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INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

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From: **Johnny Walsh, DDI/DAA , DDI's Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DDI/DRG)**

Subject: USAID Initial Response to Disinformation and Related Issues

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- DDI/DRG organized a full-day pan-USAID workshop on how we can better respond to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (sometimes abbreviated at USAID as MDM). The exercise gathered roughly 50 participants, and reflected a shared judgment that MDM has become a pervasive problem for USAID, the broader U.S. government (USG), and the world. It poses significant risk to USAID and its staff, partners, and programs, especially in the field.
- Key takeaways from the workshop included a shared perception that we are not set up bureaucratically to programmatically or operationally respond well to MDM. Internally, we need to share information, clarify roles, and tighten our operations. Externally, we need more strategic and comprehensive partnerships with interagency leads on MDM, the technology sector, and academia, among others.
- Moving forward, DDI/DRG will shepherd a process to better define the problem, produce a framework document for our efforts moving forward, explore some form of intra-agency entity on MDM, and use these tactics to strengthen USAID's response to the needs identified above.

BACKGROUND:

On May 25th, DDI/DRG organized a strategic planning workshop with approximately 50 participants from each of the USAID Regional Bureaus, CPS, PPL, LPA, SEC, and DDI. Prior to the workshop, DDI/DRG conducted an Agency-wide survey to gather feedback from USAID/Washington and Missions, which solicited more than 100 responses. Below is a list of key takeaways from those consultations:

- **The need to share and learn from what different parts of the Agency are doing:** USAID requires Agency-wide guidance to address MDM. We need to systematically share information on our programmatic and operational work streams across the Agency (e.g. on security and reputational risk, strategic communications, cybersecurity, etc.). USAID has considerable tools to counter MDM, given its global presence, local

partnerships, and work across diverse sectors, but the Agency must take a more systematic approach to deploying those tools.

- **The need to clarify roles, responsibilities, and response mechanisms within USAID:** MDM is a whole-of-Agency problem, but roles, responsibilities, and response mechanisms are largely undefined — both within respective Missions, Bureaus, and Independent Offices (M/B/IOs) and Agency-wide. While some M/B/IOs (e.g. DRG, OTI, or GH) are tackling MDM through targeted programming and by measuring the MDM-related impact of their programs , other M/B/IOs are less intentionally engaged on MDM, and might benefit from institutional expertise on how MDM impacts their work and best practices to address it. The respective roles of Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA), Office of Security (SEC), Innovation, Technology, and Research Hub (ITR), Office of Acquisition, and Assistance (OAA) and others are also important to define in USAID's overall approach to combating MDM.

- **The need to assess our operations in order to respond to reputational and security risks:** Information theft and manipulation affects USAID's reputation and security as well as those of its staff and local partners. USAID has not adequately assessed reputational and security risks to USAID mission staff and implementing partners stemming from MDM campaigns, or the direct risks MDM may pose to its operations. USAID also lacks communication guidance on how to best prepare to respond to targeted MDM campaigns that affect its programs, staff, implementing partners, and civil society. Further, there is no information sharing or reporting mechanism between USAID missions and Washington Headquarters, creating gaps in information and awareness of threats that could help reduce operational risks. A solution would entail clarifying USAID's policies, organizational structures, training, resources, budget, contracting, and personnel to document these instances - and more importantly, to better respond.

- **The need to strengthen interagency coordination:** USAID could benefit from more intentional interagency coordination both in DC and in the field. USAID employees (leadership and working level) are not systematically made aware of or know how to deploy the tools available across the USG that may help them in their response to MDM. For example, the Global Engagement Center's (GEC) Insights Quantified (GEC-IQ) platform offers analysis and social media analytics tools to track MDM campaigns. Moving forward, USAID can better partner with the interagency in DC and in the field, and through NSC processes like the "information integrity and resilience" and "sensitive messaging" IPCs to strengthen the coordination. Our contribution will draw on our programs and localized knowledge; we can also revisit applicable lessons learned from the USG coordinating mechanisms for counterterrorism, countering violent extremism, and atrocity prevention.

- **The need for localized and contextual solutions to understand the information and media environment:** USAID's local knowledge and partnerships are a substantial comparative advantage. We are well positioned to fill gaps that the interagency and the tech sector often struggle to handle, especially by strengthening a society's resilience to disinformation before any specific campaign takes root. For example in Georgia, USAID

is implementing a one of a kind "whole-of-society" program to address disinformation and strengthening the resilience of the information environment at the local level by providing targeted trainings to media and civil society, and working with local data scientists, emerging technologists, religious figures, artists, and anthropologists addressing MDM.

- **The need to strengthen our relationship with the tech sector:** USAID should coordinate and expand partnerships with both established digital platforms and emerging technology firms, particularly with an eye to places where these companies lack significant local presence and operations to address MDM. Such partnerships could seek to strengthen the information environment by supporting independent media, digital literacy, and cyber hygiene training, as well as ways for local media, civil society, democratic host-government counterparts, our missions, and implementing partners to track, report and elevate MDM-related concerns more strategically and systematically.

