The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks

“Learning While Doing: A Conversation with USAID/Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation”

With Joseph Hewitt, Senior Conflict Advisor at CMM and David Hunsicker, Senior Conflict Advisor at USAID

Part 1: Overview

On December 4, 2014 the Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation and the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium were pleased to have hosted a talk with Joe Hewitt and Dave Hunsicker of the US Agency for International Development Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (USAID/CMM).

Ideally monitoring and evaluation support accountability but also contribute to wider learning. Distilling and managing that learning, however, can be challenging in any setting. This is particularly true in institutions with large staff, numerous reporting structures and programs around the world, and varying goals and mandates. Joseph Hewitt and David Hunsicker, of US Agency for International Development Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (USAID/CMM), shared insights in how their team works to gather, disseminate, and apply learning from conflict-affected settings within USAID.

About the Speakers:

Joseph Hewitt is a Senior Conflict Advisor in the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation at USAID, where he serves as the lead for the Technical Leadership team. He is a specialist in international conflict, with a particular focus in forecasting armed conflict and political instability. He has extensive expertise in quantitative political analysis, statistical modeling, research design development, and management of large datasets. His specific research focuses on the causes of armed civil conflict, conflict early-warning, forecasting political instability, conflict assessment, and the connections between government attributes and conflict behavior. Prior to joining USAID, he was the Associate Director of the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland where he directed the center’s policy research operations. His most recent book is Peace and Conflict 2012 (co-authored with Ted R. Gurr and Jonathan Wilkenfeld). Additionally, his research has appeared in the Journal of Conflict Resolution, the Journal of Peace Research, and International Interactions.

David Hunsicker is a Senior Conflict Advisor at USAID. He provides technical support to USAID bureaus and missions on conflict issues, particularly as they relate to religion and identity. His work includes developing analytical and training products on religion and conflict, radicalization processes, counter-extremism and counterinsurgency from a
development perspective. His regional focus and responsibilities center on South and Central Asia, and Israel-West Bank and Gaza. David received his Masters from the University of Washington in Near Eastern Languages and Civilization.

**Part 2: Q&A**

_Melanie Kawano-Chiu (moderator):_ What is the learning agenda of the office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM)?

_Joseph Hewitt:_ CMM is a technical office, and our job is to: support the field, provide best guidance for field missions in ways to do their jobs effectively in conflict situations, and to break new ground in responding to conflict. Our job includes developing new technical products, meaning we have to be good at learning, and how we do that is by setting priorities for what we want to learn and which topics we want to dive deep into. The field of conflict is quite expansive, and it’s often useful to have a specialty. To be able to respond quickly, our office has a technical leadership agenda of about twenty topics - including atrocity prevention, extreme poverty fragility and conflict, gender and conflict, water and conflict - that they’re making investments in and developing technical products for.

The role of this office is to make and rank learning priorities based on the needs of USAID, but also to continuously scan the horizon for opportunities to learn more about what issues are growing in conflict mitigation. This puts CMM in a position to provide guidance when such an issue comes to the fore.

_David Hunsicker:_ By scanning the horizon, CMM can keep an eye on things. A few topics are always on a “slow boil”. We are following the latest developments and reading the literature on academic developments constantly, and we are able to “turn up heat” on any topic as it comes up.

Violent Extremism is that sort of an issue – interest comes in waves depending on what’s going on in the world. With all that’s going in Iraq and Syria, there’s a lot of interest at the moment. When issues come to the fore, CMM can say “we know what works best with this from the aid standpoint, as well as where development programming isn’t appropriate.” It’s important to know what the best approaches are in any particular context. Because there’s a culture of learning at CMM and not merely response, the office can be that much more effective.

Our learning agenda is defined by USAID’s investments. We prioritize learning around projects to use financial resources in the most effective way possible. We at USAID are stewards of taxpayer money and need to be answerable to it, to stay answerable we focus on M&E and strategically prioritize how to pursue our learning agenda.

_Melanie:_ What makes CMM unique in technical expertise? CMM is USAID’s office of conflict management and mitigation – is there something inherent in conflict that makes learning about it unique? Does this make M&E for CMM more challenging than in other USAID offices?

