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Strengthening Democratic Resilience (SDR) Assessment Tool Guide

Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence (ATARI)

March 2024

Contract No. 7200AA19D00006 / 7200AA20F00019

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Acronyms

ASIV	Analytical Services IV
ATARI	Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DPI	Development Professionals, Inc.
DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
GTC	Governing the Commons
KI	Key Informant
MCI	Making Cents International
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
RAI	Resurgent Authoritarian Influence
SAF	Strategic Assessment Framework
SDR	Strengthening Democratic Resilience
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy Institute

Background

In an increasingly more contested international environment, geopolitical competitors actively project an alternative model of development and target vulnerable democracies. Although there are many domestic political factors driving shifts towards authoritarianism within a given country, the principal argument behind “**strengthening democratic resilience**” (SDR) is that democracies must take active steps to develop more robust defenses against threats by external actors, both state and non-state.

External actors’ efforts to influence partner countries can damage country sovereignty, increase vulnerability to corruption, create economic dependence, enhance social and political cleavages, and spread autocratic practices. While USAID and like-minded international donors offer strategic partnerships with select countries, geopolitical competitors may assertively lead countries down a path of strategic dependence, in which short-term investment decisions may contradict the long-term public interest. As such, these efforts also undermine partner country progress to become self-reliant and capable of leading their own development journeys towards self-reliance, which is a key objective of USAID’s mission. As these geopolitical actors increase their global footprints, democratic institutions and principles are being sharply contested. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, 2023 was the year in which “[m]ore than 35 years of global advances in democracy have been wiped out” as autocracies have outpaced democracies during the last decade.¹

USAID’s Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Bureau collaborated with select interagency partners to develop a “resurgent authoritarian influence” (RAI) framework over the last five years to guide DRG strategies, resource allocation, and programming design; this terminology has subsequently shifted to “strengthening democratic resilience” to better reflect the goals of strategic and programmatic responses. In addition, the DRG Bureau has made several recent investments to better understand the phenomenon of democratic backsliding and has active projects seeking to understand and measure threats to democratic spaces within partner countries. The development and piloting of this **SDR Assessment Tool** is one such investment, under the Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence (ATARI) Task Order of the Analytical Services IV (ASIV) IDIQ.²

Orientation to the SDR Assessment Tool

Through the RAI framework, the DRG Bureau has recognized the need for tools to measure and develop responses to the efforts of external state and non-state authoritarian actors. The SDR Assessment Tool assesses external influences in partner countries and works collaboratively with interested Missions and select stakeholders to develop effective strategic and programmatic responses. The tool diagnoses a country’s vulnerability to actions undermining democratic resilience, focusing both on the actual and potential actions of external actors with interests threatening democratic resilience.

¹ Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023. University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, page 9.

² This Tool Guide was developed by ATARI Task Order Manager and Technical Lead Dr. Andrew Green, with technical consultants Dr. Kristie Evenson and John Lis.

External actions within a country stem from multiple, sometimes simultaneous and synergistic, sources: internal political dynamics, authoritarian learning, and malign actors. As noted by V-Dem researchers in 2019,³ the third wave of autocratization mainly affects democracies and largely takes the form of democratic erosion: ruling actors legally acquire power and then hollow out democratic institutions and processes. This activity found that these moves to erode democracy are driven by internal political needs and often given direction by authoritarian learning, but they could also be triggered or bolstered by external state or non-state actors.

The focus of the SDR Assessment Tool is the behavior of external actors as they work to undermine democracies for geopolitical or economic gain by fomenting disunity, generating uncertainty, and destabilizing existing political, social, and economic relations. The tool also examines some aspects of authoritarian learning that contribute to problems within a democratic system; for example, the regional diffusion of laws to limit civil society organization (CSO) financing or the adoption of social media censorship tools and information manipulation.

The SDR Assessment Tool shares a common analytical perspective with many of the DRG Bureau's other assessment tools: the DRG Strategic Assessment Framework (SAF) or Political Economy Analysis (PEA), both of which examine the political economy of how behavior is shaped by formal and informal rules, processes, and institutions. **Where it differs from other assessment tools is the focus on external actor behavior and how that intersects with a country's actual and potential weaknesses to undermine democratic development.**

The SDR Assessment Tool first seeks to develop an understanding of the country's political and economic context, then analyzes the ways in which external actors undermine or could undermine the current political economy, and finally recommends a series of strategic and programmatic responses. An SDR Assessment is not intended to be a DRG Assessment, though a solid understanding of the economic context and democratic institutions and processes is necessary. Due to sensitivities around this analysis and the need to prioritize "do no harm" principles, those opting to conduct an SDR assessment may determine that the resulting SDR Analytical Report should be non-public.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COOPERATIVE POLITIES

The SDR Assessment Tool is built on an approach that provides conceptual guidance for relationships between key elements and connects real-world actions with potential strategic and programmatic responses: the Governing the Commons (GTC) framework, which was developed over three decades by Dr. Elinor Ostrom and colleagues.⁴ GTC is a response to the "tragedy of the commons" problem that views public goods as subject to overconsumption and despoilment by individuals pursuing their self-interest. What Ostrom and her colleagues saw in natural resource management, however, was individuals cooperating collectively to manage common-pool resources through jointly determined institutions and behavior mechanisms, and they realized that understanding the dynamism of this cooperative governance requires identifying the mechanisms that generate the rules and principles. GTC is transferable to

³ Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?", *Democratization* 26:7, pp.1095-1113, 2019.

⁴ Dr. Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for this work.

