



## Office of Transition Initiatives

### Lessons Learned

# MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN COMPLEX, HIGH-THREAT ENVIRONMENTS

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is critical to all USAID programs for accountability reporting, measuring impact, and informing ongoing strategic management decisions. The principal lesson learned from the Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) 15 years of experience operating in complex, dynamic, and frequently high-threat environments is that M&E requires an approach that is as dynamic as the environment in which a program operates and that is designed to help country teams learn, adapt, and re-target in real time. M&E should be integrated at all stages of the programming cycle, from design through close-out. The three broad principles and corresponding best practices described below summarize this approach.

**(1) CLEAR, REALISTIC GOALS: Monitoring Outputs, Evaluating Outcomes** – To help programs meet institutional reporting requirements while remaining effects-based rather than metrics-driven, OTI employs an array of standard practices and tools. First and foremost, transitional assistance goals are aligned with policymakers' desired "next state" in the country or region's transformational development, rather than aiming for an ideal "end state," the path to which can be unpredictable. Second, given the nature of these environments, it is more realistic to demonstrate impact through significant "contribution" rather than "attribution." Third, while OTI tracks activity outputs and outcomes, programming is not constrained by sector. An "action learning" approach aims to ensure that every activity is an opportunity to learn what works, what doesn't, and why. How programs choose to assess and act on these learning opportunities will vary, depending on the context. Lastly, OTI defines success as how rapidly—and how well—its country programs respond to both U.S. foreign policy imperatives and local political developments. This practice encourages OTI field staff and implementing partners to focus on continually analyzing the forest while still monitoring the trees.

**(2) LEARN AND ADAPT: Intensive Management and Iterative Processes** – Operationally, the purpose of M&E is to support learning through constant feedback loops of analysis, response, and evaluation at multiple levels (e.g., overall strategic imperatives, specific program objectives, and the short-term activities designed to support them), drawing on multiple sources of information. Traditional pre-program baselines are often not possible or useful in conflict environments where conditions rapidly change. Therefore, following an initial country assessment, OTI programs start with a "snapshot" of the current situation that, when periodically updated through ongoing analysis, provides a picture of the evolving context and the program's performance in relation to it. Every OTI program has an M&E plan tailored to the specific country context, conducts country-team strategy reviews on a quarterly basis, and is evaluated annually through an internal peer-review process. At the program's culmination, an independent final evaluation is conducted to measure program impact, followed by an After-Exit Review (AER) to capture and share operational lessons learned. These program performance management processes—and the intensive management that they require—help programs act on lessons learned and adapt to

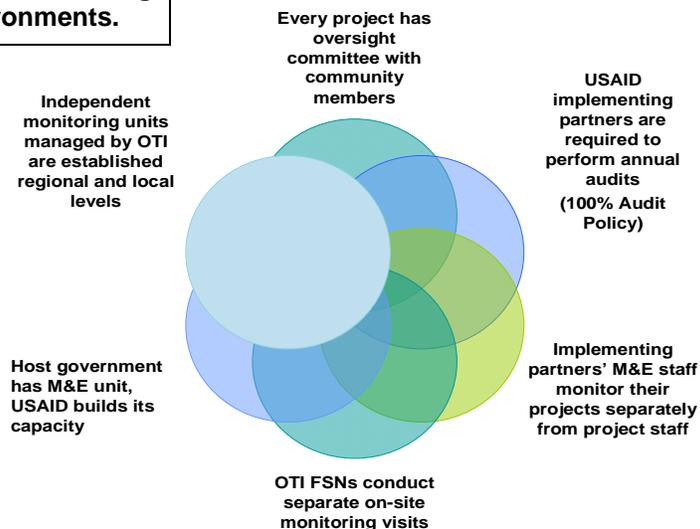
changes in the local environment. At their most effective, they allow a fresh analysis of a country's political transition to emerge.

**(3) ORGANIZATIONAL REQUIREMENTS GUIDE LEARNING: Flexible Tools and Real-Time Reporting –**

OTI's Activity Database is an integrated program performance and knowledge management system that links all programs globally and ensures that field and headquarters, OTI and implementing partner staff have access to the same real-time information. The Activity Database is designed to support real-time financial tracking, planning, budgeting, activity design, output and outcome reporting, monitoring, troubleshooting, GIS mapping, and photo archiving. Since 1998, it has continuously evolved to incorporate lessons learned, frame best practices for end users, and respond to evolving information needs in fluid environments. It was created by a former USAID Mission Director and is owned and managed by OTI. Other widely used tools include rapid appraisals, perception surveys, polling, and focus groups.

**How Are Principles Put Into Practice?** Every OTI program tailors its M&E system to the particular country context. In non-permissive countries or regions where OTI expatriate staff cannot visit projects, redundant methods of monitoring are established to track and triangulate information. For example, one country program's M&E system is comprised of six degrees of monitoring: (1) USAID Foreign Service National (FSN) staff; (2) a local NGO hired to act as an independent monitoring unit; (3) implementing partner staff dedicated to M&E that conduct site visits and provide GPS data and photos before, during, and after every project; (4) a local project-oversight committee that includes community elders who have a vested interest to supervise every project; (5) the host government's M&E unit, supported by the USAID mission, which also independently conducts site visits; and (6) annual audits conducted by each implementing partner, in accordance with USAID regulations. A dedicated expatriate M&E Specialist trains and supervises local monitors whose sole function is to travel to program sites and monitor ongoing implementation and evaluate impact. All of this data is tracked in OTI's Activity Database so that the OTI country team can continuously assess what works, what doesn't, and why.

**Fig. 1 – Model of remote monitoring in non-permissive environments.**



**Conclusion:** The very nature of these environments requires flexible responses and iterative processes adapted to specific country contexts and the constantly changing local, regional, and national dynamics within them. In the field, OTI's approach to M&E is the same as its approach to programming: action learning. OTI's real lessons learned reside in the practices, processes, requirements, and tools it continuously develops to help operationalize its goals.

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