USAID DRG STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK UPDATE
ASSESSMENT REPORT

This document was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development, Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Center under the Learning, Evaluation, and Research Activity II (LER II) contract: GS10F0218U/7200AA18M00017.

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

ATARI	Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence
CAF	Conflict Assessment Framework
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
COR	Contracting officer's representative
DCHA	Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance
DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
FGD	Focus group discussion
IP	Implementing partner
KII	Key informant interview
PEA	Political economy analysis
POC	Point of contact
ROL	Rule of law
RT	Review team
SAF	Strategic Assessment Framework
SBU	Sensitive but unclassified
TWP	Thinking and working politically
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-commissioned study explores whether the Strategic Assessment Framework (SAF) is still a useful tool for the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Center to utilize and promote. The SAF review team's (RT's) desk research and key informant interviews (KIIs) indicated that the SAF remains a useful tool but could benefit from some modification. Notably, the SAF RT recommends that the five conceptual framework elements, which heretofore had been mandated, should now serve as guideposts to allow for more flexibility in identifying the key DRG challenges that are within the United States Government's (USG's) manageable interests to address.

The DRG challenges mentioned in the latest iteration of the SAF guidance, which was issued in 2014 soon after the publication of USAID's new DRG strategy, do not adequately reflect the current realities faced by countries around the world, nor do they sufficiently incorporate current USAID priorities such as localization and inclusion. However, simply including a revised list of DRG trends and current administration priorities would be counterproductive because it only adds to an already long checklist of phenomena to consider.

As was noted repeatedly in KIIs, the lengthy and often jargon-filled SAF final reports are difficult to digest by all but the most engaged DRG officers. Hence, the SAF RT recommends that USAID use an extended desk review process and workshop to determine the DRG trends in a particular country and USAID's policy priorities to focus the SAF's field research and analysis. The SAF RT acknowledges that this option compromises the broad scope of the current SAF framework and the comprehensive analytic report that often emerges; in return, the proposed approach invests scarce research resources in a manner that is likely to have the most impact and increases the likelihood that the resulting analysis is socialized and applied.[1]

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[1] The SAF RT recommends a 20-page limit to the report with ample use of data visualization tools.

DECISION MATRIX FOR CONDUCTING DRG ASSESSMENTS

Rationales for SAF Assessment:

a. Mission is preparing a Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) and a DRG assessment is required.

b. Portfolio rethink: DRG staff is dissatisfied with the current portfolio (i.e., the new DRG office head wants to shuffle the program).

c. Major event: End of conflict, elections resulting in new host country political leadership.

d. Concern about the impact of other USAID sector investments on the country's democracy.

Types of DRG Assessments:

a. Traditional version of SAF is consistent with the 2014 guidance—conducting a full analysis of five elements and a survey of all stakeholders, available resources, and specific recommendations.

b. Rapid/focused SAF—Mission prefers more actionable and timely SAF: utilize the newly introduced five-step approach outlined in response to question 9 with an emphasis on iteration through the workshop process, flexibility in the design of actual fact-finding as developed through the initial workshop, and focused analysis on specific issues defined during the initial workshop.

c. Political economy analysis (PEA)/or subsector DRG assessment—Mission determines it does not have the resources or time to dedicate to SAF or already knows what it is going to do programmatically.

The DRG Center has produced several useful tools for instructing field staff on when to use different assessment tools, but few of the interviewed DRG officers were aware of their existence. The SAF RT recommends that the new guidance incorporate the matrix document, which describes the different tools and explains when they should be used. While an element of PEA is incorporated into the current guidance via the use of a stakeholder analysis tool, the research processes and iterative nature of thinking and working politically (TWP) through PEA are not emphasized in the current SAF guidance. The SAF RT recommends merging the SAF and national PEA into one approach and methodology that takes the best parts of each. More generally, the SAF RT recommends numerous changes to the purpose, timing, and methodology of the SAF to make the process more appropriate for Mission purposes.

The findings and recommendations are summarized below.

FINDINGS

- The SAF process is broadly understood to be a useful exercise for USAID Missions in providing an analytical frame for consideration of DRG programmatic priorities.
- In practice, SAF products are circulated among country staff, although not always fully socialized.

- The lengthy and often jargon-filled reports are difficult to digest. The perceived political sensitivity of the analysis results in delayed or limited distribution of the final report, again compromising its utility.
- There are often only intermittent interactions between the SAF teams and prospective consumers, limiting the potential for broad buy-in.
- Current SAF guidance is sometimes interpreted by assessment teams as overly prescriptive and too detailed, which contributes to the resulting reports often reading like academic theses rather than notional/iterative sets of recommendations for consideration by DRG specialists within a Mission.
- While there are multiple references to flexibility in the current SAF, the specific requests for data regarding actors, institutions, and issues reduce opportunities for adaptation.
- The SAF makes a concerted effort to ensure that gender considerations are mainstreamed, but less attention is often directed at other marginalized groups.
- The SAF has the capacity to address the refined DRG priorities, such as inclusion and localization, but doing so without limiting the examination of other issues may increase the length of the final report.
- SAF incorporates stakeholder analysis with a PEA lens but has a different analytical framework and is designed to be a stand-alone study, not an iterative process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The SAF guidance manual should be more concise by limiting the detailed elaboration of the five conceptual elements and the descriptions of each of the stakeholders that might be subject to examination as part of the SAF.
- USAID staff should more actively engage in the SAF research process.
- The SAF should incorporate lessons from the PEA methodology and approach, focusing on fewer but more targeted questions and the utilization of a more iterative approach.
- SAF guidance should incorporate a five-step process that encourages a shorter timeframe for completing the SAF process and better reflects the needs of the consumers.
- The drafting of the purpose statement at the outset of the process should result in a decision on whether a SAF is the appropriate tool to use or whether the Mission already has a sufficient understanding of the DRG challenges and a sub-sector assessment tool would be more appropriate—if the former, a scope of work should delineate specific areas of concern, thereby allowing the SAF team, in conjunction with the Mission sponsors, to focus the assessment on the precise issues that the Mission wants to be addressed.
- SAF guidance should reframe the SAF process to encourage more flexibility in undertaking the analysis, with the current five elements examined as part of the desk review and the initial workshop focused on determining which of the elements require more in-depth review during the field research.
- The revised SAF guidance should clarify that the SAF is an appropriate tool both when the Mission is undertaking a broad review of the portfolio (i.e., in anticipation of a CDCS) and when there is a political or strategic opportunity, such as at the end of conflict or the election of a reformist leader—the scope of the SAF should be discussed during the post-desk review workshop with an

agreement emerging as to the focus of the field research, the iterative nature of the analysis, and the curious, non-judgmental mindset (i.e., drawing from the applied TWP/PEA methodology).

- The desk review should rely on existing data sources such as current easily accessible PEAs prepared by respected organizations, USAID's DRG Country Data Portraits, and bespoke survey data and should serve to focus the field research.
- Two workshops, one following the desk review and the second after the field review is completed, will increase opportunities for USAID input and ownership and will secure buy-in on findings and recommendations and completion of the draft deliverable.
- SAF guidance should be aligned and released concurrently with the new DRG policy.

NEXT STEPS

- Following further internal discussions within USAID DRG, develop an outline for a more concise version of the SAF guidance that reflects the agreed-upon changes.
- Decide on the team, timeline, and budget to draft revised guidance.
- Produce revised guidance to be issued concurrently with the new DRG policy.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to analyze recent USAID experiences with the SAF, which USAID has used for the past 20 years to inform DRG strategies and programming around the world. This research is intended to advise USAID on whether to update the guidance to reflect current DRG trends and approaches, whether to increase the accessibility of the analysis, and whether to strengthen the development of actionable recommendations intended to shape DRG country strategies and programmatic approaches.

The SAF guidance is a complex 61-page technical document, which was most recently updated in 2014. As one commenter mentioned, "when the instructions and guidance are longer than the end report, it is problematic and thought should be given on how to simplify the guidance and requirements."[2] Since the publication of the revised SAF guidance, the DRG Center has also produced a document describing 12 DRG Center assessment tools (2020),[3] a matrix that compares the various assessment tools used by the DRG sector (2018),[4] and a five-page document on guidance for Missions conducting a SAF (2019).[5]

Following an initial briefing with USAID/DRG/Policy, Coordination, and Integration team staff, the SAF RT was advised to focus more on prospective revisions, rather than retrospective analyses. As such, the 13 KIIs with USAID staff and implementing partners (IPs)[6]—who are, respectively, consumers and practitioners of SAF products—emphasized SAF utilization, research processes, and methodologies. Additionally, the SAF RT reviewed 12 DRG assessment reports. The SAF RT brainstormed a list of emerging DRG trends and discussed how to make the SAF more relevant to current policy goals, including

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[2] DRG SAF Stocktaking Analysis February 18, 2016 (Learning and Knowledge Management contract).
[3] Center of Excellence, DRG Technical Assessments Guidance (January 2020).
[4] DRG Center Assessment Matrix 2018.
[5] "Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Assessment Guidance for Missions," USAID DRG Center, 2019.
[6] In addition to the discussions with the DRG team commissioning this review, the RT selected the KIIs based on their substantive expertise and their experience with SAF activities. Some KIIs had more than one person participate in the virtual meeting.

the challenges faced by USAID in supporting local partners to uphold democratic principles and practices in the countries where USAID operates.