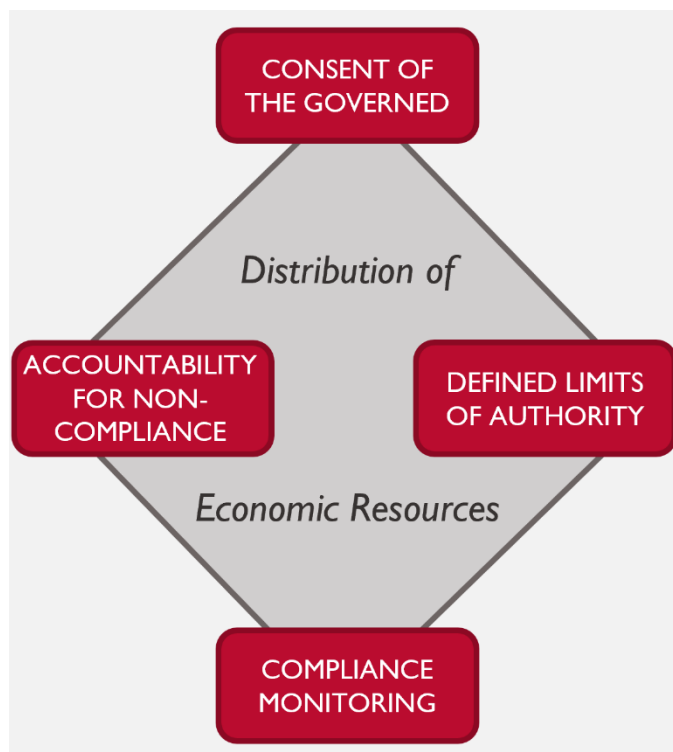
democratic institutions and processes, provides guidance for analyzing intent of geopolitical competitors or other external actors, and is based on democratic values of inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

The SDR Assessment Tool takes the GTC lens as its starting point to analyze democratic regimes as expressions of collective will, in particular a will for mutual benefit from open and cooperative interaction. This sort of “cooperative polity” can take many forms, but all are characterized by open governance that envisions citizens as co-equals in decision-making processes. This polity is embedded in and interacts with an economic context characterized by the distribution of economic resources.

The SDR Assessment Tool adapts the principles of GTC to structure analytical inquiry by dimensions of cooperation; see Figure 1 below.⁵

The distribution of economic resources gives some citizens the means and incentive to engage in, influence, and shape the political system. Democratic regimes typically fall short of strong performance in all four dimensions; for example, a country might succeed in defining the limits of authority but perform poorly in accountability for non-compliance. Different institutional arrangements could serve the same ends within a dimension; for consent of the governed, for example, one country might have a first-past-the-post presidential system and another a proportionally representative parliament. Political economy also changes the nature and dynamic of cooperative governance; for example, high concentrations of economic power are more conducive to media sector dominance and disproportionate influence over public policy agendas and solutions. No assumptions about the quality, level, or specific institutional arrangements of the cooperative polity are necessary; understanding how cooperative a country’s governance is.

Figure 1: Four Dimensions of Cooperation



Threats to democratic resilience, whether stemming from internal political dynamics, authoritarian learning, and/or external actors can create actual and potential weaknesses, while also exploiting existing vulnerabilities, in aspects of the cooperative dimensions. We can understand the dynamics of cooperative polities by identifying problem areas, and we can understand the danger of external actors by connecting their actual and/or potential behavior

⁵ See Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, especially pp.90-102, for a list of the principles underlying cooperative governance. Here we have clustered the principles (aspects) into four dimensions, added an aspect for information circulation, and collapsed “nested enterprises” into another aspect.

Figure 2: Cooperative Polity Dimensions, Aspects, and Manifestations

CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED		
Clearly-Defined Polity: Defined boundaries of the state, the polity, and population		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty over state territory • Constitution or body of high-level laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of who qualifies for rights 	
Inclusive and Participatory Rules for Decision-Making: Individuals affected by the polity may participate in modifying rules and authority		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Election administration • Electoral laws for parties/candidates • Party/candidate campaign financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referenda or citizen initiatives • Transparent policymaking processes at national level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparent policymaking processes at subnational level • Use of policy research/advocacy • Public comment on pending legislation/regulation • Bureaucratic service reflects polity complexity
Right to Organize: The rights of individuals to devise their own institutions are not challenged by polity officials or foreign actors		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual rights exist and are guaranteed in law • Collective bargaining and other labor rights exist and are guaranteed in law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling environment for non-governmental organizations • Enabling environment for trade unions 	
DEFINED LIMITS OF AUTHORITY		
Democratic Limits on Use of Authority: Rules for who may exercise political authority are clear and based on democratic values		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation of powers • Legislative structure • Judiciary structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fiscal authority • Appointment of officials • Districts/representatives defined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political party system reflects polity complexity • Transparent state procurement and sale/control of state assets • Subnational government reflects polity complexity
COMPLIANCE MONITORING		
Monitoring: Monitors can actively oversee the behavior of polity officials and decision-making processes, and are themselves capable of being monitored		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative oversight/hearings • Legislative approval of nominations • Legislative prerogatives to information from executive and judicial branches • Judicial review of legislation • Executive veto/approval of legislation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive nomination of judges and other polity officials • Independent auditors within polity institutions • Integrity institutions • Financial declarations by polity officials • Investigative journalism • Watchdog organizations 	
Information Circulation: Individuals have access to adequate and accurate information about polity actions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent mass media • Accessible social media platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of information by polity institutions • Access to information rights 	
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR NON-COMPLIANCE		
Sanctions: Individuals violating polity laws/regulations are subject to graduated sanctions by other individuals or polity officials		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polity officials subject to prosecution, removal, and fining • Enforcement of court judgements against polity institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals subject to prosecution for rights violations • Violence by or against the polity is subject to prosecution 	
Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms: Individuals and polity officials have access to processes for resolving conflict		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative law and courts • Alternative dispute resolution • Access to justice enabled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislature investigative hearings • Lawsuits against polity institutions • Multiple levels of judicial review 	

to those areas. For example, cyber censorship weakens the ability of citizens to monitor government compliance with democratic rules and procedures, zombie election observers provide cover for flawed elections that undermine popular consent, and corrupt procurement violates authority limits and sanctions.

The dimensions themselves can be disaggregated to distinct aspects and readily identifiable real-world manifestations, as seen in Figure 2 on the previous page.

