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**Evaluation Framework:** USAID's  
Results Framework Planning and  
Evaluation Tool

## **A Summary of USAID's Results Framework Planning and Evaluation Tool as a Program Evaluation Model**

**Introduction:** Since the mid-1990s, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has used a “results framework” (RF) model as its principle planning strategy to achieve strategic objectives.<sup>1</sup> The framework is results-oriented and has been designed as both a program planning and evaluation and management tool for USAID-funded projects.<sup>2</sup> It is designed to help managers of programs determine progress or problems toward achieving program objectives, while allowing for changes to programs and activities during the implementation and funding of programs. It also is a collaborative planning process that enables the agency's development partners, such as NGOs in nations where USAID works, to share in the development of strategic objectives and help to meet those goals. What's more, the results framework also serves as a communications tool, as it captures a strategy's primary principles and the building blocks that facilitate the achievement of the higher-level objectives.<sup>2</sup>

**Background:** The results framework grew out of congressional backlash over concerns that USAID and other U.S. government agencies were wasteful with taxpayer funds and poorly managed. In 1993 Congress passed the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which created the framework for USAID's new approach to ensure that it and other agencies achieved specific goals, improved service delivery, boosted customer satisfaction, and provided Congress with understandable benchmarks.<sup>1</sup> Since 1996, this model has become widespread in USAID as a means of monitoring programs and initiatives. It is frequently referenced in USAID materials, notably strategy planning and evaluation documents. (*See appendix 1 for copy of regional HIV/AIDS model from USAID Caribbean Regional Strategy – 2005-2009.*<sup>3</sup>)

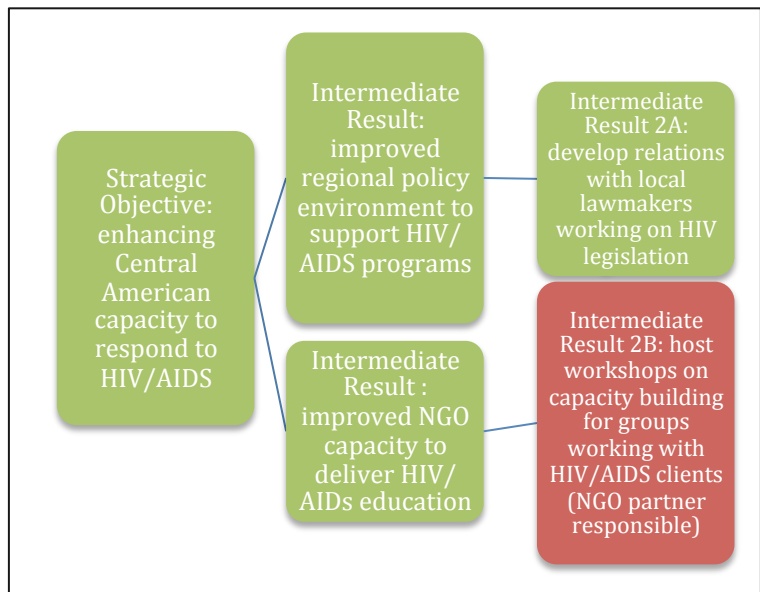
**Overview of Results Framework:** The GPRA specifically dictates that USAID teams “manage for results” by defining their work around the end results they hope to accomplish. Results focus on three principles: satisfying customer aspirations, working

at different levels toward the strategic objective level, clarifying causal relations that show higher-level results are achieved because intermediate results are first met.<sup>4</sup> USAID emphasizes that its framework encourages staff to focusing on the outcomes, rather than the process or mere completion of activities. In the planning process, the strategic objective (SO) remains at the center of the framework and USAID planning processes.<sup>2</sup> It forms the standard by which a program is judged and provides a goal to achieve. USAID sets specific criteria for SOs<sup>2</sup>:

- Each SO must clearly express an outcome and have only one result.
- Each SO must be clearly stated in a manner to allow for an objective measurement.
- Each SO must have a time frame to be achieved (not longer than 8 years).

