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PROGRAM REVIEW OF USAID INFORMATION RESILIENCE AND INTEGRITY PROJECTS

JULY 2023

Prepared under Contract GS-10F-0033M / 7200AA18M00016, Tasking N088

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Acronyms

DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
EGAP	Evidence in Governance and Politics
GIIP	Georgia Information Integrity Project
IP	Implementing Partner
IRI	Information Resilience and Integrity
MDM	Mis-, dis-, and mal-information
MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OTI	Office of Transitional Initiatives
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
TOC	Theory of change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Executive Summary

Overview

Increasing the supply of high-quality information from independent, credible sources and building societal resilience to mis-, dis-, and mal-information (MDM) is a global priority. In response, USAID and its Implementing Partners (IPs) have developed and implemented a wide range of activities designed to mitigate the harms associated with manipulated information across global regions and sectors, including but not limited to Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG), Health, and the Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI).

This Program Review provides an overview of the breadth and depth of USAID's programming related to Information Resilience and Integrity (IRI). It is based on a detailed examination of 23 projects that cover all regions where USAID operates and a wide range of activity types, including "supply-side" interventions focusing on media development, regulatory reform, content creation, and others – along with "demand-side" interventions that aim to help citizens detect and critically respond to non-credible information sources, attenuate the influence of content from malign actors, and achieve related goals.

This Program Review is not an evaluation of USAID's IRI portfolio. Rather, it aims to understand the types of interventions being funded by USAID; identify gaps in programming; provide an updated typology that reflects the scope of USAID's IRI programing; examine strategies for monitoring, evaluations, learning, and research (MERL); and provide a summary of the emerging evidence on what's working. Based on the findings, the Program Review offers a set of recommendations to USAID related to programming and MERL strategies. A full description of the goals and research questions is provided below.

This review draws on two principal information sources. First, the research team carried out a document review for 23 programs, based on project descriptions, quarterly and annual reports, M&E plans, evaluations, and other relevant materials provided by USAID and IPs. Second, the team conducted 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 41 individuals, including USAID HQ and Mission personnel, as well as IP staff based in the US and in country offices. In collaboration with USAID, the study team selected seven countries for in-depth case studies, reflecting the diversity of contexts and project types that fall under USAID's information resilience and integrity portfolio. In each case study country, the research team interviewed Mission personnel and in-country staff from implementing partners.[1]

Key Findings

1. **USAID programming related to information resilience and integrity includes a diverse set of projects with distinct objectives and theories of change**. While the wide set of activities are all conceptually related, respondents consulted for this report noted some

[1] As noted below, the research team was not able to arrange interviews for one of the selected case study countries, Tanzania.

important distinctions in how they understand core objectives. Specifically, some respondents conceptualize interventions as promoting information integrity and building a resilient media environment, while others view their efforts as designed to counter MDM, often related to context-specific threats and actors. While these differences may in part reflect the lack of agreement on shared terminology, they have [illegible] alternative frames inform how program designers and implemen[illegible] change and articulate the associated harms they aim to mitigate[illegible] varied on whether IRI projects should aim to produce behavior changes. While some projects, particularly those related to media literacy and alternative narratives, explicitly aimed to change individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, many other projects, especially related to media development, framed their goals in terms of contributing to overall information ecosystems.

Names of 23 programs reviewed – list here.

2. **While USAID supports many IRI activities, programming is concentrated in two main areas: media development and citizen engagement / literacy.** A smaller set of programs focus on connecting and augmenting the work of other stakeholders, on monitoring and understanding MDM, and on responding to MDM through strategic communications offering alternative narratives.

3. **While there is widespread support for addressing cross-cutting issues related to gender and marginalized / vulnerable groups, few projects make this a central goal, and respondents disagreed about whether targeted programming was always needed.** Respondents expressed support for the general idea that USAID and IPs should do more to address MDM related to gender and marginalized groups, which can increase the risks of violence against these groups and discourage participation in politics, among other harms. Respondents agreed that these issues were often not being adequately considered during program design. **Consistent with this, the program review found that only eight of 23 projects incorporated cross-cutting issues in meaningful ways.** However, views on the importance of program targeting differed among respondents. While many expressed support for activities designed to address group-specific harms related to MDM, other respondents viewed interventions as taking a “whole-of-society” approach that benefited all social segments, making targeting unnecessary.