The distribution of economic resources can be further disaggregated in terms of income or wealth inequality, regional disparities, marginalized populations, existence of monopolies/monopsonies, overall economic structure, state-owned/-controlled assets, transportation infrastructure, special state concessions, access to private or state credit, and commercial enabling environment, among other aspects.

Applying the SDR Assessment Tool

The SDR Assessment Tool is not intended to be a DRG or PEA, although the country's baseline political economy reality is the starting point. The SDR approach allows the Tool to serve as a module to a DRG Assessment if desired. While this section discusses how to apply the SDR Assessment Tool as a standalone analytical exercise, an accompanying guidance product (see Annex C, **SDR Assessment as a DRG Assessment Module**) elaborates on how to integrate the SDR approach as a module to a DRG Assessment.

The SDR Assessment Team will collect and synthesize information about a country's political and socio-economic structures; the formal and informal institutions that characterize governance and shape cooperative behavior; and the ways in which external actors drive, contribute, or could contribute negatively to existing dynamics. The resulting analysis guides the generation of strategic and programmatic recommendations.

The SDR Assessment Tool's application is a multi-week phased process that requires focused engagement and inputs by both subject matter expert team members and their USAID counterparts. Although expert team members will collect and analyze data, **USAID active involvement at multiple points is critical to the success of the tool's application.** For example, Washington-based personnel could facilitate connections to relevant United States Government (USG) and think tank experts, and mission personnel are key facilitators and even interviewees within the United States embassy system as a whole.

Application of the SDR Assessment Tool takes place in three phases:

- The *inception phase* is based on existing sources of information and is intended to identify a country's current weaknesses and related vulnerabilities through analysis of structures, institutions, behavior, and actual or potential threats to democratic resilience by state or non-state actors. The intersection of weaknesses and threats generates several focus areas for field work, along with any gaps in information.
- The *fieldwork phase* primarily includes field data collection through qualitative interviews of key informants, but it could expand to incorporate remote data collection via surveys or other instruments as appropriate. Teams should be authorized for six-day workweeks, as is standard practice for DRG Assessments and evaluations.

- The final phase, *analysis and recommendations*, returns to the inception’s analysis for revision and updating, followed by development of strategic and programmatic recommendations for USAID. Findings and recommendations are delivered through a brief analytical report and presentation to USAID regional and Mission stakeholders.

SDR ASSESSMENT TEAM

Careful composition of the SDR Assessment Team is critical to its success. The Team should consist of three senior-level subject matter experts (one Team Lead and two additional experts, either local or expat) and two support staff (a research assistant and logistician). The Team Lead should have significant experience with primary qualitative data collection and fieldwork leadership, whether for strategic assessments or project evaluations, and the two additional team members should have experience working on assessments, evaluations, or multidisciplinary research teams. **Team expertise should be viewed holistically.** Based on the Tool pilot experiences, at least two of the three team members should have deep expertise in corruption, information manipulation, or civil society and media as watchdogs, while the third should ideally have expertise across multiple DRG areas. The research assistant should be familiar with current political developments within the country context and have a strong command of English. The logistician should be experienced working with fieldwork teams, have a solid comfort level with “cold” outreach for scheduling, and demonstrate a strong command of spreadsheets and project management tools.

INCEPTION PHASE

The first phase analyzes the country’s most significant risks vis-à-vis actual and potential threats to democratic resilience from external actors. The Team will examine current political and socio-economic structures, as well as formal and informal institutions and resulting behavior, to develop an understanding of the cooperative polity’s governance points of weakness. Known external actors will be identified and mapped to those points and related vulnerabilities identified. The latter are institutions or processes related to identified weaknesses that have not been the direct target of authoritarian learning or external actors; for example, opaque policy-making processes are associated with CSO restrictions and limitations on access to information. Information gaps will be discussed along with the preliminary analysis in a collaborative workshop between the team and USAID stakeholders (i.e., inception workshop).

The resulting inception report of 15-20 pages should be based on:

- *Existing analyses and data* – There are many sources of information available for the Team to analyze the structure and dynamics of a country’s cooperative governance (see Annex A for an illustrative list), but fewer for useful discussions of external actions that undermine democratic resilience. The Team will collect and analyze relevant academic literature, think tank papers, reports from international bodies, and USAID and other USG materials. Data are available from V-Dem, regional surveys like the Americas Barometer, and specialized initiatives like AidData’s Global Chinese Development Finance dataset. The research assistant should locate and synthesize recent local-language analyses from domestic universities and think tanks, any relevant in-depth investigative journalism, and current political events. Collaboration with USAID staff to identify additional relevant materials would be of tremendous value during this phase.

- *Qualitative interviews of key informants (KIs)* – Existing information sources need to be supplemented by initial interviews with country or regional experts both inside and outside government. USG sources include staff at USAID/Washington, USAID Missions, U.S. Department of State in Washington and post, and U.S. Departments of Justice and Labor. Non-government sources include relevant academics, thinktank researchers from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings, USAID/DRG and National Endowment for Democracy grantees, USAID implementers, and international initiatives like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, the China Index, and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. These sources of information are critical for SDR Assessment success because threats from external actors tend to be ongoing, dynamic, and hidden, and typically experts have relatively up-to-date information. Collaboration with USAID staff to identify and connect with key experts is critical for SDR Assessment success.

The Team conducts a preliminary analysis of secondary analyses, data, and initial interviews to develop an understanding of the interaction between the economic distribution of resources, cooperative behavior shaped by governance institutions, and more recent authoritarian events and external actor threats to democratic resilience.⁶

<p>Examples of Efforts to Undermine Democratic Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oligarch-dominated media sector • Defamation, fake news laws • Information manipulation • Corruption • Low port management capacity • Belt & Road Initiative debt • External control of key industries • Transnational crime groups • Opaque party/campaign financing • Bans on foreign funding of CSOs

Examples of weaknesses can be seen in elections: where through authoritarian learning or “bad practice” technical assistance from external actors, the ruling party has disqualified candidates or parties on flimsy grounds, which violates the aspect of “inclusive and participatory rules for decision-making” within the “Consent to be Governed” dimension of the SDR framework. Relatedly, election appeals and complaints (integrity institutions within Compliance Monitoring) and judicial remedies (conflict-resolution mechanisms in Accountability for Non-Compliance) could become the target of further autocratic action. Another example would be a mine concession awarded to a foreign firm through a non-competitive process that not only violated procurement law, but also resulted in labor rights violations and pressure on local officials by national officials to use security forces against protesting citizens.

