



Feeding the Beast: Reporting on Development Programs and Outcomes

One of the most important but often mismanaged areas of foreign assistance is data collection and reporting.

Data and information are important because managers and senior leaders must have a basic understanding of how resources are used and with what results; and, when they cannot answer basic questions about their programs, they look incompetent or worse. Every administration has attempted to improve the collection and reporting of program information, and most administrations have committed millions of dollars and person years to this effort without substantially improving the speed or quality of real-time information about programs and program outcomes. This is in part because it takes time for new leadership to become knowledgeable enough to lead this effort, and in part because bureaucracies, contrary to common wisdom, have a tendency to over-respond and to build mini-bureaucracies around those responses.

The new administration would be well advised (and well rewarded) by a fundamentally different approach, characterized by:

- *Simplicity*: Ask who needs what information for what purpose. Data collection and reporting requirements can be time consuming and expensive and produce much irrelevant information, so keep it simple and stay focused on the purpose and audience for the information. A fundamental problem is there are many audiences and shifting demands.

Reliance (at least initially) on existing systems: Start with the assumption that systems are in place to deliver basic information for planning and reporting, and give them a chance to work. Avoid reinventing the wheel. Basic questions which the system can or should answer include:

How much are you spending?	Who are you reaching?
What change is occurring?	Why or why not?

*Prioritize **doing** over **counting***: Be clear about what information you need and why you need it. The people who are asked to provide information are the same people who actually perform the work they are reporting on. Don't lose sight of the balance in this zero-sum game. At present, the balance is off.



Differing Approaches to the Issue

- Approach 1: Levels – Project, Program, Sector, Strategic Objective
 - How much are you spending?
 - How many people are you reaching?
 - What change is occurring?
- Approach 2: The Audience
 - What does the internal audience need to know?
 - What does the external audience need to know?
 - If the external audience is Congress, the questions often boil down to: what works, how do you know, can you scale it?

Challenges

1. *The “tyranny of rolling up -- drilling down” – what happens to data integrity/data utility when the focus becomes aggregating or too detailed?*

The tyranny of rolling up is balanced by the “danger of drilling down” – that if you get too detailed, it becomes difficult to show causal impact. Activities might be critical to the ultimate sustainability and impact of the program but be tough to capture in a bottom line number. Examples of this would include health (communication activities are essential to a successful program but don’t have a 1:1 ratio to net usage) and education (difficult to link strengthening ministries and administrative structures to learning outcomes).

Information gets less credible as you aggregate. The indicators we end up being most interested in are the responsibility of the mission across a program using a myriad of supporting factors. There is a level of information that is essential to how missions decide to allocate resources across communications, management support, technical assistance, etc., which makes the achievement of program objectives possible. There is a possible danger that the more Washington focuses on the higher-level indicator, the more missions or program implementers will also match their efforts at performance against those indicators, undermining support to other less clear, but equally important, program elements. “If you begin to think that high-level indicators are the end-all and be-all, other pieces of your program will get undervalued.”

There is a linkage between this issue and the LOG Frame (Logical Framework). This approach provided the narrative context that linked goals to purpose to outputs to inputs. It detailed the critical assumptions and helped focus thinking. As with any tool there was a risk that some might look at it as simply a matter of “filling in boxes,” but, if people knew how to use it well and understood that it included an underlying theory of change, it was quite effective and helped develop a shared vocabulary.



2. *Indicators – important to have a finite number that are agreed to and for which there is a common understanding (if each party has a different understanding of the indicator, the integrity is lost).*

Reporting on indicators: (a) serves a purpose in reporting to stakeholders; (b) provides discipline within a mission to look at a program and assess performance; and (c) enables Washington to have an intermediate look at how programs are tracking against objectives (enabling both functional and regional oversight).

F’s “400 indicators” are both too much and not enough. The concern is that missions may end up funding only things with indicators and as a result will not support comprehensive programs.

It is difficult to determine the “right” number and level of indicators. No one wants to report failure, so people will tend to low-ball their expectations in order to then exceed them. There is much in the literature about the need for foreign assistance to be “risk-taking”, but reporting and demonstrating achievement quash this. We don’t want a system in which staff is “chasing the indicators.” Programs need the flexibility of matching programs to needs/effectiveness irrespective of what the indicators might require. Missions either need more resources to report broadly or to let the available time determine how much to report.

3. Division of labor between DC and the field

Washington headquarters is responsible for:

- global development strategy & global and regional priorities;
- coherence among USG policies and programs;
- review of five-year country strategies;
- technical integrity of programs and projects; and
- review of annual or biannual report on progress.

Mission is responsible for:

- 5-year country strategy, insuring consistency with U.S. development strategy and local needs and input;
- develop program and project content and implementation tactics; and
- project management.



4. *Clarify the use of performance data for management purposes versus higher order data for reporting on effectiveness.*

Often there is a demand for too much data at the higher level (headquarters, Congress) that isn't really relevant to policy makers.

It would be useful to think through the interests of Congress and DC when it comes to reporting through the lens of a Global Development Strategy – use a framework of the major strategic goals and then think through what this might look like for foreign assistance in a particular regional or functional area.

May be useful to compare and contrast some of the models that are out there, for example the Malaria model v. PEPFAR. They are similar insofar as they look at a particular disease and focus on the country level and a specific set of interventions, but are different in terms of their reporting requirements (Malaria has fewer requirements for indicators and financial data). Note that this may also relate either to legal requirements which differ as well as the clearly multi-agency component of PEPFAR.

Things That Have Worked:

- USAID's 5-year country strategy
- 5-year renewable contracts and grants which inherently acknowledge a long-term process
 - Contracts and grants are time- and resource-intensive to develop and compete
 - Need the flexibility to alter workplans based on available funds as well as performance and outcomes
- R4 (Results, Review, Resource, Request) process: common indicators across countries, reporting moved to every other year and timed to not impact the obligation of funds
 - On a yearly basis, what is the funding needed over the next two years to move forward
 - A single report contained a large amount of information with a minimum burden of reporting
 - Linked progress (with indicators) to budget requests and provided the story behind the numbers
 - Over time, a common understanding of the format and the indicators evolved
 - Compare to the Operational Plan – for the latter there is insufficient time for substantive review and too many indicators
 - The R4 had a better balance of results (outcomes vs. outputs), was timed to enable a solid review (both at the technical/functional level and the bureau level with specific stakeholders), and empowered the Mission's voice.



- E&E Bureau developed a menu of 13 strategic objectives that allowed missions to aggregate funding and results in a manageable and meaningful 13 buckets
- F's hierarchy
 - The hierarchy goes from the Objective, to the Area, to the Element, to the Sub-Element level; perhaps helpful for Congress and DC, but not necessarily for program management
 - Before F, USAID had strategic objectives, but there was no uniformity and there were too many
 - For Health, the F plug-in has been easier and there is an easier connection to funding; Health can talk about its programs within this framework.
 - The “vertical axis” of country categories is not useful; it seems forced