4. **Theories of change are typically not assessed by existing MERL approaches.** The theories of change articulated in project documents typically emphasize high-level impacts, including increased availability of quality information, greater demand for impartial information, increased citizen participation, improved inclusion and tolerance, and greater transparency and accountability in government. MERL plans, on the other hand, tend to focus mainly on outputs and short-term outcomes, including the number of journalists trained and workshops held, the number of legal reforms attempted, the reach of content

produced by USAID-supported actors, and other related measures. The focus on outputs and short-term outcomes reflects the inherent difficulties of measuring long-term outcomes and impacts for most IRI projects. Moreover, in some cases it is neither desirable nor feasible to focus on impacts, including in conflict-affected and transitioning countries, where evolving political condition and project objectives may limit opportunities for measuring impacts. In other cases, though, opportunities exist for integrating MERL approaches that have the potential to narrow the gap between the goals expressed in TOCs and the data collected to track program implementation and effectiveness.

5. **There is an insufficient evidence base to allow for definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of some IRI activities on higher-order outcomes.** Impact evaluations based on randomized-controlled trials and other credible research designs are rare for IRI projects, and the existing academic literature is under-developed in this area. Despite this, there is widespread agreement that some interventions – particularly those related to media development and media literacy – can be effective at building the capacity of media organizations and other stakeholders to provide accurate, independent information and building skills citizens need to navigate complex information landscapes. Additional research will be valuable for helping USAID and IPs more fully "tell the story" of program successes, test intervention strategies, and examine the relative effectiveness of alternative approaches.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the key findings outlined here, as well as others described in subsequent sections, we offer a set of recommendations related to programming and MERL approaches to USAID and its partners. The recommendations are described in more detail at the end of the report.

Programmatic Recommendations
1. Expand programming informed by behavior change theory and designed for adaptability, iteration, and learning. 2. Prioritize refining and expanding media literacy programs. 3. Consider expanding strategic communications programs related to information resilience. 4. Consider ways of integrating non-media programming more fully in the information resilience and counter-MDM toolkit. 5. Develop theories of change that match project timelines. 6. Reconsider how USAID approaches relationships with social media platforms in its programming. 7. Encourage IPs to design programs with deeper consideration of gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) issues

MERL Recommendations
1. USAID should dedicate more resources to MERL for IRI/MDM programs. 2. Programs should consider increased usage of complexity-aware MERL strategies. 3. USAID and IPs should track how programs affect women and people from marginalized groups as part of routine project monitoring. 4. National opinion surveys are useful for tracking attitudes and behaviors but in most cases should not be used for outcome indicators. 5. Content reach is not a strong outcome indicator and should be coupled with other means of assessing audience impact, when possible. 6. USAID should increase the use of impact evaluation methods for some types of projects.

2. Goals, Research Questions, and Methodology

Goals and Research Questions

The goal of this program review is to examine the portfolio of USAID-funded projects related to information resilience and integrity. This review does not serve as an evaluation of USAID-funded projects; rather, it aims to take stock of USAID programming, and examine theories of change, approaches to cross-cutting issues, monitoring and evaluation strategies, and evidence of effectiveness. The review is guided by a set of research questions (RQs) initially presented in the Concept Note and subsequently refined with input from USAID after project launch:

(RQ1) Theories of Change. How do USAID projects define information resilience and integrity and conceptualize the harms associated with MDM? What types of theories of change (TOC) are being used by projects seeking to prevent or address these harms? Are there ways to improve TOCs for USAID's activities?

(RQ2) Stocktaking of Activities. What approaches are USAID and its implementing partners using to build information resilience and integrity and to counter MDM? How are these related to the theories of change above? What is the appropriate typology for information resilience and integrity projects and adjacent programs? Are there types of activities that are over- or under-represented?

(RQ3) Stocktaking of Approaches Related to Cross-Cutting Issues. What share of projects are addressing issues related to gender and marginalized groups (e.g., immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ communities, etc.)? What strategies are being used?

(RQ4) Stocktaking of MERL Approaches. What MERL strategies (and indicators) are currently being used by USAID and its implementing partners? Are TOCs being used to inform MERL strategies?

(RQ5) Analysis of Impact. Which of the current approaches seem to be working best to increase information resilience and integrity and to address MDM? Which of the current approaches have the most evidence to support their effectiveness? What contextual factors affect the impact of these approaches?