DATA SOURCE	M	F	TOTAL
KII—USAID HQ	3	2	5
KII—USAID Field	2	2	4
KII—IPs' SAF team leaders	3	I	4
Total	8	5	I3

The SAF RT reviewed other DRG assessment options, such as an applied TWP/PEA, a Conflict Assessment Framework, and related DRG sub-sector frameworks, to consider their overlap with and/or potential for augmenting the SAF. The SAF RT also benefited from the current undertaking of SAF activities in several eastern and central European countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding and where USAID does not have a presence.

In early June 2022, the RT presented preliminary findings and recommendations to USAID/DRG/Policy, Coordination, and Integration team. Based on USAID's feedback on the presentation, the SAF RT recalibrated its efforts to answer a revised question set aimed at achieving actionable updates to the SAF guidance and providing greater clarity on which DRG analytical tool is appropriate for different contexts.

This report is organized to answer the following key questions:

1. Is the SAF still a useful tool for the DRG Center to utilize and promote?
2. Does the conceptual framework of the SAF guidance remain valid?
3. Do the DRG challenges highlighted in the SAF guidance need to be updated?
4. Does the SAF guidance adequately address what is currently being proposed as refined DRG priorities, such as localization and inclusion?
5. To what extent is USAID's PEA tool reflected in the current SAF guidance?
6. How should the SAF guidance be changed to be more aligned with the USAID PEA tool and PEA emerging best practices?
7. Are the distinctions between when to use a SAF and when to use a PEA clear to USAID staff in the field?
8. Which sectors/sub-sectors/thematic areas/tools are best suited for combined SAF or SAF+ approaches?
9. What specific changes are recommended to the purpose, timing, and methodology that could make the SAF more useful for Missions?

ANNOTATED RESPONSES TO KEY QUESTIONS

KEY QUESTION 1: IS THE SAF STILL A USEFUL TOOL FOR THE DRG CENTER TO UTILIZE AND PROMOTE?

The SAF remains an important tool for the DRG sector but requires several adjustments to reflect changes in the global environment and the mainstreaming of DRG within USAID. As a DRG mainstay for more than two decades, the SAF is well-branded among DRG officers and most DRG officers serving abroad have sponsored the conduct of one or more SAFs during their careers. The repository of SAF reports also provides a wealth of data for in-country and cross-country comparisons.

Operationally, the SAF serves as a high-level examination of the DRG challenges confronting a given country. As one advocate of the SAF noted, "[the SAF] is not an evaluation, but an opportunity to take a big-picture look at what is going on in the country." Big picture aside, the specific goal of the SAF, as articulated in the 2014 guidance, is to offer a "recommended DRG strategy, including an objective or set of objectives along with a general plan for deploying resources to achieve those objectives." SAFs vary in their relative emphasis on these two distinct objectives and, importantly, the quality of analysis devoted to them.

In addition to the high-level examination and DRG program prioritization, the SAF has been described as serving the following purposes:

- Establishing an analytical basis for USAID engaging with other country-team counterparts on politically sensitive issues.
- Informing the content of the CDCS beyond the DRG sector (i.e., contributing to a political assessment of the prospects for reforms in areas where USAID invests resources).
- Building an evidence base to advocate for a defined programming approach in a DRG sub-sector and thus advancing/expediting the project design process.

In practice, SAF products are widely circulated among country staff, although not always fully socialized due both to the perception (rightly or wrongly) that little new information has been uncovered through the SAF and to the SAF's emphasis on the details of USAID programming, which may be of less interest to other country team staff. Meanwhile, the SAF's influence on USAID's CDCS beyond the DRG sector has depended on the personal interest of the Mission director and/or program office director. As one DRG officer stated, "SAFs can be used more generally if they are read, but I am skeptical that Mission staff necessarily read the SAF, which is unfortunate given the holistic content."

Finally, several interlocutors remarked that the SAF often provides a post hoc rationalization for program directions that have already been made, either because of timing constraints or the lack of resource flexibility, rather than truly contributing to the DRG priority setting or program design processes. In the words of one DRG officer, "DRG staff will generally 'cherry pick' the specific recommendations that they welcome and incorporate into their predetermined program plans." And another officer remarked that "prioritization is a fool's errand. Let 1,000 flowers bloom—hard to predict how the democratic system will respond to developments on the ground."

The SAF's limited impact is often a consequence of the timing, length, and readability of the final products that emerge from the SAF process.[7] SAFs have traditionally required a minimum of four months, and often considerably more, from contracting to final report submission and thus, by design, are not responsive to immediate exigencies. As one DRG officer commented, "a good assessment requires a year's lead time, including discussions with Washington, and then actually carrying out field work. Every assessment takes longer than envisioned." And a Mission director remarked, "the time frame has real implications on its utility." In the 2016 SAF stocktaking report, survey respondents mentioned that "the DGA review process was often slow, resulting in a delay of up to a year before a report was finalized. Delays were caused by factors such as poorly written reports, nit-picking (especially on history and factual detail), and lack of Mission responsiveness."[8]

In many cases, there are only intermittent interactions between the SAF teams and prospective consumers, limiting the potential for broad buy-in. Further, the lengthy and often jargon-filled reports are difficult to digest by all but the most engaged DRG officers. Finally, the perceived political sensitivity of the analysis undertaken by the SAF teams results in delayed (as the content of the report is internally reviewed) or limited (if the product is designated *sensitive but unclassified [SBU]*) publication of the final report, again compromising its utility.

At an operational level, the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged reflection on whether certain assessments can be undertaken through virtual technologies and better use of existing literature, reports, and survey data, thus obviating the need for more expensive, extended in-person deployment of assessment teams; nonetheless, both SAF implementers and DRG officers acknowledge that much is lost without the field component of the SAF.

While the SAF RT did not have access to data regarding the cost-sharing between Washington and Missions, the guidance for Missions document recommends a 50-50 split. Still, there is a perception that much of the expenses are covered by Washington and many DRG field officers treat the undertaking of a SAF as a "free good." Ultimately, this may contribute to the lack of full buy-in related to the SAF products that several DRG officers noted, or as one SAF implementer commented, "sometimes Washington owns the SAF more than the Mission does."

DRG officers are uncertain as to when to advocate for a SAF as opposed to relying on a more project-level DRG assessment tool. While the DRG Center's technical guidance and matrix mentioned above summarize the strengths and weaknesses of different tools and their utility in specific circumstances, many of those with whom the SAF RT spoke were unaware of their existence.

An oft-repeated criticism is that the SAF guidance is overly prescriptive. The guidance outlines a four-stage process: a) a consideration of country context, analysis of five elements, and identification of the element that poses the greatest DRG challenge to the country; b) a stakeholder examination of institutions

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[7] The 2015 Final Retrospective Analysis of the SAF reached a similar conclusion: "Dense language, weak presentation, and weak cohesion are common issues with current assessments. As such, it is recommended that DRG select team leads and consultants with writing skill and technical expertise and provide reporting templates to aid in document navigation and assimilation."

[8] DRG Assessments Stocktaking Analysis. February 18, 2016, pg. 7.

and actors, which is similar in scope to a national-level PEA; c) a review of US interests and available resources; and d) a prioritization of DRG programming for the Mission.

The core analytic component of the SAF guidance involves the examination of five elements—consensus, inclusion, competition and political accountability, rule of law (ROL) and human rights, and government responsiveness and effectiveness—which, per the SAF guidance, "will provide the information needed for a thorough DRG analysis in a country." The guidance further states:

> *The output from [this analysis of the five elements] is the identification of the central challenge(s) in democracy, human rights, and governance. The analysis should prioritize among the challenges to guide resource allocation when budgets are tight or to clarify second-best options when the primary challenge cannot be addressed productively.*

The continued viability of this proposition is addressed in response to key question 2.

Not surprisingly, after more than 20 years of continued usage, the SAF has lost some of its luster as other assessment tools have emerged (e.g., PEA, Conflict Assessment Framework, ROL, civil society) and the SAF's analytical framework has remained largely unchanged over more than two decades. While the SAF is supposed to be forward-looking, some SAF exercises invest considerable energy in evaluating past programs. Moreover, as recognized in the 2015 evaluation of the SAF, many implementers use the framework as a guide but then adapt to the particular circumstances dictated by Mission needs and country circumstances.[9]

Hence, the SAF RT proposes several adjustments to the SAF guidance that reflect current best practices and should contribute to the SAF's continued utility as a DRG assessment tool.[10]

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[9] The 2015 review highlighted the conflicting imperatives of legibility (i.e., being able to compare SAFs across countries) versus flexibility (allowing SAFs to be tailored to specific needs).

[10] The proposed revisions draw also from the extensive 2015 review of the SAF. While that evaluation team recommended several changes, they were never formally incorporated into the SAF guidance, in part, the SAF RT suspects, because the new SAF guidance had been issued shortly before the team finished its work.

