The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation
Thursday Talks
“Linking Evaluation & Strategy at the
United States Institute of Peace”
Osama Gharizi, Program Officer
Michael Zanchelli, Senior Program Assistant

Part 1: Overview

Even as organizations get better at evaluating individual projects and programs, they still struggle to link evaluation to strategic-level planning and decision-making. Evaluations are often conducted in an ad hoc or opportunistic manner, without an overall strategy to feed the results of these evaluations into decision-making at every level. In April 2014, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) produced a five-year strategic plan.

The Learning and Evaluation Team at USIP is currently rolling out a comprehensive evaluation approach designed to provide guidance to USIP’s leadership on whether the Institute is achieving the strategic objectives in the plan and how it can do better. In this Thursday Talk, Osama Gharizi and Michael Zanchelli, of USIP’s Learning and Evaluation Team, introduce us to their process for creating and implementing USIP’s strategic plan.

About the Speakers

Osama Gharizi previously worked at the International Republican Institute (IRI) where he designed, managed and evaluated programs on governance, political party and civil society strengthening, and election observation. Prior to IRI, Osama worked for Transparency International’s chapter in Lebanon. He holds a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, with a concentration in economic and political development.

Michael Zanchelli provides support for program and knowledge management initiatives as well as learning and evaluation activities. Prior to this, Michael was the Peacebuilding Evaluation Junior Fellow based jointly at the Alliance for Peacebuilding and USIP, supporting the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium. He holds a M.A. in International Relations from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

Presenter Remarks

Background

USIP was established by Congress in 1984 as an independent, federally-funded national security institution devoted to the nonviolent prevention and mitigation of deadly conflict abroad. USIP achieves its mission through its active engagements in the world’s conflict zones, teaching and training, research and analysis, and global grant-making.

We have recently released our five-year plan, which outlines the United States Institute of Peace’s vision, mission, strategy, and priorities through 2019. We believe it is a substantial step forward in better positioning the Institute to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflict around the world and
serve the interests of the United States and societies worldwide. Still, we recognize that without implementation plans are meaningless.

We are going to talk through the process of drafting USIP’s strategic plan, how we are tracking that plan, and how we are tying evaluation into its goals.

Strategic plans are notorious for being enthusiastically drafted, but having little follow-through. In that way, by focusing on how to make a strategic plan living and actionable, what we are doing is fairly new in the field of peacebuilding. To accomplish this we have implementation and evaluation blueprints; the implementation blueprint focuses on better coordination and sequencing of activities, while the evaluation blueprint focuses on assessing progress toward goals and priorities and allows reflection on the strategic plan.

Our process was and continues to be heavily staff driven, heavily consultative. To answer the question, “how do we connect lofty goals with day to day work at USIP?” we had each team make a team oriented strategic plan with objectives and milestones. The strategic plan has generally been welcomed by our staff, but is has also been a reality check as to what the day to day and month to month needs are for the larger goals.

Challenges

• Demands on Staff: Staff buy in and involvement has mitigated this

• Working Linearly: Asking people to sequence their work in the form of milestones may be viewed as going against the peacebuilding field’s focus on flexibility.

• Linking to Management

• The Funding Conundrum: How do we know what we can do when it’s dependent on external funding? The key is to know what you WANT to do.

Before the Strategic Plan, things were very ad hoc. Lessons were not being applied on an aggregate level across the institution. Our 17 Strategic Evaluation Questions are key to the process (please see slide 8 of the Powerpoint for full descriptions of the Evaluation Question categorized into “efforts”). For each of the 17 SEQs there is a baseline to measure, what is our impact?

Ambient Data that has never been looked at is now coming to light. That data is being leveraged in new ways that are relevant across organization instead of just per team. That’s part of our goal, Harmonization and Aggregation: looking at the whole.

We also must consider Learning (1st and 2nd loop), the question is not only, are we building capacity? But, are we building the right capacities? This ties to Strategy vs Impact, considering whether we are making a small scale impact or making an impact relevant to the strategic plan; the question of USIP’s total impact will not be answered on the team level.

Our key takeaway is the importance of Linking to Decisionmaking, we must ensure lessons are being put into place, even though introducing new processes will meet resistance.
Part 2: Question & Answer

**Q: Melanie (Moderator):** Can you speak to any difficulties you encountered with getting people in the organization on board?

**A: Michael:** People at USIP want this plan to be implemented, they see its value to their work, and how it will stop their work from going to waste. As we mentioned earlier, there was significant buy-in and involvement from everyone at USIP.

**A: Osama:** During the beginning of our work on the Strategic Plan, there were definitely winds of change blowing at USIP. Dick Solomon (former President of USIP) was stepping down, people were looking for new leadership and vision. Things were changing and it was easy for people to get on board. There was also the added weight of a guided mandate from the top.

**Q: Andreas Hipple (Attendee):** Have you set benchmark or indicators for your SEQ? I see that you are using analysis of evaluations of different programs and grants but have you determined the benchmarks to look for in those evaluations?

**A: Osama:** We have a number of objectives, a number of indicators, and we are in the process of establishing baselines for each; each of our teams are devising team level strategies. We are hoping for a scale up approach and to aggregate those team level strategies and goals into our benchmarks.

**Q: Vanessa Corlazzoli (Attendee, Search for Common Ground):** (1) How do you plan to monitor the strategic plan? And who will be involved? How are you planning to include and be inclusive of your stakeholders (CSOs, junior staff, participants) as part of your monitoring of the strategy? (2) What have you learned from the private sector that actively creates and monitors strategic plans? And more specifically how they monitor and evaluate them

**A: Osama:** We have in place an evaluation blueprint for monitoring the strategic plan. As for who is involved, our approach is holistic; teams are responsible for collecting information, while Michael and I are supervising the collection and results. The best way of easing resistance to monitoring is through buy in, which we have done.

**Q: Mary Sue Smiaroski (Attendee):** In terms of use of evaluations, you mentioned that you are introducing a new level of rigor and reflection in your work and that has been a hand-holding experience. Can you be a bit more specific of actions you have taken to increase use? And given that the plan was mostly internal, how did you get the leadership team to get these things to cascade down?

**A: Michael:** Andy Blum (the Learning and Evaluation Team’s previous leader) focused on cultivating evaluation champions around the organization, and had a clear sense of who was on board with M&E. We continue to turn to those people to lead Strategic Plan initiatives. We also have a new team within the Strategic Plan for Strategic Research, which helps feed this research back into the organization.

**A: Osama:** We are trying to establish an evaluation culture. We need staff to understand that evaluation is a process, and that this plan is a stage in that process. Initial resistance to the additional work that comes with the Strategic plan dissipated once staff saw the value add.

**A: Michael:** Strategic plan creates strong leadership roles by empowering team leaders to create team level plans, so there’s very little training. It’s a bit messier, but it’s more organic.
Q: Melanie (Moderator): Can you talk a little bit about the costs involved?

A: Michael: We are not entirely sure what our costs are. It’s difficult to parse out what’s part of the Strategic Plan and what’s become integrated in day to day activity. We have worked hard to integrate the plan into the day to day, which is good for sustainability. But it means that breaking down exact costs is difficult.

Q: Peter Woodrow: To what extent is there a superordinate goal of providing "evidence" of effectiveness to Congress?

A: Michael: There is no articulated goal within the plan to provide evidence to Congress. But evaluation inherently holds proof of its progress.

A: Osama: We have to look back a few years when Congress was thinking of shutting down USIP. That crisis moment made leadership realize that they needed to start demonstrating impact. It centers everyone’s attention at USIP on common objectives, and the Strategic Plan gives everyone a platform to work towards that.