USAID DRG Strategic Priorities
Paper to accompany Strategic Priorities slides
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The resurgence of authoritarianism, increase in democratic backsliding, rapid spread of technology, rampant disinformation, corruption, growing inequality, the COVID pandemic, and malign actions by Russia and China have all dramatically changed the development environment and created significant challenges for democracy assistance. USAID and its partners have been adapting to meet many of these challenges, but we recognize that much more needs to be done and we are looking forward to doing so in alignment with this Administration's priorities. The first slide offers ideas for the type of work we do, for example moving more rapidly to address emerging issues such as corruption, disinformation and cybersecurity, or revitalizing work in areas where we've lost some credibility, such as human rights. The second slide provides examples of proposed pivots in the way we work, for example by broadening the range of partners with whom we work.

Pivoting USAID Foreign Assistance to Adapt to Today's Challenges (Slide 1)

Counter authoritarianism and strengthen democracies. In partnership with democratic allies, the USG must call out and counter aggressive efforts by authoritarian countries to undermine democratic institutions and democratization globally. USAID should focus on implementing its long-term sustainable development model - steeped in a strong understanding of the local context - to directly counter the internal factors that are driving autocratization and polarization in partner countries. Authoritarianism and hyper-partisanship are parts of a complex set of local power dynamics between actors controlling or seeking to control local institutions of power. USAID is well positioned through its programs to shore up the strength of institutions of accountability and justice to resist creeping authoritarianism.

Combat corruption and strengthen accountability. USAID should reemphasize institutional strengthening work - including public administration, public financial management and oversight, transparency, and accountability mechanisms at all levels of government - with a view towards promoting broader accountability amongst the branches of government. We should reinvest in building the capacity of countries to prevent, detect, mitigate, and sanction corruption, while addressing the underlying drivers that allow corruption to flourish. It is also necessary to enhance our support to the legal, investigation and sanctioning functions that combat corruption impunity, and support for civil society, investigative journalists, and private sector stakeholders to provide oversight and ensure government accountability. Finally, all USAID programming will be more effective if we integrate anti-corruption approaches across all USAID sectors and find ways to address the increasingly global scale of corruption (including illicit finance, money laundering, transnational organized crime, kleptocracy and authoritarian networks).

Broaden support for human rights, rule of law, and citizen empowerment. USAID must broaden its human rights approach to emphasize the rule of law's role in sanctioning perpetrators of human rights abuses, deepen efforts to promote internet freedom and democratic technology

as a means of protecting and advancing human rights online, and expand support for civil society, human rights defenders, and independent media and other scrutiny actors to hold governments accountable. This includes partnerships with the U.S. private sector, especially technology companies, to counter disinformation and digital authoritarianism.

Make aid more strategic. USAID can make democracy assistance more strategic and effective, for example by re-investing in evidence-informed programming, developing better data on malign soft power, incorporating social and behavioral change approaches in programs, and using AI and machine learning to inform strategic planning. To keep up with the very fluid and rapidly changing development environment, we should utilize existing more flexible and innovative assistance mechanisms and approaches (and ensure staff have relevant expertise). We can also make all aid more effective by increasing efforts to integrate DRG programming throughout the Agency's development portfolio, using political economy analyses to help improve development outcomes, and framing our assistance in terms of participation, inclusion, transparency, accountability, and equity. Foreign assistance built on such a foundation of democratic governance can also help counter false narratives that authoritarian regimes are more responsive to their citizens. Evidence abounds that inclusive democratic governance correlates with economic growth.

Invest in youth. With 16 percent of the global population between the ages of 15-24, it is vital that the Agency take steps to ensure that young people are included and engaged in democratic processes and participate in responses to crises. Movements and informal actions led by youth require the support of civil society to help move an issue from protest to policy, and build more inclusive, equitable and resilient democracies. USAID should invest more to support young people to responsibly consume and produce information on their rights, responsibilities, and role of government.

Operational Pivots to Adapt to Today's Challenges (Slide 2)

Acknowledge the overlap of US and overseas democracy & governance programs/authorities, and help restore US credibility and leadership on democracy, human rights and governance. To be credible in delivering democracy assistance, we need to acknowledge our weaknesses, which is a sign of strength, helps distinguish us from our adversaries, and builds trust and credibility with our partners. We believe that USAID can play a prominent role in President Biden's planned Summit for Democracy and is uniquely positioned to help countries implement Summit deliverables. We also are positioned to help this Administration demonstrate how democracy assistance and foreign aid benefits Americans. Also, because many of the democracy challenges in developing countries, such as disinformation, election security, extremist speech on social media platforms, equity in criminal justice, and transnational corruption, are the same types of challenges we're facing in the US, USAID should increase engagement with other US and USG partners like the Department of Homeland Security that are tackling these issues here in the US, both to learn lessons that might be applied overseas, and also to coordinate on issues that know no borders.

Revitalize USAID engagement in bilateral and multilateral fora that drive collective global action on democracy issues, and seek partnership opportunities with other donors and

development stakeholders. USAID must also help set, promote and monitor compliance with international norms on anti-corruption, transparency and accountability, internet governance, data privacy, surveillance technology, and cybersecurity, in order to re-assert U.S. leadership and counter efforts by China and Russia to leverage aid and influence to gain allies.

Expand USAID collaboration with other USG and private sector. We also need to broaden our partnerships with other USG and the private sector in order to address democracy challenges.For example, USAID and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation should work closely to more strategically counterbalance investments by China and its parastatals in order to leverage each other's comparative advantages. USAID could also expand partnerships with the U.S. foreign investment community on issues of business transparency, open government, and integrity/anti-corruption measures, and with the tech companies on issues such as disinformation and cybersecurity.

Advocate in the USG inter-agency for USAID leadership in areas where USAID DRG has the comparative advantage. As the State Department's share of the global DRG assistance budget has increased in the past decade, the overlap of State and USAID DRG programming has increased significantly, including in areas where USAID retained distinct comparative advantages. USAID leadership should seek to clarify within the interagency and with Congress those areas where USAID has comparative advantages and experience, such as generally longer term, field managed programs that focus more deeply on capacity development for local actors and result in more sustainable change, and advocate for budget decisions that reflect the relative programming strengths of each interagency partner.