- The SAF guidance should be more concise and less prescriptive.
- Reframe the SAF guidance to allow for more flexibility in undertaking analyses and to encourage reliance on existing USAID DRG data and bespoke survey data, creating more timely final reports with greater emphasis on data visualization, using a practitioners' orientation (as opposed to a heavy academic overlay) and iteration between the team conducting the SAF and DRG staff both during preparation and after completion.
- Incorporate a refined five-step process that encourages a shorter timeframe for the SAF process (i.e., optimally 10–14 weeks from initial start to the presentation of the final report), reflects the needs of the consumers, and places heavy emphasis on iteration.
- Reissue and ensure the broad dissemination of the DRG Technical Assessment Guidance, which explains existing tools, and reference the Technical Assessment Guidance in the revised SAF guidance.
- Issue the revised SAF guidance upon release of the new DRG policy to ensure that the two documents are viewed as part of a package as opposed to the SAF being seen as a stand-alone effort that is then overtaken by the new policy.

KEY QUESTION 2: DOES THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SAF GUIDANCE REMAIN VALID?

The conceptual core of the current SAF guidance is the analysis of five elements deemed critical to DRG success: consensus, inclusion, competition and political accountability, ROL and human rights, and government responsiveness and effectiveness. Specifically, the guidance requires an analysis of the precise challenges that each element poses to DRG progress in the country. The objective is to use this analysis to prioritize programmatic responses to the most consequential challenge(s) (or in the language used in Inclusive Growth Diagnostics, the most serious binding constraint toward achieving economic growth).

The SAF conceptual framework has many supporters. One DRG officer noted, "the assessment part of SAF is usually pretty good and stands the test of time." He then noted that "the recommendations section is generally weak because it doesn't consider USG priorities that are often not privy to the SAF team members."

In addition to acclaim for the SAF conceptual frame, the SAF RT also heard the following critiques:

- The approach results in too academic a presentation of the DRG situation in a country, rather than providing the clients with their sought-after objective: a notional/iterative set of recommendations for consideration by DRG specialists within a Mission.
- The approach is too atheoretical given that the five elements are not always, as the guidance itself acknowledges, the sum and substance of the challenges that countries face.
- The five elements inevitably cross-pollinate and addressing them in a siloed manner does not reflect the reality of political dynamics within a country.
- The "consensus" element is often a derivative problem of another element and, consequently, programming to improve consensus is rare.
- Translation of the high-level, comprehensive, conceptual analysis into the prioritization of DRG programs is problematic given the constraints associated with US interests, country context,

available resources, prior programmatic commitments, and personal predilections of ambassadors, Mission management, and newly arrived DRG officers.

There have been calls for a review of the SAF's five elements to ensure that they reflect contemporary DRG thinking and challenges. Such a review would undoubtedly lead to an intellectually interesting and potentially contentious, if ultimately inconclusive, debate. Rather than expend energy and resources in this direction, the better approach, as reflected in several quality SAF reports reviewed as part of this exercise, is to encourage weaving the five elements into a singular analysis with the elements serving as guideposts, rather than requiring each element to be formulaically examined with the goal of singling out one of the five elements as the "critical" challenge. This analysis could also incorporate the specific challenges and Agency priorities addressed in the responses to key questions 3 and 4.

The 2014 SAF guidance, reflecting the then-newly released (2013) DRG strategy, includes reference to diverse analytic approaches (including systems-thinking, inclusive growth diagnostics, and the local systems framework), emphasis on human rights, consideration of a country's political trajectory, gender-related factors, and the use of public opinion surveys and peer reviews. SAF implementers have sought to follow this guidance, but the multitude of areas to be covered contributes to the unwieldiness of the final product.

A further criticism of the existing SAF guidance relates to the long list of institutions and actors that are suggested for the step 2 analysis. While the guidance includes repeated references to flexibility in selecting the relevant actors and institutions, several SAF implementers noted that failure to include a listed institution or actor would inevitably be questioned during the review process. Hence, the default is to examine all the institutions and actors referenced, which requires a long list of interviewees and results in an expansive report that may or may not actually contribute to a greater understanding of the DRG context and challenges.

Another criticism relates to the third and fourth steps of the process. SAF teams are dependent on the information provided by the Mission regarding available resources and other practical constraints that may preclude the Mission from responding to the immediate DRG challenges. Unless the Mission DRG officers are well-integrated into the SAF team, the recommendations for prioritizing specific DRG sub-sector programs often lack a bureaucratic perspective. However, as a practical matter, while conducting field research, the SAF team often has limited interactions with the Mission DRG officers and receives substantive feedback on its analysis and recommendations only when presenting at an out-brief or when the report is near completion. Hence, facilitating a more iterative process would considerably enhance USAID buy-in and the utility of the SAF report.

Finally, as discussed in the response to the next questions, the SAF guidance must be updated to reflect changes in the global environment affecting DRG and in USAID's policy priorities.

- The five elements of the SAF conceptual framework should be guideposts—i.e., analytical reference points to be considered in relation to the focus of the research—rather than prescriptive analytical categories.
- The SAF should focus on an analysis of actors and institutions as elaborated on in the purpose statement and core questions (not all democracy and governance actors and institutions).
- Update SAF guidance to reflect changes in the global environment affecting DRG and in USAID's policy priorities.

KEY QUESTION 3: HOW SHOULD THE DRG CHALLENGES HIGHLIGHTED IN THE SAF GUIDANCE BE UPDATED?

The DRG Center is currently in the process of assessing the contemporary global political context, identifying the specific challenges that this context poses for the DRG sector, and articulating and prioritizing appropriate DRG policy and programmatic responses. The SAF RT is not in a position to forecast the outcome of this important exercise and therefore recommends issuing new SAF guidance only after the new DRG policy has been adopted and programming implications fully incorporated. With this caveat in mind, the SAF RT offers the following observations.

Perhaps the most pernicious developments of the past decade-plus from a DRG perspective have been growing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in many countries, which has contributed to the well documented 16-year democracy recession.[11] This has occurred in tandem with the rising influence of several governments, most notably the People's Republic of China and Russia, which—through their rhetoric and actions—have sought to challenge and undermine the liberal, democratic model of governance.

The DRG Center, through the [Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence](#) (ATARI), is developing and piloting a new diagnostic tool for assessing resurgent authoritarian influence in USAID partner countries and working collaboratively with USAID Missions and stakeholders to formulate effective responses. The substantive lessons from this pilot effort should inform whether to incorporate the specific attributes of this tool into the revised SAF guidance or to use the ATARI tool as a stand-alone assessment mechanism. Regardless, as highlighted throughout this report, the revised SAF guidance should clarify for DRG field officers when to use the available tools.

A pertinent question being considered by the DRG policy development team is whether a) the democracy recession has peaked, such that there are now new opportunities for democratic openings in select countries, or b) the underlying factors that contributed to the recession will sustain, and perhaps even exacerbate further, the current cycle of authoritarianism and backsliding. In terms of SAF guidance, the implications of this dialectic suggest the need to restructure the analytic priorities to ensure that emerging issues and new challenges are addressed substantively to the extent warranted by country circumstances. This approach would result in a SAF report whose analysis and recommendations impact the overall USAID portfolio; the SAF report should thus serve an audience beyond the DRG sector.

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[11] Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, [Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule](#). Freedom House 2022.

USAID's current efforts to combat corruption reflect a recognition that corruption is both a DRG issue and a major impediment to USAID achieving its broader development objectives. While the DRG Center has an existing Anti-Corruption Assessment tool, the focus is on developing specific anti-corruption programs.[12] The revised SAF guidance should reference the analytic portion of the tool to ensure that the examination of relevant corruption/state capture issues is reflected in the SAF process. However, the determination of whether anti-corruption is indeed the primary democracy challenge or whether democracy programming should focus on anti-corruption would remain very much core to the underlying prioritization analysis undertaken during the SAF process.

Another development meriting consideration in the revised SAF guidance is the implications of increased digitization across the globe. Authoritarians are using new technologies to further their ambitions, as are governments in backsliding democracies. The potential for digital tools to undermine democracy and entrench authoritarianism, therefore, warrants attention in the SAF guidance, as do the opportunities they may provide in offering constructive pushback. Importantly, given the fluidity of technologies across borders, SAF teams may need, in appropriate circumstances, to expand the aperture of institutions and actors beyond the territorial boundaries of the country being assessed.

The SAF RT recognizes that the inevitable consequence of expanding the SAF to include new challenges could be a longer duration for the expatriate expert(s) to remain in the field, more diffuse recommendations, and lengthier and less readable final reports. Indeed, this often happens with the current guidance. **As one KII noted, despite efforts by USAID to convey the message to SAF teams that "it is not necessary to assess all [DRG] aspects—it would still happen, which resulted in unwieldy reports with overwhelming annexes."** Hence, a key proposed change in the SAF guidance is that the initial purpose statement discussion and then the workshop following completion of the desk review would delineate the specific areas of concern warranting field research attention, as well as the key actors that need to be heard. This point is further elaborated in the response to key question 8, which provides guidance on how to incentivize USAID and SAF teams to reduce the scope of the SAF reports to achieve greater focus and to produce more useful findings and applicable recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Draft a purpose statement and conduct a desk study workshop to determine which DRG trends and challenges the team should focus on.
- Restructure the analytic priorities to ensure that emerging issues and new challenges are addressed substantively to the extent warranted by country circumstances. This approach should result in a SAF report whose analysis and recommendations impact the overall USAID portfolio.
- Issue new SAF guidance only after the new DRG policy has been adopted and programming implications fully incorporated.