The compiled set of weaknesses and additional data collection focus areas should then be discussed by the Team to finalize the data collection approach, including deciding what small set of topics will be the focus of field data collection. Each team member should contribute to an

⁶ Parallel analysis is recommended. In parallel analysis, the Team would examine evidence for each data source type at the aspect level, produce findings and conclusions for each type, synthesize across the types at the aspect level; and then further synthesize across the aspects to produce a set of weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and information gaps to be addressed by field data collection. Different KI types should be treated as different source types. This analytical process would be repeated for all aspects and dimensions. The Team would then compile the set of weaknesses, connect vulnerabilities within or across aspects, and identify possible data collection methods to address information gaps.

evolving key informant list. It is worth noting that an SDR Assessment anticipates the active support of the USAID mission and United States embassy to identify in-country USG experts, other donor analysts, and foreign assistance implementers, including contact information to facilitate their engagement as key informants. USG key informants could include not just USAID DRG and Embassy political and economic section officers, but also personnel like the embassy Public Affairs Section to discuss the media environment; officers from the Department of Treasury, Department of Justice and law enforcement agencies at post to discuss organized crime, the courts, trafficking, money laundering, and the security sector; and USAID rule of law, education and economic development officers.

The Inception Report covers the country’s political economy before diving into an analysis of each aspect under each dimension. A synthesis of that analysis generates the small set of areas that will be the focus of data collection. Ideally this would be between 4-6 thematic areas. Finally, the Team will outline key fieldwork dates, locations, and anticipated types of key informants. The Inception Report should be discussed with relevant Washington- and Mission-based USAID staff via an inception workshop at least one week before international travel, and the logistician should begin contacting key informants at about the same time using a Mission-approved outreach statement developed by the team.

<p style="text-align: center;">Inception Report Structure</p> <p>Introduction (<i>SDR, process, team</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political Economy Overview (<i>political, economic, social, external actors</i>)• Analysis of GTC Dimensions/Aspects (<i>narrative, external actors, weaknesses</i>)• Proposed Research Areas• Field Investigation Plan

DATA COLLECTION PHASE

Based on decisions made at the inception workshop, the Team will finalize planning for field data collection. This would primarily include qualitative interviews and review of additional source materials, but it could expand to incorporate *remote data collection* via survey, social media scraping, or administrative record analysis.

Remote data collection could produce valuable information that would otherwise be hidden; for example, transnational bot networks conducting information manipulation through social media or shifting popular opinion about who qualifies as a citizen. This sort of data would be collected via survey, social media scraping, or available administrative records. Whether and how to implement this sort of data collection, however, is very much dependent upon three factors: cost, which could be quite high relative to the rest of the SDR Assessment budget; context, which may not allow for the most effective methodology for the desired information (for example, people will not answer phone surveys on politically sensitive topics); and time, which could be lengthy for the design and implementation of data collection in addition to the analysis of resulting data.

The SDR Assessment Team will rely primarily on information collected through qualitative interviews on the small set of focused topics with 50-70 KIs, but always with a “Do No Harm” approach to protecting KIs, USG interests, and Team members. For example, the team should consider active cyber-security measures like using Signal or WhatsApp for encrypted messaging between the Team, Protonmail for email exchanges, secure cloud storage and limited access of all working files, and a coding scheme to protect the identities of KIs.

The initial interviews could be with the same post-based USG personnel interviewed during the inception phase, who should have subsequently identified additional post-based personnel to serve as informants. The Team will then begin interviewing local experts, USAID implementers, experts from allied donors, and experts identified during the course of other KI interviews.

If possible given the political climate and diplomatic sensitivities, the Team should consider interviewing current or former political and government officials as well, after thoroughly vetting them with the mission and embassy. These KIs could be opposition parliamentarians, prosecutors, judges, leadership of accountability institutions, subnational officials, etc. Often former officials are more open than current officials, and are able to address developments over a longer period of time. The interview protocols for such KIs should be carefully crafted to avoid subjective or negative characterizations of political issues, focusing instead on capacities, processes, and relationships with other government actors.

“Do No Harm” to Key Informants	“Do No Harm” to USG Interests	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask KIs where they would feel most comfortable meeting. For hotel meetings, use a private meeting room rather than the lobby or restaurant • Make any reservations in the name of a Team member • Obtain valid consent for voluntary participation and confidentiality • KIs should be referenced via coding scheme in the content and file name of notes • The coding scheme should be cross-walked to KIs only in the scheduling spreadsheet • Access to the scheduling spreadsheet should be limited to the Team members and key USAID points of contact • Never mention details to any KI from another KI interview • Do not list KI names in anywhere in the body or annexes of the Analytical Report • Ensure interpreters are trusted team members and have confidence of informants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vet the working list of desired KIs with the Mission on an ongoing basis • Obtain from the Mission an approved statement describing the Team’s work for use in informant outreach emails and calls • Be sensitive to diplomatic concerns on terminology or appropriate questions for host-government officials • Be very clear to KIs that you are independent researchers, <u>not</u> USAID representatives 	
	<th data-bbox="834 1184 1432 1226">“Do No Harm” to Team Members</th>	“Do No Harm” to Team Members
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide generic business cards instead of asking them to use their own cards • Allow them to opt out of KI interviews they deem too sensitive • Explicitly provide the opportunity to leave their names off any deliverables • Inform Mission contacts about any threats to or harassment of local Team members 	

Depending on the specific context of the country, travel to an additional region or secondary city outside of the capital may be necessary. A small but significant percentage of the KIs interviewed will be quite different from those of a DRG Assessment – e.g., organized crime experts, government auditors, foreign policy analysts, information manipulation and cyber-security experts, and money laundering researchers, among others. As with DRG Assessments and evaluations, the Team should meet on Saturdays to review what had been learned during the week, what knowledge gaps still existed, and how to guide the logistician in prioritizing subsequent interview scheduling. The Team should meet informally with the main USAID points

of contact at least twice during fieldwork for progress updates. At the end of fieldwork, the team should formally present a preliminary analysis at the mission to interested USG personnel.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the Team may still conduct a small number of interviews following formal field data collection, the Team will shift to analyzing the data collected to revise and update the inception phase analysis.