(RQ6) Recommendations. Which approaches appear to be most promising? What approaches are missing in USAID's current programs? What indicators should USAID use to track program effectiveness? What additional MERL approaches should be considered?

Methodology

Document review. The study team compiled and examined program documents provided by USAID related to 23 projects, including several that are regional in scope (see Annex D for a list). Documents included: (1) program work plans; (2) quarterly and annual reports; (3) MERL plans; and (4) and evaluation/research reports (see Annex H for a complete list of documents). Based on this material, the team catalogued activities by type, refined the typology of USAID information resilience and integrity programming, and analyzed information related to the core research questions, focusing on theories of change, MERL strategies, cross-cutting issues, and evidence of impact.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The study team conducted 20 KIIs with a total of 41 participants. This included interviews with headquarters personnel from USAID and Implementing Partners. The team also conducted interviews with USAID Mission staff and IPs in six case study countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, Libya, Nicaragua, and Indonesia.[2] The KIIs for the case studies were designed to complement information obtained through the document review and allow for further exploration of core topics. The set of case study countries was chosen in collaboration with USAID to ensure the inclusion of multiple project types and implementing partners, and to cover multiple regions and political regime types. The study team conducted all KIIs remotely between May 12 and July 14, 2023.

[2] The set of case study countries also included Tanzania, thought the study team was not able to arrange an interview with relevant personnel for this report.

3. Theories of Change

RQ1.1: How do USAID projects define information resilience and integrity and conceptualize the harms associated with MDM?

Primary Findings:

- USAID staff largely pull from similar definitions of MDM and consider information resilience a broader, longer-term goal than countering MDM.
- The harms attributed to MDM and low information resilience are many and varied, producing several distinct families of change theories.

RQ1.2: What types of theories of change (TOC) are being used by projects seeking to prevent or address these harms?

Primary Finding:

- While USAID supports many IRI activities, programming is concentrated in two main areas: media development and citizen engagement / literacy. Strict "counter-MDM" activities are rare.

RQ1.3: Are there ways to improve TOCs for USAID's activities?

Primary Finding:

- Theories of change should be less abstract and more measurable, better connecting proposed activities to desired changes, which were often high-level and vague.

Improving information resilience, promoting information integrity, and responding to MDM are broad goals. The projects considered in this review tackled them in many different ways: some attempt to improve the supply of quality media and public access to it. Others try to understand and respond directly to low-integrity information from bad actors. Still others disseminate alternative narratives meant to blunt the impact of MDM and promote social cohesion and other goals.

This section of the report explores how programs describe what they aim to achieve, and how they hope to achieve it. It explores competing conceptions of the core problem, examines the types of harms programs are concerned with, and summarizes common interventions used to prevent or mitigate those harms. Some theories of change operate purely on a systemic level such as national media environments, while others are focused on specific changes in behaviors or (more rarely) attitudes.

Not every program provided documents explicitly laying out a theory of change, and even fewer used the classic "if-then," format. For those projects that did not, this review tries to infer one from stated objectives or other available information. Sometimes, interviews were the best way

of assessing a given program's theory of change. Most projects focused on media development, support for journalists and media outlets, or various forms of media literacy. Other theories of change were less well-represented.

In general, even theories of change that were explicitly spelled out in program documents sometimes contained gaps, leaps of logic, or vagaries that inhibit monitoring and evaluation. This often leads to disconnects between theories of change and MERL indicators. These issues are elaborated on in later sections that take stock of activities and MERL approaches.

Defining the Problem

The goals of promoting high-integrity information and a resilient media environment are distinct from countering MDM. This distinction was an important theme during interviews. Which of these frames a program uses often informs its theory of change—as does the way it articulates the associated harms.

The Executive Branch has already weighed in on this distinction and provided a starting point for common definitions of a wider frame. In a December 2022 "Roadmap for Researchers on Priorities Related to Information Integrity Research and Development," the National Science & Technology Council laid out four goals:[3]

- to help individuals discern between "high-integrity" and "low-integrity" information,
- to prevent or minimize avoidable harms from information manipulation,
- to promote resilience—the ability of people to operate in the context of potentially questionable information and of communities to "maintain appropriate levels of information integrity" despite uncertainty or active manipulations,
- and the collection of "high-quality evidence" for evaluating strategies for addressing information integrity challenges.