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[12] DRG Center Technical Assessment, supra note: "The Anti-Corruption Assessment is an integrated framework and set of practical tools to conduct tailored, efficient anti-corruption assessments at a level sufficiently detailed to produce targeted and prioritized recommendations for programming." See also, USAID, Dekleptification Guide: Seizing Windows of Opportunity to Dismantle Kleptocracy, September 2022.

KEY QUESTION 4: DOES THE SAF ADEQUATELY ADDRESS WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING PROPOSED AS REFINED DRG PRIORITIES, SUCH AS INCLUSION AND LOCALIZATION?

The SAF can be—and in many cases, has been—used to analyze inclusion and locally led development. The revised SAF guidance should highlight their new stature in the USAID policy hierarchy. At the same time, a distinction should be drawn between big-picture global challenges, such as ATARI and anti-corruption (addressed in the section above) and localization and inclusion, which speak more to how USAID does business. Moreover, as emphasized in response to Key Question 3 and as elaborated in the response to Key Question 8, to avoid a very long and detailed report, the outcome of the workshop process should specify the areas of inquiry that will be the focus of the SAF.

Turning to inclusion, issues of identity, national representation, and discrimination based on gender or sexual identity are currently addressed as part of the analysis of the five SAF analytic elements. While emphasizing the particular importance of gender-related inclusion considerations, the SAF guidance refers also to other population groups whose concerns should be considered.

Identifying the relevant groups will be different in each country. In some cases, the focus may just be on youth and women (e.g., where demographics are such that youth make up a vast majority of the population or where women are systematically excluded from civic and political participation). In other instances, the lens may expand to groups that have been historically marginalized or subject to human rights abuses, including LGBTQ communities and ethnic, religious, and indigenous groups organized outside the formal structures of civil society or political parties.

Articulating issues related to inclusion in a SAF is a challenge that should not be underestimated. First, there is the task of determining which groups need to be included in the SAF team's research and fieldwork and who best represents the identified groups. Second, the SAF guidance, while referencing a wide range of potentially marginalized groups, particularly emphasizes the importance of identifying "key gender issues that relate to the identified DRG challenge(s) and integrating attention to gender dynamics and inequalities throughout its analysis and recommendations." Third, as the SAF guidance warns, "as with many groups, inclusion of women may be limited to elites; while this may represent progress on women's participation, it also points to other questions of inclusion based on socioeconomic status or other factors." Fourth, the overall understanding of the role of gender and inclusion in the political system in a country is often not fully explored in a SAF, leading to stand-alone or poorly integrated gender and inclusion activities that support the needs of specific groups but can unintentionally balkanize efforts and weaken the overall intended outcome.

The 2014 SAF guidance sought to broaden the SAF's analysis of the challenges and opportunities for greater integration of marginalized groups in national democratic processes. In practice, gender, equality, and social inclusion are often de-emphasized as the SAF is designed to provide an overview of the status of national democratic institutions. If the perception exists that women, indigenous, and other defined groups do not actively participate in some form of democratic process or are too disempowered, the SAF's assessment of this aspect can be quite rudimentary.

Given that USAID's DRG budget in many countries is relatively small, these inefficiencies can lead to missed opportunities to integrate gender and inclusion work into programming. Moreover, the drive to include women and other vulnerable groups in DRG programs is too often reduced to inviting representatives to participate in activities and then disaggregating participant data to show the numbers

attending by groups. Ultimately, the parameters of inclusion are specific to the country context and require definition and discussion in terms of who is excluded or restricted from participation prior to undertaking the SAF process.

The analysis of "inclusion" as one of the five elements and the mandated gender analysis process have largely been separate processes, leading to inefficiencies and gaps in understanding and programming. Per USAID policy, the five dimensions of gender analysis are:[13]

- Laws, policies, regulations, and institutional practices that influence the context in which men and women act and make decisions.
- Cultural norms and beliefs.
- Gender roles, responsibilities, and time use.
- Access to and control over assets and resources.
- Patterns of power and decision-making.

Aligning the above categories of gender analysis with the SAF's inclusion analysis process may be a productive way to harmonize assessments. The SAF framework should also be open to consideration of who faces challenges that restrict and disempower in the country context. SAF teams can widen the lens of the five dimensions of gender analysis to look at who is marginalized and excluded from the political and civic engagement process in a country. This may largely be women, but it may also include others.

The SAF RT further recommends that the revised SAF guidance should emphasize a holistic examination of the particular needs and capabilities of, and government responsiveness to, the most politically marginalized groups within a country. This may require, given limited time and resources, triaging among the groups included in the SAF team's analysis. At the same time, the team should acknowledge the limited scope of the analysis and either seek to extrapolate to those who were not directly engaged or recommend that a broader inclusion analytic exercise be undertaken as an immediate follow-up to the SAF team's inquiries.

Related to the inclusion issue is the Agency's renewed emphasis on locally led development. The three key objectives, as outlined by Administrator Power in her November 2021 Georgetown University speech, are:

First, we have to broaden our coalition to allow people from more diverse backgrounds and partners of all kinds to participate in our mission. We must make aid more accessible. Second, we must shift our thinking to be more focused on the voices and needs of the most marginalized. We must make aid more equitable. And third, in confronting some of the biggest challenges of our time—COVID-19, climate change, growing authoritarianism—we must listen to what our partners in the countries where we work are asking of us. We must make aid more responsive.[14]

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[13] USAID ADS 205, Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID's Program Cycle.
[14] Administrator Samantha Power on a New Vision For Global Development.

The initiative has received a groundswell of support among USAID staff, IPs, and key members of Congress, although definitional details remain in flux.[15]

In the context of the SAF guidance, the initiative raises several obvious questions. First, do the leading roles played by non-host country nationals in the SAF process (given that the team lead and country expert are usually expatriates) contribute to the perception that the analysis reflects external biases (i.e., the "white gaze" syndrome)? The alternative would task local actors (e.g., national think tankers and academics) with taking the lead in conducting the SAF. However, local experts, who are often drawn from the country's elite, undoubtedly also have biases that need to be taken into consideration.

Second, does the SAF's approach, as currently implemented, ensure that a broad spectrum of local voices is informing DRG programming decisions, or does the SAF (as noted in the inclusion discussion) inevitably rely on the well-connected usual suspects? Third, as a practical matter, what is the basis for the SAF team determining whose voices among the cacophony that often exists within a country should shape programming? Finally, and particularly relevant to the DRG sector, what role should the national government, particularly when it has been democratically elected, play in influencing USAID's DRG investments? This issue is particularly sensitive given that the government's priorities may not coincide with the priorities articulated by USAID or the resources allocated by Congress.

While these issues will require ongoing reflection by USAID policymakers in Washington, the revised SAF guidance should encourage SAF sponsors to urge the SAF team to think creatively in addressing these dilemmas. A one-size-fits-all approach will stifle innovative responses to the challenges posed by Administrator Power and will belie the commitment to support and protect USAID officers who are willing to take risks, even if the outcome proves less than ideal. Moreover, as described below, a key principle of the revised SAF guidance incorporates iteration both during the preparation of the initial SAF product and beyond, which should shift the balance away from the external experts retained to conduct the SAF and to local actors who are attuned to a country's political dynamics on a daily basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Widen the inclusion lens to reflect the five dimensions of gender analysis (from ADS 205) to look at who is marginalized and excluded from the political and civic engagement process in a country. This may largely be women, but it may also include others.
- Emphasize a holistic examination of the particular needs and capabilities of, and government responsiveness to, the most politically marginalized groups within a country. This may require, given limited time and resources, triaging among the groups included in the SAF team's analysis.
- Acknowledge the limited scope of the analysis and either seek to extrapolate to those who were not directly engaged or recommend that a broader inclusion analytic exercise be undertaken as an immediate follow-up to the SAF team's inquiries.

KEY QUESTION 5: TO WHAT EXTENT IS USAID'S PEA TOOL REFLECTED IN THE CURRENT SAF GUIDANCE?

From its inception in 2000 and update in 2010, the SAF guidance has required an assessment of institutions and actors to help understand the political context in which USAID is working and the feasibility of

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[15] Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, It's Time to Release & Implement the Plan on Locally Led Development, July 2022.

promoting certain aspects of democratic governance.[16] However, the 2014 SAF guidance explicitly introduced the term "political economy analysis" into Step 2: "Analysis of Key Actors and Institutions, (Political Economy Analysis)." The title reflects a view that a PEA is similar to or the same as a stakeholder analysis with a DRG focus and that the analysis should illuminate the extent to which there are institutional arenas in which identified actors are amenable to reform. The 2014 SAF Guidance states that:

> *Because the [SAF] framework is a political economy analysis (PEA) of the DRG sector, it will naturally investigate non-DRG sectors, including their actors, stakeholders, institutions, systems, rules, and dynamics, to determine the extent to which they affect the key DRG challenge(s) in a country. Further, to improve the Missions' understanding of how to design programs to promote change, the framework aims to explain how and why resistance to governance and human rights reform persists. The framework is a tool specifically tailored to the DRG sector; it is not intended to be used to conduct political economy analyses of other sectors, nor is it intended to serve as a framework for conducting country-level PEAs.*

In 2015, USAID issued draft guidance on applied PEA guidelines, which was then revised in 2018 to emphasize TWP and the importance of iterative/everyday PEA.[17] The revised TWP/PEA guidance infers the use of stakeholder analysis but has a different purpose and approach than the SAF's guidance. In particular, the PEA uses a more focused set of core questions to animate the research linked to a specific purpose. The objectives are to inculcate a mindset of contextual awareness and continuous learning for USAID and partners and to encourage iteration and programmatic risk-taking.