The analysis in the formal SDR Analytical Report should synthesize external actor behaviors and a country's relevant weaknesses related to democratic resilience. The 25-30 page report should identify problem areas under each dimension, specific problematic aspects, actual and potential threats affecting those aspects, and implications for USAID strategy and programming. Recommendations should address these specific problems with detailed actions to guide whole-of-mission and even whole-of-government responses. For example, a mining concession corruptly obtained by an external actor that results in toxic waste and labor rights violations should generate recommendations that include strengthening the miners' union, engaging with watchdog CSOs and investigative journalists to collect and publicize information about environmental damage and security force abuse, connecting legislators to CSOs and unions for legislative hearings, training security forces in ethics and anti-corruption strategies, participating with other USG actors to coordinate an International Labor Organization complaint, and visible attendance of high-level Embassy personnel at any judicial proceedings against union leadership or CSOs.

Drawing conclusions can be quite difficult in SDR analysis for complex reasons:

- Most definitive evidence regarding external actor threats is deliberately hidden, so the Team must carefully consider what they do and do not “know” based on commonly shared perceptions, partial or indirect data, and their own cognitive biases. As such, researchers need to wrestle with how to analyze limited, partial, and potentially tainted information.
- It is very difficult to untangle the extent to which a threat to democratic resilience is driven by domestic political motivations or external actor influence; the latter is an SDR-specific problem, the former is a broader DRG problem. For example, one completed pilot SDR Assessment included a focus on opaque party and campaign financing, but the Team gathered evidence that financing came from regional oligarchs buying into the party system, not from external actors attempting to co-opt party leaders; as such, this was identified as a broader DRG problem as opposed to an SDR problem. Another aspect of this problem is that a threat dynamic may have already existed before external actors began exploiting it (i.e., DRG problem), but external actors may have greatly expanded it or changed the dynamic in some specific way (i.e., SDR problem). For example, high-level corruption was identified as endemic in one completed pilot SDR Assessment. In this case, high-level corruption was common before an external actor began gaining corrupt political access, but it used that access to engage in a larger and accelerated dynamic of acquiring extractive industry concessions; therefore, this was identified as an SDR problem.

The structure of the SDR Analytical Report is based in part on an update and expansion of the Inception Report analysis based on primary data collected. The Background and Methodological Approach should restate the SDR Assessment purpose, provide an overview of the focus areas, and update the completed research plan. The Political Economy Considerations should be an

updated version of the first three sections of the Inception Report’s political economy analysis. The Geopolitical Considerations section pulls out, updates and expands the external actors’

section in the political economy analysis of the Inception Report. The External Actor Findings section presents an analysis of each of the focus areas in turn, including those that the Team concludes are not SDR problems. Within each focus area analysis, the Current Situation subsection is an update of the “Narrative” section in the Inception Report; the Evidence of External

Actor Influence subsection is an updated and expanded version of the Inception Report analysis that integrates KI interviews and additional media and research materials; the Level of Threats subsection specifies the threats and assigns subjective probabilistic ratings⁷ to each; and the Potential Mitigation Areas subsection proposes actionable response by USG actors. Finally, the Conclusions and Key Programming Takeaways section presents a synthesis of conclusions across the political economy, geopolitical, and focus areas analyses, along with a visual matrix of threats and a synthesis of mitigation responses. Delivery of the Analytical Report can be complemented by a virtual presentation of findings and recommendations to USG stakeholders as appropriate.

Analytical Report Structure

- Background and Methodological Approach
- Political Economy Considerations
- Geopolitical Considerations
- External Actor Findings
- Conclusions and Key Programming Takeaways

⁷ Each threat should be rated according to likelihood that it could take place, the timeframe in which it could take place (e.g., short, medium, and long-term), and the strength of the negative effect on democratic resilience. The categorical timeframes should be based on anticipated major events, e.g., a national election, end of presidential term, or a mission’s strategic planning cycle.

Annex A – Potential Data Sources

Materials

- **Academic literature** on the country, region, and potentially relevant external actors
- **Research or policy papers** on the country, region, and potentially relevant external actors by private organizations, USG bodies, or other state and non-state bilateral or multilateral organizations:
 - Private organizations would include AidData, Freedom House, German Marshall Fund, The Asia Foundation, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, United States Institute of Peace, Brookings Institution, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Christian Michelsen Centre's U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Egmont Group, Council on Foreign Relations, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, National Endowment for Democracy, International Republic Institute (IRI), National Democratic Institute (NDI), Solidarity Center, Center for International Private Enterprise, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, International Press Institute, Open Government, Open Procurement, Media and Journalism Research Group, Center for Media Engagement, China Index, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Basel Institute for Governance
 - USG bodies would include USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategies, USAID DRG Assessments, USAID performance evaluations, USAID implementer reports and other project documents, USAID mission non-public materials, State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, State strategy papers, the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, embassy non-public materials, reports from other USG agencies working at the embassy level, Congressional Research Service
 - Other state and non-state bilateral or multilateral organizations would include the World Bank, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Parliamentary Assembly, European Parliament, Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (including its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), regional development banks, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Organization for Supreme Audit Institutions and its regional bodies, the International Labour Organization
- **Data or indices** for country, regional, and global levels would include Varieties of Democracy, Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit, Bertelsmann Stiftung, China Index, regional 'barometer' surveys, IRI or NDI polling, USAID's Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, Open Budget Survey, Transparency International, World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, Global Organized Crime Index, International Research and Exchanges Board's Vibrant Information Barometer, Global Fiscal Integrity, Global Disinformation Index, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, Global Terrorism Database, World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, Basel Anti-Money Laundering Index

