID Training Officer should discuss?

Answer: DETRI does *not* cover specific program content. It is up to the specialist in the participant's field to discuss the substantive content of academic courses, on-the-job experience, or the value of observation tours. The A.I.D. officer is also knowledgeable about the development needs of the participant's country and may wish to evaluate the relevance of the training to the country's goals.

Question 2: Why is the questionnaire so long?

Answer: The twelve areas of the participant experience covered in the questionnaire were developed after consultations with OIT program development officers and review of printed material about participant training. All areas covered are important.

The current questionnaire takes an average of 92 minutes to fill out. In June 1969, an anonymous evaluation form asking the participants about the exit-interview procedure itself was developed. This included a question on length of the questionnaire. Although the results show that a majority of participants do *not* find the questionnaire too long, DETRI continually attempts to shorten it by deleting items that are not producing significant data. The initiation of the entry interview will eventually decrease the length of the exit interview even more.

Question 3: Why are some of the questions worded in a non-positive way? Some questions begin with the phrase, "A.I.D. participants have sometimes reported difficulties with English language, Pre-Academic Workshops, Communication Seminars, etc." Doesn't this solicit unfavorable views?

Answer: Yes. The format of the "difficulty items" was developed because it was found that participants from various cultural backgrounds were reluctant to discuss problems they thought were unique. If they were given an indication that others had similar difficulties, they were more likely to give valid information on aspects that had troubled them. It is important to elicit negative as well as positive information, if improvements in future programs are to be made. Using the "common difficulty" format, the data gathered from the first 3194 academic and

special participants showed that the format was not introducing any systematic negative bias—the majority of participants did not report experiencing any single difficulty.

Question 4: Why is the seven point scale of satisfaction and utility used so many times in the questionnaire? How is it to be interpreted?

Answer: This scale is one result of the first year of developmental work at DETRI. It was found that in making evaluative judgments, participants frequently chose the positive end of any scale or category used. Since it is important to know about variations in feelings of satisfaction and utility, the seven point scale was developed to provide finer distinctions between positive or negative ratings. Even with these refined scales, the majority of participants are still using one of the top three categories.

In interpreting the replies, the points on the scale are not comparable to the degrees on a thermometer, because they are not fixed. One person's assignment of a "4" may mean the same as another person's "5" or another's "3." The importance of the scale position of the replies depend on how many participants check the various values. In the annual report, one scale may show replies of those who choose "5-7" ratings in one group while on another scale, those who marked "4-7" may be lumped together. This is because a significant number of replies fall within those parts of the scale. The most useful way to define the scale positions is to say that the top group of ratings means "more useful" or "satisfied"; the middle "intermediately useful" or "moderately satisfied"; and the bottom "least useful" or "less satisfied."

Question 5: Can we be sure that participants whose English is poor fully understand the questions?

Answer: Visual formatting has been used to make the questionnaire as easy to read as possible. For example, all "difficulty items" look exactly the same in terms of their layout on the page. Red lines are used to help participants see which questions they can omit and which they should answer. These formatting techniques are explained by visual aids and wall-charts before the participants fill out the questionnaires.

The clearest possible English wording is used after thorough pre-testing. During the developmental phase of the project, it was found that, in some cases, a longer phrase than native English speakers would use was sometimes necessary to communicate the same meaning in different languages. (ALIGU linguistics experts helped DETRI with this.)

On the anonymous evaluation of the DETRI exit interviews, participants are asked if they had difficulty with the meaning of any of the

questions. More than 2/3 of the participants say they have no trouble with any of the questions. Only 2% say they have trouble with 6 or more of the items in the questionnaire.

After completion of the questionnaire, the interviewer reviews the participant's answers for contradictions or unanswered sections and asks the participant for any needed clarification. At this time, misunderstanding of the questions sometimes shows up. Questions are changed in periodic revisions if they have caused comprehension difficulties.

Question 6: Aren't some of the questions offensive to personal and political sensitivities of some of the participants?

Answer: Although participants are urged to go to DETRI, they can refuse for personal reasons. They can also skip any questions they find offensive. So far, only one participant has refused to take part in the exit interview and less than 1% have declined to answer any given question. This fine record is partly attributable to the fact that during the first year developmental period, DETRI submitted the questionnaire to experts on these issues, as well as checking them with participants.

In the individual oral interview, interviewers are advised not to probe into issues that may prove embarrassing to the participant. On the anonymous evaluation of the DETRI exit interviews, 86% of the participants do not feel that any part of even the private conversation is too personal or sensitive.