A national- or country-level PEA of the DRG sector and the SAF have similar objectives. Like the SAF, a national-level PEA seeks to identify the main challenges and opportunities for reform of the political system. The SAF offers a wider lens covering a broader context, examining more actors and institutions, considering USAID interests, and drafting a development hypothesis based on normative assumptions of a functioning democracy. The PEA, on the other hand, presents a more agnostic approach to understanding why the system operates as it does and then asks what local actors are doing to promote DRG; it then operationalizes the analysis to ask what opportunities exist to support local DRG reformers.

The revised SAF will demonstrate how USAID's investments in other sectors (health, agricultural, education) affect a country's democracy. For example, if USAID's support for health and education systems relieves an authoritarian-leaning government from its responsibility for domestic resource mobilization (tax reform) to pay for these services, the ability of civil society and citizens to hold their government accountable is arguably reduced. Conversely, if the SAF process concludes that USAID's non-DRG sector programming is contributing to a healthy, educated, and more wealthy populace that is empowered to participate in their nation's democracy, USAID will be better able to know where and how to invest its resources to have the maximum influence.

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[16] See USAID, Conducting A DG Assessment: A Framework for Strategy Development, November 2000. See also USAID, Conducting a Democracy and Governance Assessment: A Framework for Strategy Development, February 2010.
[17] https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/PEA2018.pdf

- Promote an understanding of the differences in orientation between a SAF and PEA among DRG officers.
- Encourage the use of the SAF to inform the broader USAID portfolio beyond the DRG sector.

KEY QUESTION 6: HOW SHOULD THE SAF GUIDANCE CHANGE TO BE MORE ALIGNED WITH THE USAID PEA TOOL AND PEA EMERGING BEST PRACTICES?

To align the revised SAF guidance with USAID's applied TWP/PEA tool and emerging best practices, the SAF process and methodology should encourage a focus on why a country is governed as it is. Therefore, the questions that animate the DRG assessment should be more of a curious nature than judgmental, and more agnostic than normative. Also, decisions on who to interview should place more emphasis on the "unusual suspects" and marginalized persons (as mentioned above) than the traditional DRG actors and institutions.

Given the time and resources required to produce and socialize SAF findings and recommendations, a narrowing of focus and more frequent iteration aligns with emerging TWP/PEA best practices. Using the five elements of the SAF and the PEA's analytical elements as guideposts to structure a set of core knowledge and operational questions would effectively meld the DRG SAF and the national-level PEA as a single guidance.

The revised steps in the research process, which are detailed below, suggest that the SAF guidance be streamlined to achieve actionable analysis for decision-makers in a reduced time period, then iterated as necessary. The SAF, like the baseline PEA, is one step in the iterative process of analyzing and interpreting the evolving local political context and how it is likely to affect USAID's development objectives in DRG and more broadly in other sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus core SAF questions on "why" questions to incorporate the TWP/PEA approach and mindset.
- Place more emphasis on the "unusual suspects" and marginalized persons than on the traditional DRG actors and institutions in decisions on who to interview.
- Streamline/focus the SAF guidance to achieve actionable analysis for decision-makers in a reduced time period and then iterate it as necessary.

KEY QUESTION 7: WHICH CIRCUMSTANCES/INFORMATION NEEDS ARE BEST SUITED FOR A DRG SAF VERSUS A PEA?

The DRG Center is aware of the need for clarity between the PEA, the SAF, and other DRG assessment tools. As mentioned in the responses to the questions above, the DRG Center produced a comprehensive DRG Technical Assessment guide to clarify the similarities and distinctions of 12 assessment tools available to Missions. In addition, the DRG Center developed a matrix to facilitate comparisons among assessment tools. However, neither of these documents appear to have been effectively disseminated within USAID despite multiple messages and inclusion in training programs. Regardless, they now need to be updated to reflect policy changes, new priorities, lessons learned, and best practices.

Regarding when to use the PEA, the DRG Technical Assessment guidance recommends "after major changes at the country, sector, or problem level (e.g., the end of a war, election of a new leader, appointment of a new minister, or enactment of a new law)" and suggests that it is good practice to redo or update the PEA findings repeatedly if the context is changing. Similarly, the Technical Assessment guidance suggests that SAF is most often used "when a political or other strategic opportunity arises to design a new DRG strategy or reorient a DRG assistance portfolio; for example, after a political crisis or breakthrough, at the start of developing a new CDCS, or at the outset of a new country program."

The RT concludes that the revised SAF guidance should clarify that the SAF now more fully embraces a TWP/PEA approach and is the appropriate tool to assess the DRG sector, contribute to a CDCS, and use when there is a political or strategic opportunity, such as the end of conflict or election of a reformist leader.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Revise SAF guidance to incorporate select PEA elements, processes, and approaches so the DRG SAF and the national-level PEA are essentially equivalent assessment tools.
- Update the DRG Technical Assessment matrix to reflect policy changes, new priorities, lessons learned, and best practices.

KEY QUESTION 8: WHICH SECTORS/SUB-SECTORS/THEMATIC AREAS/TOOLS ARE BEST SUITED FOR COMBINED SAF OR SAF+ APPROACHES?

The SAF RT recognizes the challenge facing DRG field officers in deciding which assessment tool is most appropriate to their country's circumstances. Without undertaking a detailed review of each of the DRG sub-sector assessment tools, the SAF RT offers the following observations. A clear distinction should be drawn between assessment tools that assist the DRG team in prioritizing among different program areas and those that seek to design programs for an already agreed-upon DRG sub-sector.

The SAF, which already incorporates a PEA component (stakeholder analysis), clearly falls into the first category, even if the product often will address specific challenges posed by working in the prioritized sub-sector. On the other hand, if the Mission already knows the particular sub-sectors where it will be programming, then a SAF is unnecessary and a sub-sector assessment, which incorporates a PEA lens, would be the more appropriate tool to use. Commissioning a SAF either because the money is available or because there is an assumption that one is always necessary results in a waste of time and resources, even where the underlying SAF analysis is quite solid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote an understanding of the broad array of DRG assessment tools.
- Provide guidance on when to use a SAF versus a sub-sector assessment.

KEY QUESTION 9: ARE THERE CHANGES TO THE PURPOSE, TIMING, AND METHODOLOGY THAT COULD MAKE THE SAF MORE USEFUL FOR MISSIONS?

Prior to launching a DRG assessment, USAID/Washington and Mission staff should come to a consensus and a mutual understanding about the purpose, timing, funding, and research process for guiding the DRG

assessment team's efforts. The SAF RT acknowledges that some SAF teams already practice many of the recommended changes with the blessing of USAID. In a sense, the proposed new guidance reflects an attempt to recognize those best practices and share them with the wider communities of practitioners.

The recommended changes to the purpose, timing, and methodology are as follows.

PURPOSE

Several KIIs mentioned that insufficient time is given to defining the purpose of conducting a DRG assessment. The Guidance for Missions (2019) details the content and processes necessary to produce a SAF work plan. The guidance further instructs Missions to clearly convey if there are particular areas of analysis that the assessment team should consider and what type of product they want, given the unique circumstances on the ground.

Because there are often competing interests advocating for the conduct of a SAF and limited time and budget, the RT recommends that a clear and concise **purpose statement** be included at the beginning of the planning for the SAF.[18] The Mission and DRG Washington should draft and agree upon the purpose statement. The RT further recommends ensuring that sufficient time is dedicated to developing a purpose statement, as this will determine USAID's level of investment. Defining the SAF's purpose prior to deployment improves the focus of the research, directs the necessary skill set of the assessment team members, and allows for flexibility and iteration. The resources, team composition, and time available must match the purpose of the research.

TIMING, FUNDING, AND STAFFING

The SAF is normally commissioned as part of CDCS preparation following a "critical" event in the country or when the DRG team is contemplating major reorientation of the program. USAID stakeholders interviewed for this research agreed that the SAF took place at the appropriate time; however, there were concerns that the process of carrying out an assessment took too long to complete.

Most SAFs have required four to eight months to conclude. Based on the SAF RT's research, a SAF research process can be completed in a shorter timeframe by focusing the assessment on DRG elements and actors/institutions that are most pressing and that have the greatest potential for impact. This "rapid" or "focused" SAF should have a concise scope of work and an ideal timeframe of 10–14 weeks from the start to the presentation of the draft deliverable (be it a standard report or other form of knowledge-sharing), reflecting both the needs of the consumers and the emphasis on iteration.

To ensure that the DRG assessment will be effectively used, Missions should have serious "skin in the game," either through co-financing[19] or through active participation in the process. The resources available should be dependent on the purpose of the research, population, physical size, and societal complexity. Additional funds should be set aside to permit periodic updates to the findings and recommendations.

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[18] Because the SAF RT was not privy to any of the SAF report's work plan documents, the team does not know if this is already in place.

[19] The SAF RT did not examine how many of the SAFs were in effect co-financed, how many relied on the Mission person-power to count as their cost share, and how many simply ignored the requirement and relied exclusively on USAID funding.