Annex B – SDR Assessment Tool Implementation Advice

Implementing an SDR Assessment differs in important respects from a Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Assessment or programmatic performance evaluation. Below are six technical differences to be addressed in SDR Assessment planning and implementation:

Recruit the team based on potential issue areas

The three most common areas identified as actual or potential efforts to undermine democratic resilience through the SDR Assessment pilot process were corruption, compliance monitoring by civil society and/or media, and information manipulation. Team composition should reflect expertise in as many of those three areas as possible, although an uncovered area could be handled through key informant interviews. At least one of the Team members, preferably the Team Lead, should have general DRG expertise and applied research experience in order to provide overall technical and operational oversight.

Examine development sectors beyond DRG

The political economy analysis that is part of the SDR inception phase will likely identify key socio-economic sectors that are potentially problematic for democratic resilience. For example, is there a pattern of shell company ownership by oligarchs and foreigners? Are those shell companies involved in key national assets? Another example from an economic growth perspective might be that highly centralized states have distorted economic development in rural areas and thereby create an opening for narco-traffickers to tap local populations as allies.

Recognize that clear and unambiguous evidence may not exist

The types of activity and influence that are the focus of an SDR Assessment are, by design, hidden. For example, money flows from an external actor to offshore accounts controlled by a domestic political party leader will not be publicly acknowledged by either side. In the absence of a “Panama Papers” type event, the Team will have to rely on multiple sources (i.e., interviews, press reporting) and other forms of indirect information (i.e., analyses of state-level illicit money flows) to guide its analysis based on the Team’s expert judgment. Conclusions will inevitably be discussed in probabilistic, qualitative terms.

Look at more than the “usual suspects”

The SDR Assessment pilot process clearly demonstrated various forms of influence from major geopolitical competitors and other state and non-state actors. Teams should consider the role of larger and more powerful neighboring states, non-state actors like organized crime or narco-traffickers, large multinational firms, or even the role of cybercurrencies.

Distinguish domestic politics from foreign influence

Was a domestic political dynamic the main threat to democratic resilience and external actors are taking advantage of the resulting weakness, or are external actors engaged directly in efforts to undermine democratic resilience? This reflects the common problem of contribution versus attribution, and is a thorny issue when examining authoritarian learning. The team should be examining whether an external actor is creating a new dynamic or substantially changing an existing dynamic. For example, if an external actor had a long history of offshore funding for a political party and now another external actor is doing the same for a different political party, then the latter is simply tapping into or perpetuating an existing dynamic. On the other hand, if infrastructure procurement was always highly corrupt for both domestic and external actors, but an external actor pushed that corruption into extractives concessions, then that was a substantial change in the existing corruption dynamic. Ultimately, the Team should conclude whether an issue is one of externally-driven efforts or an existing domestic DRG problem involving external actors.

Make recommendations beyond USAID DRG programming

The pathways and results of geopolitical competitors' efforts to undermine democratic institutions are not limited to DRG actors, institutions, and processes, and neither should the Team's recommendations. A more holistic, cross-sectoral approach to findings and recommendations was highly valued during the SDR Assessment pilot process; in addition to DRG interventions, the recommendations pointed to “whole-of-agency” or “whole-of-USG” approaches. For example, pilot SDR Assessment reports pointed to the need for multi-donor attention to education reform, the importance of coordinated strategic communications on specific topics, increased engagement of key U.S. Department of State or U.S. Department of Justice operating units, diplomatic presence in high-profile judicial proceedings, and so on.

Annex C – Integrating the SDR Assessment as a DRG Strategic Assessment Framework (SAF) Module

This document provides practitioner guidance complementary to the SDR Assessment Tool Guide, produced under the Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence (ATARI) Task Order for USAID. The SDR Assessment was designed as a standalone exercise, but is highly compatible with the DRG SAF. Missions could consider integrating the SDR approach as a module to a planned DRG Assessment if they have concerns that external actors are exploiting weaknesses stemming from democratic backsliding. That said, if the primary concern is that efforts to undermine democratic resilience stem directly from external actors, a standalone SDR Assessment might be warranted. External actors could be geopolitical competitors or other state or non-state actors.

There is substantial overlap between DRG SAF and SDR elements (see table below), which gives flexibility to DRG Assessment teams in incorporating the SDR approach as appropriate. For example, weaknesses in procurement monitoring bodies that enable corruption by external actors could stem from opaque processes (Inclusion or Government Responsiveness & Effectiveness), limited authority or capacity of the bodies (Competition & Political Accountability), and/or inability of legislative or judicial branches to effectively monitor the executive branch (Competition & Political Accountability, Rule of Law/Human Rights).

SDR Dimension / Aspect	DRG SAF Element
Consent of the Governed	
Clearly-Defined Polity	Consensus, Inclusion, ROL/HR
Inclusive and Participatory Rules for Decision Making	Inclusion, Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR, Government Responsiveness & Effectiveness
Right to Organize	Inclusion, Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR
Defined Limits of Authority	
Democratic Limits on Use of Authority	Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR
Compliance Monitoring	
Monitoring	Inclusion, Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR
Information Circulation	Inclusion, Competition & Political Accountability, Government Responsiveness & Effectiveness
Accountability for Non-Compliance	
Sanctions	Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR
Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms	Competition & Political Accountability, ROL/HR

While the DRG SAF and SDR Assessment are implemented with similar timeframes, field work activities, and USAID engagement practices, there are some differences in team composition and interview practices so that SDR topics and issues are identified and addressed as relevant. Note however, that recommendations produced through the SDR approach will be integrated with DRG SAF recommendations.