This suggests that at high levels within the US government, a distinction is being made between two terms that were often used but not well-defined during interviews for this project: "information integrity" and "information resilience." The National Science & Technology Council's usage suggests it views integrity as a measurement applied to a unit of *content*, while resilience is related to societal ability to identify, produce, and access information of high integrity. It also highlights that low-integrity information—including but distinct

> *We agree with the standard definitions—disinformation is intentional spread of misinformation; misinformation is unintentional spread of inaccurate information.*
>
> *– Interview Participant*

[3] "Roadmap for Researchers on Priorities Related to Information Integr
Information Integrity Research & Development Interagency Working Gr
Technology Council (December 2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp
content/uploads/2022/12/Roadmap-Information-Integrity-RD-2022.pdf.

from “information manipulation”—produces discrete harms that the US government seeks to mitigate.

The goals of promoting high-integrity information and a resilient media environment are distinct from countering MDM (or “low-integrity information”). This distinction was an important theme during interviews. Which of these frames a program uses often informs its theory of change—as does the way it articulates the associated harms.

Many interview participants referenced “Mis-, Dis-, and Mal-information” as challenges to information integrity and resilience. This specific combination of terms reflects that USAID staff largely draw on the conceptual framework laid out by Claire Wardle’s work on “Information Disorder.”[4] When asked, all of the USAID staff interviewed for this report defined these terms as Wardle does: misinformation is the incidental, unintentional spread of false or misleading information—essentially rumors—while disinformation is understood to be intentional. (Mal-information is used less commonly and refers to true information used intentionally to harm, such as the release of hacked materials.) Many interviewees referenced Wardle and her work directly by name.

Some interview participants also felt that the definitions on offer, while widely cited, lacked a necessary degree of clarity around nuanced and sometimes sensitive issues. Some felt that “countering MDM” evokes geopolitical aspects of strategic communications by external authoritarian governments, even in contexts where domestic sources of MDM were more influential and harmful. Several expressed an appetite for more precise terms—even MDM obscures important differences between mis- and disinformation, for instance.

Interviewees typically agreed that resilience is a longer-term, broader goal than countering MDM. A few said that countering MDM was more “reactive” than promoting IRI. Some took a societal perspective and distinguished between efforts to expose and hold bad actors accountable and efforts to create a resilient environment in which those actors are less harmful. Others took a more individual-level perspective, seeking to identify and reduce harmful “end-state behaviors” motivated by MDM.

> *[Resilience] has to do with being able to not trigger these unhealthy end-state behaviors, to be able to recognize when you’re being deceived…But it’s also the broader context.*
>
> *– Interview Participant*

Not everyone agreed that the distinctions were significant. Some dismissed them as jargon, while others felt one or the other was more politically palatable. But most made some distinction along the lines above, and some felt that as a development agency USAID should work more holistically than a narrow “counter-MDM” frame or even media-bounded conceptions of resilience—that its work in this area should include larger issues of governance, democratic norms, and social cohesion and draw more often on civil society beyond the media sector like artists, activists, and advocacy organizations.

[4] Consider “Understanding Information Disorder,” Claire Wardle, First Draft News (September 22, 2020), https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/.

Getting Specific about Harms

> *Often, the TOC doesn't really know what it wants. We want to counter disinformation but why is that important?*
>
> *So many USAID TOCs are at this vague transformation level…what is the end state you expect to get to? Is it an aspirational goal that in the next generation this will not be an issue? Or is it that in five years you want to have reduced violence of certain communities? It's important to not oversimplify the problem, but we need to get specific about what we expect to achieve with a program.*
>
> *– Interview Participant*

Common agreement on the definition of a problem is not the same as agreement on how to address it (although it may be a necessary first step). Among the 23 programs included in this review, 12 contained an explicit TOC in the documents provided to the research team (see Annex X). As noted, for others the research team inferred the implicit TOC from stated objects and/or inquired about the TOC during interviews for the case study countries. Respondents conveyed that the theory of change pursued by a program is influenced by multiple factors, including the social and political context, the overall donor landscape in a country, and the available implementing partners. While responding to malign foreign influence is a common goal of IRI activities, many programs focused on other harms from MDM like reduced government accountability, behaviors which negatively impact public health or social stability, or abstract harms to democracy. The most sophisticated theories of change associated low-integrity information with specific harms and identified appropriate interventions.