Question 7: Why do you have a private, individual interview?

Answer: The individual interview is a means of gathering more details on questionnaire items. It also gives the interviewer a chance to clear up contradictions and inconsistencies in the written questionnaires. Even more important, it gives the participant a chance to get things "off his chest" without the constraints of specific questions and answers, or without feeling that his remarks may some day be brought up to his professional disadvantage. Participants welcome the opportunity to talk with a sympathetic listener. Those who have had warm relationships with Americans are eager to mention this. Others, who have had unpleasant experiences, find that a discussion of these experiences helps relieve any frustration or hostility.

Question 8: Why can't I see the reports on individual interviews?

Answer: The DETRI contract with AID/OIT states that the individual interviews are to be private and anonymous. The participants are told this. It would be impossible to convince future participants of the confi-

dentiality involved if information from an interview was shown to AID personnel and this were inadvertently made public.

Information from the individual interview is presented on an aggregate basis in DETRI's annual reports. In this way, data from individual participants are not identifiable. Most of the pertinent information in the individual interview can be inferred by careful reading of completed questionnaires, which are not anonymous. Important information given in the private oral interview which differs from the questionnaire is evaluated by DETRI and if the participant gives permission, this information is communicated to OIT for further action. It is planned to review group interview data more frequently. More timely reports on the comments which large numbers of participants make in the oral interviews will be provided.

Question 9: Since the questionnaire has the participant's name on it, isn't it possible that he will not answer frankly?

Answer: Attempts are made to minimize the "ingratiation factor"—in which members of certain cultures prefer to maintain a courteous rather than a candid mien—by using procedures which emphasize the value Americans place on honesty and objectivity. Participants are assured that what they say will not be used against them, but will help to improve the training experiences of future participants from their home countries. It is pointed out that DETRI is an independent non-governmental research organization, and that DETRI interviewers have no reason to be defensive about aspects of AID training or life in the United States that participants may wish to criticize.

The reliability of the participants' answers to the unstructured questions has been compared with information given to standardized questions. For the first 1810 participants, 970 "write-in" answers were compared with other items that asked approximately the same thing in a more structured form. Of these "write-ins", 809, or 83%, were found consistent with the answer checked by the participant to a closely related or identical question. In addition, the interviewers conducting the private, and individual, interview report that only 1 in 10 participants say something in that interview which contradicts anything written in the questionnaire.

Question 10: Sometimes there are contradictions in the completed questionnaires. How is this explained?

Answer: Contradictions are called to the attention of the participants during the individual interview. In checking the consistency of responses

to structured and unstructured questions, it was found that only 17% of those compared were actually contradictory. In some cases, when more information was available, replies became understandable. For example, one participant, who indicated many difficulties with housing, rated his satisfaction at the top of the scale. When asked what he meant, the participant explained that although he had difficulty at some training locations, he had a close relationship with one landlord. He felt that anything less than a "1" rating would reflect negatively on this landlord. From his point of view, his answer to both items was an honest one.

Contradictory replies should be called to DETRI's attention. If clarifying information is available, DETRI can furnish it if it does not violate the pledge of anonymity to participants.

Question 11: Occasionally, a participant's answers do not correspond to the facts. How is this explained?

Answer: There are differences in interpretation of what is or is not true. For example, a participant who has been exposed to the Washington International Center briefing on the Washington area and the Mt. Vernon tour may not consider this an "orientation" program and check that he did not take part in the W.I.C. program on his questionnaire. Others may forget after two or four years have elapsed that they ever went to W.I.C. In the analyses of the data, DETRI follows the principle that whatever the participant believes to be true, is true for him, regardless of what actually happened during his training. It is the participant's own beliefs and feelings which are the reality that will largely determine his later utilization of training—and that, therefore, must be dealt with by AID. The exit interview assesses what the participant remembers or feels, not necessarily what in fact took place. The reader of DETRI reports must keep this in mind. Actually, the incidence of reported errors in facts has been relatively rare among the participants interviewed to date.

Question 12: Do the participants have difficulty remembering what happened at the beginning of their programs?

Answer: In developing the printed questionnaire DETRI took account of topics participants could not remember well. Items remembered only by a few or which had significance only for a small group, were discarded. When the entry interview begins, we expect to get more accurate information on predeparture preparation in USAIDs. The mid-tour questionnaire will also give information on early training experiences, and should improve recall in the exit interview.