Such objectives take into consideration conditions in host countries, customer perspectives and concerns, and the available resources of USAID and its partners. Within USAID, the time frame for achieving a strategic objective can be 3-8 years for sustainable development programs.<sup>1</sup> These objectives in turn are supportive of the agency’s strategic plan and the agency’ principle goal; namely, supporting long-term and equitable economic growth that advances U.S. foreign policy objectives.

USAID evaluation and planning system uses what it calls a results framework narrative. Any results framework program planning and evaluation process must have enough information to show a developed hypothesis, namely a cause-and-effect link, to defend the strategy and communicate its goals. In this planning and evaluation process, USAID team members and their partners develop the intermediate results, which represent distinct outcomes themselves of shorter duration than an SO that also



**Table 1: Adapted results framework model for HIV program evaluation and planning by USAID (Toffolon-Weiss, 1999).<sup>1</sup>**

serve as necessary steps to achieving the SOs. USAID monitors progress on these upper level results in its annual reporting, reviews, and results request, and poor performance can negatively impact future funding.<sup>1</sup> Annual reports play a particularly important role in helping USAID evaluate a program or unit's performance in the past year, focusing on progress to achieving SOs and intermediate results.<sup>4</sup> In this manner, the framework is working as a planning and management tool.

In addition, USAID's results framework uses critical assumptions to define conditions for a strategy or objective to hold true, such as the annual rainfall of a nation and its relation to agricultural production. These are outside the control of USAID and its local partners, though they likely influence the achievement of results.<sup>4</sup> A USAID team and its partners in a country may decide to develop contingency plans if unforeseen events arise, but manage with the larger objective in mind. If contingency planning cannot adequately address problems arising from critical assumptions that have a low chance of remaining constant during a project's life cycle, a strategy and its objectives may need to be re-evaluated.<sup>2</sup>

**Benefits and Limitations of Results Framework:** USAID's model presumes that its staff and partners will remain strategically focused on the main goals of a program, with funding contingent upon meeting stated targets. An analysis of the framework (Toffolon-Weiss, et al., 1999) note this process allows for team collaboration with USAID teams and partners in developing objectives and ownership that a program is meeting their mutual needs. It assumes staff and partners have input and are fully aware of the evaluation criteria throughout a program's implementation. It also makes evaluation reporting less labor and time intensive, reducing the resources committed to mid-project and end-of-project evaluation reports.<sup>1</sup> What's more, this framework allows for the use of longitudinal study design for overall evaluation. In the case of HIV/AIDS prevention, Toffolon-Weiss et al. note that an AIDS/HIV prevention instrument may be used in a country to survey 20 resident HIV/AIDS experts to establish a baseline score for a regional policy environment on a 100-point scale. This score could be compared to mid-project and end-of-project scores to measure change.

Toffolon-Weiss et al. also found limitations. The model tries to capture processes in quantifiable means that may not truly describe achievements or progress. Outside factors may greatly impact a planned final goal, such as a political crisis in a country that reduces international funding to local NGOs working on HIV/AIDS prevention, reducing those groups' capacity to deliver prevention projects.<sup>1</sup> USAID and partner staff involved in a project may also be biased and be motivated to report results that put a project in a positive light, which requires that evaluators carefully monitor the program. In addition, evaluators themselves may lose subjectivity if they develop long-term working relationships with project staff in a program.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, Toffolon-Weiss et al. conclude that the results framework model is a useful evaluation tool because it places a strong incentive on achieving original project goals throughout a program's lifespan. Its team focus also creates better opportunities for USAID staff, partners, donors, program evaluators, and customers to have a stake in the project. Lastly, because the evaluation process of a program is initiated at the beginning, there are opportunities for collecting longitudinal data starting with baseline information.<sup>1</sup> Toffolon-Weiss et al. note that while none of these approaches are new in evaluation models, they provide advantages to processes that use mid-term and end-of-project reviews to determine success.<sup>1</sup>

## REFERENCES:

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