The KIIs revealed that there is considerable variation in whether and how USAID and IP personnel view IRI programming as responding to malign foreign influence. Some interview participants said that they avoid the term "foreign interference" because sources of disinformation concerning their work are domestic in nature. Others noted that in some political contexts it is inadvisable or counterproductive to say explicitly that a program is responding to influence from specific countries, particularly the Russian Federation or People's Republic of China—even if that is an implicit goal. Interviewees also worried that responding to foreign influence does little to address underlying social issues like food insecurity or conflict. Mis- and disinformation can leverage or exacerbate these dynamics but is rarely their chief cause.

Many theories of change focused on individual behaviors, though here too interviewees disagreed on whether they thought behavior change was an appropriate goal for IRI programs. For example, USAID mission staff in one country explicitly described a media literacy program as focused on behavior change—specifically aiming to reduce consumption of information from untrustworthy sources. But the implementing partner was averse to the idea that their work promoted behavior change, saying "I hate the idea that we are trying to promote behavior change. I don't think that's our business. We are just trying to make sure [people] have access to reliable information and they know where that information is."

It is noteworthy that USAID staff focused on public health saw behavior change as an uncontroversial and longstanding objective of their programs—and as more important than anything having to do with the information environment. No matter what rumors are or are not circulating, they consider a program effective if it can be demonstrated to improved rates of concrete behaviors like handwashing or vaccine uptake. The COVID-19 pandemic changed their approach to this by demonstrating the importance of social factors: individuals might fail to adopt crucial behaviors not because they are misinformed or ignorant but because it affects how they are seen by their in-group. Alternatively, they may be more likely to believe or act on information coming from sources that are authoritative in their community, such as faith leaders. Regardless, the goal is the same: not eradication of untrue information or even change in beliefs, but adoption of public health behaviors.

> *Normally what we do is periodic audience research, understanding what the vulnerabilities are, who are the vulnerable audiences, then targeting behavior change challenges. Our activities are not necessarily debunking activities but understanding why they believe something and targeting that root cause.*
>
> *– Interview Participant from GIIP program*

> *[It's] fair to say this is more about attitudinal change than behavior change. Not sure there is a link in those communications campaigns that inculcates better habits when it comes to information consumption.*
>
> *– Interview Participant speaking on the GIIP*

A smaller number of programs focused on producing attitudinal changes, rather than behavioral changes. For example, the Georgia Information Integrity Project (GIIP), seeks to promote solidarity within Georgia and weaken disinformation narratives targeting the anxieties about Georgia's relationship with Europe and NATO through strategic communications. An example was the "Fruits of Heroism" campaign it developed in conjunction with Georgian partners for audiences in rural communities near the contested border with Russia. Individuals associated with this program said that communities in those areas often feel cut off, neglected by Tbilisi, and vulnerable to Russian hostility; this campaign recast them as patriotic heroes on the front line and encouraged Georgians in the capital to consume produce from those regions.

Categorizing Theories of Change

This review groups the theories of change pursued by USAID programs into five categories. By far the two largest are programs aiming to improve citizen engagement with media and those working to support national media sectors through systemic reform and increased capacity in individual organizations. A smaller set of programs focus on connecting and augmenting the work of other stakeholders, on monitoring and understanding MDM and its sources, and on responding to MDM through strategic communications offering alternative narratives.

1. Citizen engagement with information. Projects in this area tend to center the well-informed citizen as a necessary component of democracy. These programs often work to provide "neutral information" to audiences so they can, for example, make informed decisions during elections.

They might also seek to mitigate harms like voter suppression through disinformation. Many programs focus on developing some element of media literacy. Media literacy is understood in many different ways, and programs under the media literacy umbrella include those aiming to educate citizens about the media ecosystem, raise awareness of MDM, or help citizens identify and avoid sharing rumors and propaganda.

Examples of the types of theories of change being used in this area include the following:

- *IF critical thinking skills and media information literacy among citizens are strengthened…THEN citizens will use more accurate, objective news and information in their decision-making. (Azerbaijan Media and Journalism Activity)*

- *IF public demand for quality journalism grows…THEN the civically relevant role of media will be strengthened, and citizens will be equipped with quality information that counters malign influence and supports European integration. (Media Program in Ukraine)*

- *IF youth gain and apply media literacy and critical thinking skills as part of their education and in other youth-friendly formats…and IF they demand and drive increased volume of high-quality, fact-based, and relevant professional media content, THEN youth will be able to not only navigate but also shape an information ecosystem that informs and engages as opposed to divides and polarizes, resulting in increased resilience to disinformation and efforts to undermine democracy. (North Macedonia, YouThink)*

2. Systemic and organizational support to media. Programs sometimes draw an explicit link between audience *demand* for high quality content—driven by their ability to recognize and access it—and the increased *supply* of that content, driven by audience growth and other forms of support to both the media sector, individual outlets, and related civil society groups.