Question 13: What are the participants' general reactions to the exit interview?

Answer: Participants are reacting favorably. On the anonymous evaluation form completed at the end of the interview, DETRI asks participants to make two ratings, on "how useful" and "how pleasant" they found the DETRI experience. The results for over 2,000 participants show that about 43% find the interview "very useful—the best way to get the participants' evaluation," the highest rating they can give. Another 34% check the second highest rating, while 16% check the third. In answer to the question "How pleasant did you find the DETRI experience?", slightly more than half find it "very pleasant"; (number 1 on the scale) 30% check the second scale position, and 13% the third.

II. Using the Completed Questionnaire

A. Reading an individual questionnaire

A completed questionnaire may contain over 400 separate pieces of information. Here are some suggestions for making these items fall into meaningful patterns:

1. Look at the evaluation scales first.

These 1-7 ratings appear at the end of most sections. If a participant gives high ("1" or "2") ratings on these scales, it is unlikely that he will have many difficulties to report or suggestions to offer on the aspect of training referred to in the scale. In these cases, the experiences the participant has had should be reviewed for reference in planning future programs.

When a participant gives "3" ratings or lower, look at the "difficulties" items in that section to see what dimensions of the experience were checked as presenting difficulty. Sometimes, on the basis of a single participant's responses, it is impossible to understand how the difficulties are related to satisfactions or dissatisfaction. If a record is kept of items that stand out for several participants, the aspects of training most related to the participants' evaluations should become apparent.

2. Read DETRI's Annual Reports

These reports point out items most often related to participants' satisfactions with both technical and personal-social aspects of training. They will give an idea of the extent to which your participants' responses are similar to those of other participants.

Individual participant's responses may vary somewhat from those of the "typical participant" described in DETRI reports. If positive

and negative participant reactions are recalled, items in the DETRI questionnaire that refer to important areas usually can be found. Use these items to get a quick reading of each of your participant's feelings about training experiences and keep records to see if responses change as you change the programs of future trainees.

B. *Using Questionnaire Results to Improve Future Programs*

The main reason why DETRI provides completed questionnaires to program officers and USAID Development Training Officers is to help them improve the programs of future participants. Records of difficulties and criticisms, as well as positive experiences should be kept so that these may be avoided or repeated in future programming.

Sometimes participants who have had programs similar to those being planned for new arrivals will make specific suggestions that should be considered. These suggestions, in conjunction with other information the program officer has, may indicate a complete change in program or training site, or may encourage a program planner to set up identical programs for future participants. While one or two cases are not enough to make a generalization, ten or twenty cases may provide information leading to better programming.

Program officers sometime ask why DETRI asks questions about things that can't be changed. It is realized that it is sometimes impossible to make requested changes. However, a complete picture of a participant's experience in the United States must be obtained in order to explain what accounts for his feelings. (DETRI asked participants to indicate on the anonymous exit interview evaluation form how complete a picture of their AID experiences was obtained at DETRI. Eighty-four per cent said they believe DETRI is obtaining a very complete picture.) In some cases, explaining to a participant in advance difficulties he is likely to encounter that cannot be changed, will reduce his negative feelings.

III. Ways in Which DETRI Can Be Helped

A. *Increasing the accuracy of questionnaire information.*

AID/W Development Training Specialists and USAID Development Training Officers should mark inaccuracies and inconsistencies on individual questionnaires and report them to the Evaluation Staff of OIT which will in turn inform DETRI. In DETRI's periodic revisions, the questionnaire can be changed to try to get more accurate information.

B. *Scheduling and Briefing participants.*

1. Whenever possible, schedule the exist interview *before* the technical

debriefing and at least two days before the participants' departure. Although the DETRI exit interview seldom takes so long, allow four hours and be sure there are no conflicting appointments.

2. Use the standard briefing DETRI has provided to reduce anxieties participants may have and to insure that all arrive at DETRI with similar expectations. Do *not* mention findings presented in DETRI reports, questionnaires filled out by other participants, or other information that may reduce the reliability of their responses and their candor. If an opportunity to talk to the participants before the DETRI interview is not available, mail the standard briefing to them.

The cooperation, advice and suggestions DETRI has received from all who are earnestly concerned with participant training have improved the DETRI procedures and instruments during the first three years of data collection. It is hoped that this manual has answered some of the questions raised most frequently. OIT invites all to continue to ask for clarification on any aspects of the exit interview that are not understood.