WHAT YOU NEED

Senior local expert in corruption or information manipulation – One of the team members should be primarily responsible for implementing the SDR approach, although this person would remain fully integrated with the other DRG Assessment team members. This expert, ideally local, would work closely with the Team Lead throughout the DRG Assessment process.

Corruption and information manipulation are two of the most common actions against democratic resilience by external actors, as identified through the SDR Assessment pilot process. Forms of corruption tend to be idiosyncratic, but could relate to state procurement generally, large infrastructure projects, or extractive industry concessions. Information manipulation also varies across countries in terms of sources and pathways. Whichever expertise the senior local expert does not possess should be a priority for additional exploration during key informant interviews.

Additional data collection – The team will need to gather materials and engage key informants (KIs) beyond the typical DRG Assessment process. Additional materials should be reviewed to cover problems prevalent in non-DRG sectors, including foreign policy analyses, regional or country analyses of corruption or information manipulation, peer review reports by international professional associations, and studies of organized crime, among other sources. Additional KIs should be sought to cover issues of corruption, information manipulation, foreign policy actors, and other cross-cutting socio-economic problems. Additional questions should be integrated into KI interview beyond a typical DRG Assessment to address key areas as they would be relevant to the KI's expertise, e.g., asking media outlet leaders about information manipulation campaigns. In addition, it is helpful for a local team member or research assistant to synthesize local-language research and media reporting from the previous two years.

HOW TO DO IT

Inception Analysis – An SDR assessment's inception analysis helps identify areas for further exploration during data collection. When integrating an SDR Assessment as a DRG Assessment module, identifying those areas becomes a more iterative process between team members focusing on broader DRG aspects and those focusing on evidence of threats from external actors (i.e., SDR focus). For example, a senior local expert in corruption or information manipulation should be tasked with reviewing materials related to corruption, information manipulation, organized crime, public financial managements, and foreign policy, along with recent local research and news articles to identify actions by external actors that do or potentially could undermine democratic actors, processes, and institutions. This should take place while the rest of the team is reviewing standard DRG Assessment materials, such as those that seek to understand the country's political economy and identify weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the country's democratic system. The Team Lead should work closely and iteratively with the senior local expert to analyze the external actions and identified issues within the democratic system, to focus on a small set (up to six) areas of actual or potential efforts by external actors to undermine democratic resilience.

The Inception Report should incorporate three distinct written contributions from the senior local expert. First, the context discussion should include a robust section on foreign policy and external actors that broadly identifies the main state and non-state actors. Second, a "sixth" element of "External Threats to Democratic Resilience" should cover the focus areas identified in collaboration with the Team Lead, including an explanation of those areas that synthesizes the context section, relevant parts of the five DRG elements, and new information gleaned from other materials. Finally, there should be questions for further inquiry specific to the focus areas, for the team's utilization during in-country fieldwork.

Field Work – The senior local expert should take the lead in identifying desired KIs relevant to the SDR focus areas. While many of these desired KIs will be identified by other team members

for standard DRG reasons, it is important that all team members are aware that those KIs should be asked additional questions related to SDR focus areas, as the senior local expert may or may not be one of the interviewees for such KIs. The senior local expert should take special care to identify KIs among Mission experts in other sectors, including: relevant U.S. Embassy personnel such as Pol-Econ Officers, Public Affairs Officers, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) staff, U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) staff, and even U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) or U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) representatives; academics specializing in relevant foreign policy issues or specific external actors, corruption, or information manipulation; state personnel in audit, procurement, and organized crime investigation bodies; and experts from multilateral security bodies.

The senior local expert should create additional interview protocol questions and follow-ups for both SDR-focused interviews and mixed DRG/SDR-focused interviews as relevant. Note that interviewers will not simply ask KIs directly about corruption, bribes, or selective persecution, unless they are sure that the KI would agree that such problems exist. Instead, interviewers will have to ask indirect questions or perhaps questions about process and capacity that would still produce useful information. It is critical to note here that the “Do No Harm” ethics of applied research should be strictly observed, as noted in the Tool Guide, in order to avoid potential harm to KIs, Team members, and U.S. foreign policy interests.

Analysis and Writing – Using the analytical process facilitated by the Team Lead, the senior local expert should analyze the data from the desk review and interviews to identify findings and draw conclusions for each focus area. Drawing SDR conclusions is complex for several reasons. First, much of the evidence of action by geopolitical actors or non-state actors (e.g., narco-traffickers) is deliberately hidden, and so team members should not expect clear confirmation of influence but will need to deduce potential influence from available evidence. Second, it is quite possible that a focus area will not be driven by external actors, although it is indeed a serious DRG problem; for example, party and campaign financing which comes from domestic oligarchs and not external actors. Third, it is also possible that a focus area is not currently the subject of efforts by external actors to undermine democratic resilience, but could be in the future given demonstrable regional trends or systemic vulnerabilities. Finally, it is possible that external actors are simply taking advantage of an existing domestic DRG problem without expanding or changing it noticeably.

The DRG-SDR Analytical Report should include five written contributions by the local senior expert. Two are updated versions of the foreign policy discussion in the context section and the external actors section in Step 1. The third is an annex that analyzes all of the focus areas, identifies specific threats, and points to potential mitigating strategies and programming. The fourth is a revised version of the “sixth” element of “External Threats to Democratic Resilience” that only discusses the focus areas that demonstrated actual or potential influence from the annexed analysis. The final contribution is a set of recommendations based on the annexed analysis, but mapped to or integrated within the set of DRG recommendations. It is worth noting that SDR-focused recommendations could be whole-of-mission or even whole-of-government, including discussions about potential diplomatic approaches.

Annex D – Responding to Challenges to Democratic Resilience

The Analytic Task on Authoritarian Resurgence and Influence (ATARI) focused on understanding responses to the challenges posed by actions of geopolitical competitors and/or non-state actors that undermine democratic resilience. ATARI analyzed incentives and motivations, efforts to undermine democratic resilience, and emerging strategic and programmatic responses.