Many programs centered their theory of change on this support, which can include training for journalists, legal and technological support, grants to modernize newsroom business practices, provision of new infrastructure or equipment, advocacy for legal and regulatory reforms affecting the enabling environment for media, and support for independent high-quality content, among other things. Interviewed individuals were quick to point out that much of this is "traditional media activity" supported by USAID, which can be effective for reason beyond contributing to IRI. For example, some projects mentioned the watchdog role of media, while others emphasized that only professional, credible media can establish the bonds of trust with audiences necessary to inform the public. Some stressed that to survive and reach their full potential, media needs to make significant improvements to its business operations.

Example TOCs in this area include:

- *The purpose of [this program] was to increase media independence and create a more competitive and self-sustaining media environment [so that] citizens can be informed and hold their government accountable. To achieve its purpose, the Activity had two intermediate objectives: to support the development of a more enabling legal, regulatory,*

and market environment for media, and to support the development of financial sustainability, innovation, and partnerships in the media sector. (Serbia, Strengthening Media Systems)

- *If the legal and regulatory environment for media is strengthened, targeted media outlets become more independent and professional, and access to high quality public interest reporting increases, the media sector will be more vibrant, independent, and capable of shaping democratic discourse. (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Media Sector Development Activity)*
- *IF the media enabling environment…is improved and legal restrictions on the press and freedom of expression are reduced while journalist safety is promoted; and IF the skills and capacity of national media outlets, community radio stations, and journalists including women and youth is strengthened…THEN media and civil society will be better able to provide accurate and impartial information that represents the voices of all citizens, including women and youth, and enables citizens to engage in democratic processes. (Tanzania, the Boresha Habari Project)*

3. Networks and hubs focused on the information environment. Some programs aimed to increase capacity of local partners through hubs dedicated to research, training, and co-creation of projects and campaigns:

- *The network is founded on the idea that regional hubs are the drivers of change and creators of innovations that address their civic space challenges. Over the years, the resources, innovation processes, research, workshops, and campaigns developed and used by each regional hub have flowed across the network and spread from one regional hub to another. (Civil Society Innovation Initiative)*

4. Research and media monitoring. Other projects focused on understanding narratives within the media environment and how they spread. Interviewees conveyed that this was crucial for designing better interventions that effectively target context-specific sources of MDM, particularly in countries where assumptions about the sources of MDM and their influence have not been rigorously tested. But no project was primarily or solely devoted to researching, monitoring, or exposing MDM.

Hub projects like GIIP in Georgia often included a research component. In fact, the GIIP was one of the few to mention a research tool in its theory of change, shown below.

5. Strategic communications. The GIIP was also one of the few programs with a theory of change in the final category: the use of strategic communications to offer alternatives to disinformation narratives. Its full theory of change reads:

- *IF the USAID GIIP is able to map the actors, vectors, channels and audiences within the disinformation ecosystem in Georgia; AND IF: the project can bring together a diverse network of private and public sector actors across Georgia, building their capacity to work collectively to develop and test responses to disinformation identified through the ecosystem*

map, THEN: Network Partners can develop evidence-based, effective, scalable initiatives to counter disinformation in Georgia, sharing learnings throughout the network; AND IF: stakeholders can understand the impact of scalable solutions on target audiences, enabling the identification of sustainable responses to disinformation, and using learnings to drive advocacy for policy change at government level; THEN: vulnerable audiences in Georgia will develop and awareness of and response to disinformation, increasing societal resilience to misinformation and malign influence. (Georgia Information Integrity Project)

As in the previous example of GIIP's "Fruits of Heroism" campaign, these alternative narratives were not intended to debunk disinformation or correct false claims. Rather, they can be seen as serving both a supply and a demand function: they supply narratives that reframe social issues for audiences in ways that lower the demand for and the effectiveness of MDM.

Considerations on Scope, Time Horizons, and Context

Interview participants provided a few final considerations for theories of change. Some were skeptical of the scope of the IRI agenda. One asked whether or not responding to foreign malign influence was within USAID's "manageable interest," given the complexity of the challenge and limited resources. Some painted MDM as an issue that could be mitigated but not solved. But others cautioned that every project in the media program would somehow have to deal with the spread of perfidy and propaganda.