This can be done both remotely via virtual KIIs and through in-person interviews and iterative workshops between available team members and the Mission DRG staff.

Determining team composition is dependent on the purpose, budget, and time available. While it is still important to have international team members, recruitment of experts from local think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and other organizations should be built into the procurement process.

METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH PROCESS

The current SAF guidance establishes a four-step process consisting of 1) defining the DRG challenges through analysis of five elements: consensus, inclusion, competition and political accountability, ROL and human rights, and government responsiveness and effectiveness; 2) analyzing the key actors and institutions through a political economy lens; 3) considering USAID's operational and programmatic environment, and 4) outlining the proposed DRG strategy.

Although now denominated as a five-step process, the revised approach is less prescriptive regarding the precise DRG elements, actors, and institutions to be assessed, and more prescriptive regarding the actual research activities necessary to produce an assessment that is fit for the purpose. **The revised SAF will be reframed to include more flexibility in undertaking analysis, more concise final reports with greater reliance on data visualization, less of an academic overlay, and more iteration both during preparation and after completion.**

REVISED FIVE STEPS

STEP 1—DESK STUDY: Once USAID/Washington, the Mission DRG office, and members of the SAF team and USAID have drafted and agreed upon the purpose statement, the focus of the desk study should be clear. The team should reference pre-existing data sets—such as USAID's DRG Data Portraits,[20] opinion surveys, academic and professional studies, and media reports (especially those written by local experts)—to the extent that they are pertinent to the core questions that focus the desk study. The purpose of extending the time period for the literature review and limiting the length of the desk report is to give the SAF team sufficient time to assess the available literature, incentivize focusing on the most salient DRG issues, and enhance readership prior to Step 2—Desk Study Findings Workshop.

RECOMMENDATION

The SAF team produces a concise (up to 10 pages) analysis of key DRG trends in the country based on a desk review of existing literature and data sources.

   a. For this step, the assessment team includes an expat DRG country expert and local DRG experts (can be USAID Foreign Service Nationals or others).
   b. The assessment team is granted discretion to determine the framework for analysis, but at a minimum it should include DRG trends in the country and significant DRG barriers and opportunities identified by local DRG reformers. The desk review report should include a preliminary set of core questions to be considered at the workshop (to reflect the lessons learned from the implementation of PEAs). The SAF's five elements and the TWP/PEA analytical elements should be used as guideposts, but not necessarily as a prescriptive outline for the analysis.
   c. The assessment team should rely more on pre-existing data sets, including previous SAFs, USAID Data Portraits, and, where available, locally generated analysis through local think tanks, civil society organizations, and universities.
   d. The assessment team should have up to three weeks for Step 1 from the start of the contract.

STEP 2—DESK STUDY FINDINGS WORKSHOP: The purpose of conducting a post-desk study workshop is for USAID staff to engage with the SAF team's findings. This newly introduced step is crucial to sharpening the focus and driving the research process going forward. Step 2 will provide a venue to discuss and debate the findings of the desk study; draft the interview question guide; populate the interview list of likely key informants; and determine the type, frequency, and composition of focus group discussions (FGDs). If necessary, the purpose statement can be modified after the completion of the workshop.

Active USAID Mission participation is imperative to introduce the USG's interests and willingness to take risks regarding the promotion of particular democratic reforms. This workshop will also discuss the extent to which the SAF will be useful in the development of programs in sectors other than DRG, gauge the Embassy's level of interest in the report, and identify the audiences that the report will be shared with to determine the breadth of dissemination and the potential for limiting distribution to political sensitivities.

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[20] https://idea.usaid.gov/drg

More generally, USAID staff will contribute to each of the deliverables (design of the literature review, focus of the SAF, and review of the research instruments) and determine in which interviews they will participate during the field research. Also determined at this workshop is the interview protocol, note-taking format, process notes, post-interview summaries (with software utilized as appropriate), types of data visualization, and any other innovations such as the use of video and podcasts. The culmination of this step is a field research work plan to take place during step 3.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings from the desk study, the SAF team facilitates a workshop with USAID to identify key areas of potential DRG focus, which also take into consideration USG interests and USAID resources.

    a. This recommended change reflects a shift of step 3 in SAF guidance to now form an integral part of step 2 in the Revised DRG Assessment Framework. This will facilitate a more focused field analysis based on USG's interests and capacities.

    b. Involvement of the USAID Mission from the outset ensures that the Mission has "skin in the game" and is providing a sense of realism to the subsequent field work. USAID staff will also be encouraged to commit to participating in the field research. Discussion and debate about the implications of USAID staff participation in field research is also encouraged.

    c. The workshop may require several days (not necessarily full days) to conduct; the assumption is that, drawing on experience gained during the pandemic, the workshop will be conducted virtually, although it may be done in person in some cases.

    d. This step culminates in a precise work plan for the field research and related tasks necessary for completing the assessment.

STEP 3—FIELD RESEARCH: This step serves to triangulate the findings from the desk review and the workshop to deepen the analysis. Both virtual and in-person interviews and FGDs take place during this step. The SAF team will decide on who should, and how best to, conduct KIIs and FGDs. This process should be carried out similarly to the way SAF field research is typically done.

Depending on the number of researchers and the timing of interviews, the ability of the research team to review, edit, compare, and contrast the notes to detect emerging trends and positive deviations will vary. An assessment team member who is not involved in the interview process should serve as the repository of the primary data and run the findings through qualitative research software to manage the data as it is collected. This team member can be in the field or based remotely. This process will include data cleaning, aggregation, and preliminary analysis that helps to expedite preparation for the Final Synthesis Workshop.

> The field research methodology consists of KIIs and FGDs designed to validate desk study work and to engage with individuals whose perspective is not necessarily likely to be found in the desk study materials. The DRG assessment team conducts the KIIs and FGDs with select actors and institutions to test and deepen the findings of the desk study and to examine prospects for USAID having an impact with interventions in identified areas.
>
> a. More targeted KIIs (while respecting the need to ensure the inclusion of diverse and often marginalized voices).
> b. Assumes 2–4 weeks of field work depending on the complexity of the country and issues to be addressed as defined by the desk study and subsequent workshop.
> c. Field research teams can be expanded to hire shorter-term specialized experts to conduct a select number of KIIs or FGDs in their areas of expertise. The team leader can decide if these specialized experts are required to participate in the final synthesis workshop.
> d. One person is assigned to collect and analyze data as it becomes available from researchers.

STEP 4—SYNTHESIS WORKSHOP: The rationale for adding a second workshop at the end of the field research phase is to provide the researchers sufficient time to discuss and debate the findings and for USAID staff to have a sense of ownership of the product. The workshop coordinator should ensure that each participant has a role and responsibility to collaborate in the workshop.

RECOMMENDATION

> After completion of the field research, the assessment team facilitates collaborative brainstorming sessions with USAID/Washington and Mission staff.
>
> a. The goal is to achieve consensus on the findings, DRG challenge(s), theories of change, and the specific programmatic recommendations.
> b. This step will require up to one week (one to two days of preparation, a one- to two-day workshop, one to two days to capture results).
> c. The recommendations should include a plan for dissemination of findings and recommendations. This will involve determination of whether the report should be labeled SBU and, if so, whether the team should also prepare a public version of the report. The team should balance the importance of producing candid analysis that is distributed only within select USG circles against broad distribution as a sign of USAID's core value of full transparency and an opportunity to provide feedback to those who shared their perspectives with the team.

STEP 5—FINAL REPORTING: The form and substance of the final deliverables should be agreed upon during the Desk Study Workshop. Reports that use data visualization, annexes, video clips, PowerPoint presentations, stakeholder power maps, etc. will significantly advance the objectives of the SAF and will reduce the likelihood that the report will simply sit on the shelf. Most important, deliverables should be presented in a form that can be easily updated. This is essential because the revised SAF emphasizes the importance of iterating the contextual analysis to ensure USAID has reliable up-to-date

information on how the political economy drivers are influencing USAID DRG and other sector investments in a country.

RECOMMENDATION

The SAF team produces a short final report (20 pages or fewer) that incorporates revised country analysis (reflecting in-country KIIs) and outlines a plan for periodic follow-on reviews of key assumptions articulated in the report. Iterative updates reflect the implicit acknowledgement that the DRG assessment may need to be refined or revised based on changes in the political environment. Assumes two weeks for completion of a draft report.

  a. Readability with a shorter product—more focus on answering questions that the Mission is asking and less on providing comprehensive prospective five-year analyses of DRG trends (does not have to incorporate analyses of all institutions and actors).
  b. Less jargon and more graphics—use accessible language to describe the complex phenomena and rely on visualization to show data where possible. The five elements provide an "academic" veneer but detract from accessibility to ensure broader dissemination of SAF to all relevant audiences through debriefs and roundtables and incentivizing effective socialization.