_Joe:_ Here’s the predictable answer: Learning while trying to be effective in conflict environments is difficult, because socio-economic and political phenomena all combine in
dynamic and complex ways. Conflicts are non-linear, and it’s hard to make direct comparisons from one situation to the other.

The more nuanced answer is that to conduct conflict assessments across the globe, CMM works to develop methodology that can be applied across contexts. CMM has begun to realize that conflict dynamics change, but the fundamentals (who identity groups are, grievances, primary ways affected populations interact with institutions, leaders in society and how they mobilize groups, triggering events) do not change too rapidly. It is possible to do long term planning in ways that can reduce vulnerability to conflict. Yes, conflicts are very complex, but concrete theories of change are still effective to reduce vulnerabilities.

David: It’s important to recognize the larger effects of how we process information. In the 21st Century, we deal with a lot of data and tend to lose the forest for the trees. Acts of violence occurring in projects we’re working on will create operational constraints, will cause disruptions, will interrupt ability to provide assistance, but a learning perspective should be longer term. Our programs and learning objectives would be better served by asking, “Are we putting it all in perspective?”

Melanie: How is it that we, as partners of CMM, can contribute to its learning processes?

Joe: The best way to help is to continue to invest in tools that enable better analyses of conflict and conflict dynamics, as well as tools to enable better M&E of our programs. This will help move us forward, because if we as a field come to a consensus of what a good analysis is, about what the best tools are for M&E of programs, etc., as a field we’ll start becoming much more effective. These improvements will help us to be much more agile in our responses and effectively in new environments. An increased commitment to rigor of analysis, theories of change, and M&E is a public good for the whole field. The important message here is a commitment to sharing, collaborating, and cooperating with partners, and the result will be a rising tide for the field.

Kerry Abbott, PACT (attendee): Given USAID’s integration into the Department of State how do you assure independence and professional development interventions from politics? Also, how do you evaluate the role of US government policies and actions in these crises and conflicts? Where are the lessons learned?

Joe: That’s a good question. I think USAID does a good job at maintaining its independence, because not all of what USAID does is necessarily political. It’s humanitarian work for instance is not political. USAID aims to address sources of fragility: the extent to which state-society relations fail to produce outcomes that are legitimate or effective. The legitimacy side of our work is political – but it addresses inclusivity and accountability. And contexts which aren’t as inclusive and accountable, those are circumstances where conflict is more likely. The theory of change is to find ways to support inclusive and accountable governments. Where political space is closed, there’s very little leverage for USAID to support change. USAID may just have to work on the margins there.

David: As an independent agency of the State Department and as a US government agency, our work has obvious foreign policy goals and objectives. However, USAID has a new mission statement: “We partner to end extreme poverty and to promote resilient, democratic societies while advancing our security and prosperity.” Our goal is partnering with other institutions and governments; we need a shared vision for positive change to combat the ills
that may be afflicting a particular country and its population. At the end of the day, politics is an element, but the end goal is to advance our global collective security and prosperity.

Sarah McLaughlin, SFCG (attendee): Based on conclusions and recommendations from the meta-evaluation that was conducted on CMM’s People-to-People (P2P) programming, how has CMM shifted their approach, especially to programming?

David: There were two main shifts. The evaluation of P2P demonstrated that the programs weren’t adding up to the intended goal of bringing peace writ large. Internally, we focused on how to concentrate for more than just a 2-3 year program to bring about peace writ large changes. How do we concentrate resources for a maximum effect?

Sukey Stephens, Heifer International (attendee): What are some of the ways you actively invest in topics on the technical leadership agenda?

Joe: CMM actively invests in technical leadership in two ways. In a more standard way, we commission research with small grants, and fund evaluations. The second way is bring experts together to think about a problem. If we are not able to commission research on a question, we enter a more exploratory mode. We bring experts in for a day, have a broad agenda, and have them design a research agenda. It’s important to have experts together, and see how the collaboration goes around certain problems. It’s not enough to just talk within the confines of the four walls of USAID, collaboration is key to success.

If you have any follow-up questions, please post them on the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum here.