- **The need to elevate USAID's focus and capacities related to the cybersecurity of programs:** There is growing evidence that insufficient cybersecurity contributes to the success of MDM campaigns directly harming our programs. In one recent instance, the Nicaraguan government launched a two-year disinformation campaign against a local civil society organization funded by USAID, to pave the way for a legal attack on the partner and the media sector at large (lawfare) that resulted in prison sentences of 9-13 years for members of the local CSO. These campaigns are spread by coordinated troll groups trained and funded by the government, as well as with technical support from third country malign governments. During that disinformation campaign, the government conducted cyberattacks on several media outlets that attempted to report on the government's disinformation campaign. These incidents and broader trends strongly indicate these types of attacks are more widespread and will continue to accelerate in pace, scale, and sophistication. This could create an existential threat to USAID's ability to ensure the security of local partners and to implement programs, especially in unstable or otherwise closing spaces.

Elements of a Stronger USAID Response

At the workshop and in subsequent discussions, the Agency B/IO and DRG representatives have identified several key things we as an Agency seek to accomplish en route to a more coordinated, integrated, potent USAID capability to address MDM.

- **Define the problem and our objectives.** We will agree upon a definition that captures the scope, scale, and distinctive challenge of disinformation at USAID. We will survey USAID's existing efforts on MDM, identify gaps and opportunities, and develop a manageable set of strategic objectives.

- **Develop an interim framework document.** This should address the challenge, provide guidance to USAID Missions and B/IOs, and propose a manageable number of strategic priorities on MDM, including identification of a few countries for cross-sector interventions.

- **Set up a USAID entity to lead on disinformation.** This requires further thought, but we are exploring a number of models for a Whole-of-Agency body to coordinate MDM efforts. Key to this effort will be the ability to bring (depending on the situation) senior leadership and working-level representatives from relevant regional and functional B/IOs across the Agency, who can give a portion of their time to this challenge, to ensure we get whole-of-agency, cross-sector representation. We envision this entity will be led by DRG, but initially, will not be a full-time standing body or have its own budget. We want to remain flexible as our needs to address this challenge evolve.
    - Even such an internal body is sensitive right now because of the recent backlash against DHS' "Disinformation Governance Board." To guard against any similar backlash (against what would be a very different enterprise from DHS'), we will work closely and transparently with the NSC, State, and others to ensure we are avoiding all foreseeable pitfalls.

- **Assess and Expand Programmatic Responses:** We will catalog existing programs that are addressing MDM, identify gaps and opportunities for innovation, and establish mechanisms to share best practices. From this exercise we will develop strategic objectives for USAID's overall programmatic response to this challenge.

- **Reform USAID Operations**: We will consult across the Agency, including with PPL, LPA, SEC, ITR Cybersecurity, and HCTM, to identify needed operational changes, such as best ways for the missions to respond to reputational, security risk, and employee resilience. From this exercise we will establish clear strategic communication guidelines, in collaboration with LPA. We will similarly identify MDM issues for our implementing partners, and how we can respond.

- **Strengthen External Partnerships:** We will solidify external relationships with the tech sector (social media and emerging technologies in Silicon Valley and in developing countries where we serve), implementing partners, NGOs, and local institutions to elevate and share MDM related challenges and best practices. One way that USAID can lead in this arena is to support the formation of locally led independent coordination bodies, inclusive of civil society, the tech sector, and relevant government stakeholders to elevate and prioritize concerns, promote accountability, and facilitate cooperation.

NEXT STEPS:

I have asked Vera Zakem, our newly-arrived Senior Advisor for Tech and Democracy and a broadly recognized expert on disinformation, to spearhead planning on this effort: defining the problem, developing an interim framework document, planning for a cross-Agency entity to lead on these issues, and mapping initial steps the Agency should take to begin reforming USAID operations and strengthen external partnerships. Other experts across USAID will support Vera, and we will work closely with interested bureaus at every turn. In the next month or two, we

will follow up with an Action Memo for your approval to launch some or all of these efforts in earnest.

Attachment:

- External views on the DHS disinformation governance board

CLEARANCE PAGE

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Approved: DDI/DAA: LMarr for A-AA: KFickenscher 6/16/2022

Bureau Level Clearances	**Clearance Status**	**Date**
DDI/DRG: JWalsh	Clear	6/12/2022
CPS/AtA: RJenkins	Clear	6/15/2022
CPS/OTI/Dir: BBrown	Clear	6/14/2022
LPA/ Rebecca Chalif	Clear	6/6/2022
LPA/Lauren Shaw	Info only	6/8/2022
PPL/A-AtA: SWalter	Clear	6/8/2022
PPL/SPP: GYang	Clear	6/6/2022
EE/S. Maguire	INFO	6/9/2022
SEC: Brian McGill	Info Only	6/6/2022
DDI/DRG/Dir: RTucci	Clear w/edits	6/3/2022
DDI/DRG/Dep Dir: DBlack	Clear	6/8/2022
DDI/DRG/DRI: MKaran	Clear with edits	6/3/2022
DDI/DRG/CSM: MDouglas	Clear	6/3/2022
DDI/DDI/ITR/A-Dir: AContreras-Donello	Clear w/edits	6/8/2022
DDI/ITR: JO'Bryan	Info Only	6/8/2022
DDI/ITR/Dir: TJones	Info Only	6/8/2022
NST: Sophia Lalani	Clear w/edits	7/1/2022
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