TABLE 1: CURRENT STEPS VERSUS PROPOSED REVISED STEPS OF THE SAF

STEPS	CURRENT SAF	REVISED SAF	MAIN DIFFERENCES
Step 1	Use literature review/desk study (and often field research) to identify the DRG landscape and core DRG challenge(s). It then focuses the analysis on five key elements of the political system that have been judged to have the greatest impact on achieving DRG goals.	Use literature review/desk study to identify the DRG trends and viable areas to support local reformers' efforts to promote or deepen DRG. Use the five SAF TWP/PEA elements as guideposts as needed.	Introduction of a written "purpose statement" and more level of effort expended on desk study in the revised SAF.
Step 2	Begin field research work. Stakeholder analysis is conducted with a PEA lens of a range of DRG key actors and institutions to identify the proponents and opponents of specific reforms, along with the resources they can mobilize. This is necessary to construct an optimal DRG strategy. The specific context and DRG landscape/challenge(s) in the country should direct the analysis to focus on the actors and institutions most central to opportunities for reform.	Conduct a Desk Study Workshop to analyze findings, get USAID to share their manageable interests, and obtain buy-in on the precise focus of research; begin planning the field research process culminating in a work plan.	Revised SAF introduces a post-desk study workshop that encourages greater USAID buy-in early on in the processes. Plus, the workshop serves to solidify the field research phase. If necessary, the purpose statement can be modified after the completion of the workshop.
Step 3	Steps 1 and 2 point to an ideal strategy from an analytical standpoint, but not necessarily from a practical one. The USG and USAID also have interests, face institutional constraints, and have to make resource tradeoffs. This step considers USAID/Embassy interests.	Commence field research. This step serves to triangulate the findings from the desk review and outcomes of the workshop to deepen the analysis. Both virtual and in-person interviews and FGDs take place during this step. Emphasis is given to "unusual suspects" and marginalized groups.	Step 3 of the current SAF is collapsed into Step 2 of the revised SAF. Step 3 begins the field research process; in the revised SAF, field research presumably begins later than it begins in the current SAF.
Step 4	Based on that analysis, assessment teams should consider reordering or revising the challenges and priorities. The information gathered in Steps 1–3 should enable the assessment team to recommend a strategy and programming options to address the major DRG challenge(s) most effectively, including any gender inequalities that contribute to the challenge(s). The assessment team should also have a clear idea of the expected results given certain assumptions and contingencies.	After completion of the field research, the assessment team and USAID collaborate in a second workshop to discuss and debate the findings and craft the recommendations. Develop a plan for the dissemination of findings and recommendations. This will involve a determination of whether the report should be labeled SBU and, if so, whether a public version of the report should also be prepared.	Introduces a second workshop that emphasizes USAID's active involvement in determining a shared understanding of why and how local governance systems function and which investments in DRG objectives are likely to have the most influence on the political system. Depending on findings, one or more DRG objectives and development hypotheses may be developed.

STEPS	CURRENT SAF	REVISED SAF	MAIN DIFFERENCES
Step 5[21]	The report should contain the following information. 1. Summary of Steps 1–3. The assessment team should succinctly summarize the information generated in the first three steps. 2. Develop the DRG objective(s). For the core DRG challenge(s) identified for assistance, the assessment team should develop one or more DRG objectives. 3. The assessment team should articulate the development hypothesis, which explains why and how the proposed interventions, when implemented successfully, will lead to achieving the DRG objective(s). 4. Identify priority sub-sectors. The assessment team should then identify priority sub-sectors that are necessary targets of programming to achieve the DRG objective(s) and provide a sound explanation of why it is important to work in those sub-sectors. 5. Suggest illustrative activities. The assessment team should also suggest illustrative activities in these priority sub-sectors. The assessment team should explain, to the extent possible, how such illustrative activities link back to the development hypothesis, theory of change, and/or potential impact on the problem statement. 6. Conduct scenario-based planning. In countries experiencing instability or undergoing a transition, the proposed strategy and programming may be highly dependent on factors outside of USAID's control. In such cases, some discussion of scenarios or notable contingencies may be helpful. 7. Consider gender. As noted above, the assessment team should address relevant gender gaps and evaluate the impact of gender dynamics on defining the DRG challenge(s) throughout the analytical process. 8. Sequencing (optional). If appropriate and supported by the analysis, the assessment team should note any sequencing related to the recommended programming, such as ensuring the existence of effective legal recourse before encouraging civil society organizations to demand legal sanctions for corrupt officials.	The SAF team produces a short final report (20 pages or fewer) that incorporates the revised country analysis (reflecting in-country KIIs), then plans for periodic follow-on reviews of key assumptions articulated in the report. Iterative updates reflect the implicit acknowledgment that DRG assessment may need to be refined or revised more frequently based on changes in the political environment. The report may include one or more development hypotheses or theories of change. However, depending on its findings, it may prioritize sub-sectors and provide illustrative activities. Scenario planning or sequencing is not likely to be included in the report. An abridged Gender Equity and Social Inclusion analysis will be incorporated into the report.	The deliverables are intended to be available within a shorter period (one to two weeks) after the final synthesis workshop is completed, with more visuals, less jargon, and/or new ways to present complex information.

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[21] The current SAF guidance has four steps. The SAF RT illustrated the final reporting guidelines of the current SAF in the step 5 column to compare and contrast with step 5 of the proposed revisions to the SAF's reporting guidance.

ANNEX 1: GUIDANCE TO MISSIONS

Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Assessment Guidance for Missions

Congratulations on your interest in conducting a Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) assessment. Using a newly revised methodology (see [Conducting a DRG Assessment: A Framework for Strategy Development, revised 2023](#)), DRG assessments help Missions develop strategies that identify key DRG trends in a country and guide resources to the DRG areas in which they will have the greatest impact. By honing in on the key DRG challenges and providing a realistic analysis of stakeholders, opportunities for reform, and resources, DRG assessments increase the effectiveness and sustainability of DRG programs.

Fundamentally, DRG assessments are an important analytical input into the development of a CDCS and can provide the foundation for the DRG components of a Mission's CDCS. DRG assessments incorporate the elements of a national-level PEA, but with a specific emphasis on developing a realistic DRG strategy and prioritizing DRG investments. These assessments are **not** sub-sectoral assessments or program evaluations, nor will they necessarily lead directly and immediately to program design; oftentimes, Missions must follow a DRG assessment with more targeted sub-sectoral assessments. DRG assessments are also not designed to provide a detailed approach to DRG integration or cross-sectoral programming, although they may be structured to inform programming in other sectors.

DRG assessments are most useful when they provide a candid and independent perspective on the DRG challenges, dynamics, and opportunities in a country within a bounded timeframe that meets the needs of those commissioning the analysis. Missions and Embassies will not always agree with the analysis, findings, or recommendations. However, even if Mission personnel participate in the assessment process, the independence and integrity of the analysis should be maintained. By incorporating two iterative workshops as core components of the DRG assessment process, the expectation is that the final product, in terms of both analysis and recommendations, will serve the Mission's needs.

Based on a review of recent experience with the current DRG assessment tool, including feedback from both DRG officers in the field and assessment implementers, the guidance for conducting an assessment has been revised. The new guidance incorporates a methodology that allows for:

- More flexibility in undertaking analysis and examining emerging DRG trends (as opposed to the requirement that five prescriptively described elements be examined for each country).
- Increased reliance on existing data sources such as USAID DRG Data Portraits, relevant political economy studies, and bespoke survey data (rather than assuming the assessment team is starting from scratch).
- Emphasis on the clients' operational needs (as opposed to a jargon-filled academic overlay).

- Incorporation of two workshops to ensure ongoing iteration during and after completion of the assessment process.
- A process that can be completed in 10–14 weeks, which should better reflect the needs of Missions.
- Shorter and more readable final reports with a greater reliance on data visualization.

WHEN TO ASSESS

- At the outset of a new country program.
- At the beginning of a new country CDCS process.
- If there have been significant shifts in the political environment.
- If there have been major changes in U.S. policy.
- If there has been a notable influx or decrease in available resources.

ASSESSMENT MECHANICS AND PROCESSES

- **MECHANISM AND COST:** Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA)/DRG has an existing contract under which DRG assessments can be conducted. DCHA/DRG is able to partially fund DRG assessments but requests that Missions contribute a cost-share of up to half of the cost of the assessment, or up to $120,000. DCHA/DRG will take care of relevant procurement actions and approvals.
- **PURPOSE STATEMENT:** Once the Mission and DCHA/DRG have agreed to conduct a DRG assessment, DCHA/DRG will work with the Mission to prepare a clear and concise purpose statement to focus the research, facilitate the recruitment of assessment team members with the requisite skills, and formalize the desired flexibility and iteration.
- **DESK STUDY:** Following agreement on the purpose statement by all parties, the designated assessment team (see below) will produce a concise desk study (5–10 pages) of key DRG trends and challenges based on a desk review of existing literature and data sources. This will be followed by a workshop, which provides a venue for USAID and IPs to discuss and debate the findings of the desk study. The outcome of the desk study workshop will be a work plan that includes the question guide for projected interviewees and the interview list of likely key informants, which will determine the type, frequency, and composition of FGDs.
- **FIELD RESEARCH:** The workshop is then followed by two to three weeks of fieldwork, where the assessment team conducts KIIs and facilitates FGDs to validate the desk study work and to engage with individuals whose perspectives are not necessarily likely to be found in the desk study materials.
  - **SYNTHESIS WORKSHOP:** A second workshop should take place following the completion of the fieldwork with the objectives of achieving consensus on the findings, DRG trends, theories of change, and the specific programmatic recommendations that USAID (notionally) agrees to adopt.
  - **DELIVERABLE:** The final step is the production of a short final report (20 pages or fewer) that incorporates the revised country analysis (reflecting in-country KIIs) and outlines a plan for periodic follow-on reviews of key assumptions articulated in the report.