EARLY RESPONSES TO GROWING CHALLENGES

ATARI's systematic review of literature surfaced the complexity of the challenges posed by geopolitical competitors, which include:

- Engaging in economic actions through funding for new presidential residences or parliament buildings, favorable terms for large infrastructure projects, or strategic use of market size.
- Conducting deliberate propaganda and information manipulation campaigns.
- Supporting activities like fake election observation teams that present a counter-narrative to international criticism by democracies.
- Providing surveillance technology to strengthen social control.

ATARI explored global and regional dynamics related to actions by geopolitical competitors, including a grant to AidData to compile and analyze an inventory of USAID's programming in this space. Key findings were:

- Programming was multi-sectoral and reflected the political and contextual idiosyncrasies of the host countries.
- The largest programming areas addressed issues of democratic norms, cooperation, and networking, as well as support for strengthening institutional laws, rules, and policies.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) were the main local partner, followed by government officials and political elites.

The main activities were primarily strengthening existing institutions through capacity building, followed by training and policy reform advocacy.

ASSESSING CURRENT EFFORTS TO UNDERMINE DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

ATARI also designed and piloted an assessment tool: the Strengthening Democratic Resilience (SDR) Assessment Tool is an adaptation of the "Governing the Commons" political economy approach developed by Dr. Elinor Ostrom and colleagues over more than three decades (see the more detailed presentation in the Guide). Key findings from this pilot process are:

- Efforts to undermine democratic resilience come not just from geopolitical competitors, but also from neighboring countries and non-state actors like narco-traffickers.
- Efforts to undermine democratic resilience often capitalize on existing vulnerabilities in a democratic system, e.g., endemic procurement corruption dynamics that become open to a geopolitical competitor, not on creating new or expanded vulnerabilities. These efforts may be reinforced by vulnerabilities in other sectors, e.g., uneven economic development that creates favorable conditions for organized crime.

- The most common efforts to undermine democratic resilience were against transparency, democratic accountability, compliance monitoring, and information flows. The specific areas were corruption through state-level procurement or concessions; repression or harassment of watchdog CSOs and independent media; and actual or highly likely information manipulation campaigns.
- Effective responses appear to be at the whole of mission or whole of government level. The more specific responses were strengthening CSO and media capacity to investigate procurement corruption, strengthening norms and capacity of accountability institutions, mitigating threats to the civic space of CSOs and media, strengthening the capacity of CSOs and media to keep open a robust information space, coordinating USAID and U.S. Department of State, and working through diplomatic channels in-country.

FORECASTING FUTURE TARGETS

ATARI invested in grant-funded research that created forecasting models based on state-level behavior. The model developed by AidData experts used more than 200 indicators from a wide variety of datasets to gauge democratic resilience, while the model created by experts at the University of Pennsylvania’s DevLab used machine-learning to analyze media articles capturing action by our two main geopolitical competitors.

AidData’s Democratic Resilience to Malign Influence (DRMI) developed a composite index of dimensions of resilience using over 200 indicators for 2005-2022 from private and governmental datasets. One finding from exploratory use of the dataset is that the relationship between a state’s democratic governance and its democratic resilience is not as strong as institutional interventions might assume. Figure A on the next page provides an example of DRMI change over time for a select set of states.

DevLab’s Resurgent Authoritarian Influence (RAI) dataset covers 2012-2023, and builds in part on the expert’s prior experience with the machine-learning methodology in international development research. The model’s predictive performance is quite robust (see Figure B below). Analysis of the dataset produced two key findings:

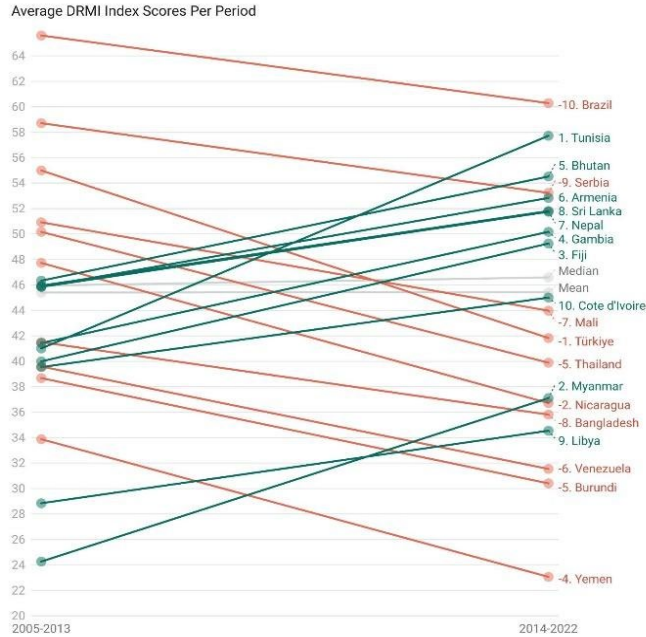
- Our two main geopolitical competitors have had different geographic strategies, but one competitor has begun to expand its actions and now competes with the other competitor for influence.
- Economic power had been the main area of action, but for both competitors that has been shifting to bilateral diplomatic action.

AidData’s DRMI is available on request as a dataset in multiple formats along with a codebook. DevLab’s RAI dataset is the core of three online resources available for analytical exploration:

- The RAI Explorer to visualize changes in RAI data over time, <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/rai/rai-explorer/>
- The RAI Data Dashboard to compare RAI event types across time and countries, https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/rai/rai_dashboard/
- The RAI Forecast to project changes up to seven months in the future, <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/rai/rai-forecasts/>

Figure A – AidData’s DRMI example

Most Significant DRMI Shift: 2005-2013 Versus 2014-2022



Most improved: Tunisia, Myanmar, Fiji, Gambia, Bhutan, Armenia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Libya, Cote D'Ivoire
Steepest declines: Türkiye, Nicaragua, Yemen, Thailand, Burundi, Venezuela, Mali, Bangladesh, Serbia, Brazil

Created with Datawrapper



Figure B – RAI Forecasting

Indonesia External Influence Forecast