- **TEAM STRUCTURE:** In the standard assessment model, teams are comprised of an expatriate senior program development specialist (team leader) and senior political scientist (country expert) as well as one or more local country experts (e.g., from local think tanks, non-governmental

organizations, and other organizations), a local logistician, and other local support staff (e.g., interpreter, translator, additional logistician if needed). Missions will work in tandem with DCHA/DRG and the contractor on team composition according to the standard model or an alternative staffing structure, where appropriate.

Whenever possible, DRG assessments should include the participation of USAID staff—typically one representative from USAID/Washington and one Foreign Service National from the Mission—to support data collection, coordination between the contractor and USAID Mission, and application of the prescribed methodology. USAID staff roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined in the work plan, including full-time participation in the fieldwork, contributions to defined sections of the report, and other provisions. However, to preserve the independent, intellectual integrity of the report, the contractor should retain ultimate authority as to its content.

- ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT MODELS: In addition to the standard assessment model, DCHA/DRG is increasingly exploring alternative approaches and models for fielding DRG assessments. Beyond just obtaining an assessment document, many Missions increasingly view the DRG assessment as an important process to deepen the knowledge of Mission staff or to build consensus across the Mission about the political dynamics in a country. In planning a DRG assessment, Missions should consult with DCHA/DRG to consider the purpose of the assessment beyond the assessment document itself and whether an alternative approach may be appropriate. A sample of alternative assessment models can be found in the document Assessment Approaches and Methods.

DCHA/DRG ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The contracting officer's representative (COR), working closely with the relevant regional coordinator, will be the main point of contact (POC) in the DRG Center on issues related to the development of the purpose statement, scope of work, and team composition. After the team and work plan have been finalized, the regional coordinator in DCHA/DRG is the main POC on the planning, implementation, and follow-up work of a DRG assessment. The regional coordinator, the COR, and, as appropriate, other staff in DCHA/DRG, the Mission, and the assessment team will conduct an initial conference call to discuss the timing of the fieldwork, logistics, the work plan (especially any deviations from the standard DRG assessment methodology and approach), and other special considerations for the country (i.e., sensitivities with meeting certain partners/officials, security issues, Embassy concerns, etc.).

Following completion of the post-desk review workshop, the regional coordinator will set up a second conference call with the Mission prior to the team's departure to finalize the details concerning the assessment, interviews, logistics, etc. This will be an opportunity to ensure that any outstanding questions are answered before the team hits the ground. Following their return from the field, the regional coordinator will often arrange for the team to present its major findings and recommendations to interested parties in Washington, including USAID, the State Department, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense. DCHA/DRG will also distribute the final report to all interested stakeholders within the USG.

MISSION'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

DCHA/DRG has found that the most useful and relevant assessments are generated when there is significant Mission participation and buy-in. While assessments are primarily organized and partially funded by DCHA/DRG and are meant to provide an independent analysis, Missions have an important role to play in ensuring that teams have the right composition, interview the most critical actors, and understand

the strategic and operational environment in which USAID designs and implements its programs. **The Mission is particularly responsible for providing materials and information to the team relevant to USG and USAID interests and available resources.** The Mission also should provide the assessment team with the information and material it needs to develop pragmatic, relevant, and well-informed strategic and programmatic recommendations.

Mission engagement throughout the process is essential for ensuring that the final product is fit for its purpose. Ultimately, the goal is to have an assessment that the Mission *uses* to develop or modify its strategy and DRG programming, which is most often the case when the Mission is involved throughout the assessment process. While it is not always possible for the Mission to dedicate a full-time staff member for the entire duration of the fieldwork, the relevant Mission staff (including those outside the DRG office) should be expected to participate in the workshop organized following the completion of the fieldwork.

In addition, **in requesting a DRG assessment, the Mission is agreeing to undertake the following tasks**. Fulfilling these responsibilities in a timely manner is essential to the success of the assessment.

BEFORE THE TEAM ARRIVES IN THE COUNTRY

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

- Sensitize Mission leadership (and Embassy officials, as appropriate) on what a DRG assessment is and is not. Given the potential sensitivity of the analysis, it is important for Mission, and often Embassy, leadership to understand the assessment methodology, final product to be delivered, timeline for deliverables, and how the assessment will be used.
- Determine whether the final assessment document should be shared outside the USG. It is very important to let the team know up front whether there is a desire to share the document with host government officials, other donors, and/or IPs, as this may affect the inclusion of certain content. Although the expectation should be that a public version of the assessment will be made published, or at least the key findings shared with those the team meets, in very sensitive environments there may be agreement from the outset to designate the final report as SBU to allow for candor during KIIs and FGDs.

USAID PARTICIPATION IN ASSESSMENT TEAM

- In consultation with the COR and regional coordinator, Missions should be involved in recommending the local expert(s) to be on the team and approving the team leader and country expert.
- Identify Mission participation in the assessment and, if possible, designate a full-time member of the assessment team. Mission participation is critical to ensure that the analysis and assessment findings and recommendations are effectively absorbed and applied by the Mission and that the team adequately understands the Mission's needs and perspectives.
- In consultation with the Regional Coordinator, agree upon a USAID/Washington participant, where possible. USAID/Washington, and particularly DCHA/DRG, participation in DRG assessments can be critical in helping to provide quality control over the assessment and to ensure that the analysis and recommendations inform Washington policy and other planning and strategy

processes. Missions may be asked to finance the participation of a USAID/Washington team member.

- Where feasible, Missions should recommend other local team members, including the logistician and translator.

COMMUNICATIONS

- Open the lines of communication with the assessment team at the outset of the process. During an initial conference call (to be arranged by the regional coordinator), the Mission and team should review the work plan and determine who is responsible for setting up interviews and making other logistical arrangements. The Mission's DRG officers, and potentially others, should virtually participate in the post-desk review workshop.
- Participate in a second conference call (to be scheduled by the regional coordinator) with the assessment team prior to their departure. This will be an opportunity to answer any outstanding questions about the assessment, interview list and protocols, logistics, etc. before the team hits the ground.

DOCUMENTS

- Provide the team with core Mission documents (including the Mission Strategic and Resource Plan, CDCS, program fact sheets or summaries, completed sub-sectoral assessments, completed sub-sectoral or programmatic evaluations, and budget summary) prior to or immediately following the kickoff call. This is typically done through a Google Drive set up for this purpose and contractor representatives are provided with access to the Drive.
- Recommend other key documents for the team to review, such as external reports, news articles, constitutional/legal documents, other donor analyses, etc.

APPOINTMENTS

- Provide the team with a list of interviewees not identified during the desk study workshop.
- Set up appointments with Mission personnel and Embassy officials; in addition to the documents provided above, these consultations should provide the team with the necessary information for step 3 of the assessment.
- Write or revise contractor-developed introduction letters and/or set up appointments with host government officials.
- Schedule other appointments, as determined between the assessment team and Mission. If USAID is primarily responsible for setting up interviews, the Mission will need to appoint a dedicated staff member to provide logistical support to the team.

- Typically, when the team arrives in the country, the Mission will conduct an in-brief to finalize logistical issues, such as meetings with government counterparts, and will arrange an in-brief with the Embassy as well.
- Designate a POC at the Mission to maintain regular contact with the team throughout their time in the country (may be different from the POC responsible for logistical support).
- Encourage broader Mission participation, as appropriate. For example, the team may want to meet with other technical offices to explore potential synergies with proposed DRG approaches or programs. Ensure that the full-time Mission team member is freed from normal work responsibilities in order to fully participate as a member of the team.
- Accompany the team on important interviews; for example, with ministry officials (note: Mission personnel and the assessment team leader should jointly determine whether USG participation in certain interviews will encourage or deter frank dialogue).
- Organize the in-country portion of the workshop-conducted post-fieldwork and debriefs with the USAID Mission and Embassy (note: at this point, teams will not have completed their analysis or thoroughly developed their strategic or programmatic recommendations).

FOLLOWING THE ASSESSMENT

- Review the draft and provide comments in a timely manner. Within one week of departing, the team will produce a first draft of the assessment for the Mission's review. The Mission needs to give concrete feedback and substantive edits on this document within five days. **Comments should be reasonable, substantive, and limited to what is required.** Assessment teams should not be asked to address issues and provide analyses that are superfluous to the main DRG problem(s) identified. If there are questions, the regional or deputy regional coordinator and task order COR will make the final determination about comments to be accepted or rejected. The team will then address the Mission's comments and finalize the document within one week after receiving the feedback. The team will also produce an executive summary to accompany the DRG assessment; this piece will also be vetted and approved by the Mission (note: the exact timeline may vary from team to team; deadlines should be clearly stated in the work plan. If commenting on a Google Docs version of the report, it is likely that some formatting fidelity has been lost in the conversion process—e.g., page numbers, table appearance, heading fonts).
- Approve the final document in a timely manner (note: approval does not require that the Mission *agree* with all points of the analysis or the recommendations; after all, this is an independent assessment. Approval signifies that the team has met the terms of the task order statement of work and work plan and made *reasonable* efforts to address the Mission's comments and feedback).
- Provide feedback to DCHA/DRG on the quality of the team members and product. This input is very important for future assessments and ongoing monitoring of the contract.