I think there is still this driving frame that this should be a fixable problem. That this is something we can solve for, even if we have to do it across multiple types of interventions. If we can realign the incentives that make disinformation such a pernicious aspect of the information environment, that we can in fact stuff this genie back in the bottle. I remain deeply skeptical of that as a driving objective. We're beginning to wrap our head around the idea that it might be manageable or mitigatable, but we're probably not going to eliminate this particular challenge.

Interview participants often reflected on how long observers should wait to see the changes programs pursue. Is the intended change broad and generational? Or is it a discrete, measurable change that will be detectable within five years? For some programs, especially those that deal with attitudinal change or "change in people's minds," the right time horizon might be generational. For others, like reforming media business practices, the program may aim to achieve an objective and wind down after five to ten years. While there is no one-size-fits-all answer, interviewees emphasized the need for specificity on this question.

RQ2.1: What approaches are USAID and its implementing partners using to build information resilience and integrity and to counter MDM?

Primary Finding:

- USAID staff draw from a deep pool of approaches to promote information resilience, spanning media development and literacy to research, strategic communications, and support for capacity-building hubs.

RQ2.2: How are these related to the theories of change above?

Primary Finding:

- It is possible to map the theories of change above directly to the activities included in this review.

RQ2.3: What is the appropriate typology for information resilience and integrity projects and adjacent programs?

Primary Finding:

- These activities and their objectives can be sorted into five overarching categories differentiated by whether they address information resilience or focus on mitigating harms from low-integrity information, and by whether or not they affect the supply of information, demand for it, or both.

RQ2.4: Are there types of activities that are over- or under-represented?

Primary Finding:

- Media development and media literacy are by far the most well-represented program types.

- Only two programs included elements of strategic communications.

4. Stocktaking of Activities

This section takes stock of USAID's information resilience and integrity programming, identifying common approaches, relating programs to theories of change, and noting gaps in programming. It also provides an updated typology of USAID-funded programs designed to assist USAID in

communicating what the agency is currently fundings in a concise, visual format for a variety of audiences, including Mission personnel and others interested in exploring potential intervention strategies.

Analysis of the theories of change described above revealed five major programming categories, represented in the revised typology shown in Figure 1. To examine how USAID-funded programs relate to this typology, the research team counted how many projects include components related to each of the five categories and sub-categories (see Figure 2). As noted above, the most well-represented category is systemic and organizational support for media, which captures various supply-side measures for improving IRI. The second most well-represented is improving citizen engagement with media—which includes methods for promoting IRI by increasing audience demand for high-integrity content and reducing demand for its opposite. Less well-represented were other categories focused on understanding and mitigating harms from low-integrity information (either on the supply or demand side).

Based on the revised typology, this section also examines common MERL indicators, grouping them by output indicators (representing activities) and outcome indicators (representing progress toward objectives). In most cases, it is difficult to ascribe any causal relationship between outputs and outcomes, or to say whether outcomes promote desired macro-level changes. For example, a participant can attend a training, but not apply the skills learned; if they do apply those skills, they still might not see the benefits the training was supposed to promote.

A Proposed Typology for USAID Programs Included in This Review

As a first step, NORC reviewed the initial typology developed by USAID staff to categorize programs.[5] This typology captured most of the programs included in this review but was somewhat cumbersome. The nine categories had significant overlap—for example, “legal and regulatory” was included both its own category and as a form of support under media development. An important caveat is that the revised typology is based only on the 23 programs included in this review and does not reflect other activity types that USAID may support for which program materials were unavailable or could not be shared with the review team.

Many USAID programs are large with many components, and so may be placed in more than one category. Given the broad scope of many programs, it is probably not feasible—or even helpful—to create a typology in which each program fits into only one category. However, it is possible to reduce the number of categories overall, making the typology easier to use and interpret. The revised condenses the nine categories included in the initial typology into five based on the similarity of their approaches and objectives.

Programs are organized across two axes in the typology. First, column labels on the top of the typology show how the five categories relate to core goals related to (1) information resilience (programs improving media production and consumption) and (2) harm mitigation/information integrity (programs focused more directly on understanding and reducing the effects of low-integrity information). Second, row labels on the left show how the main categories relate to the

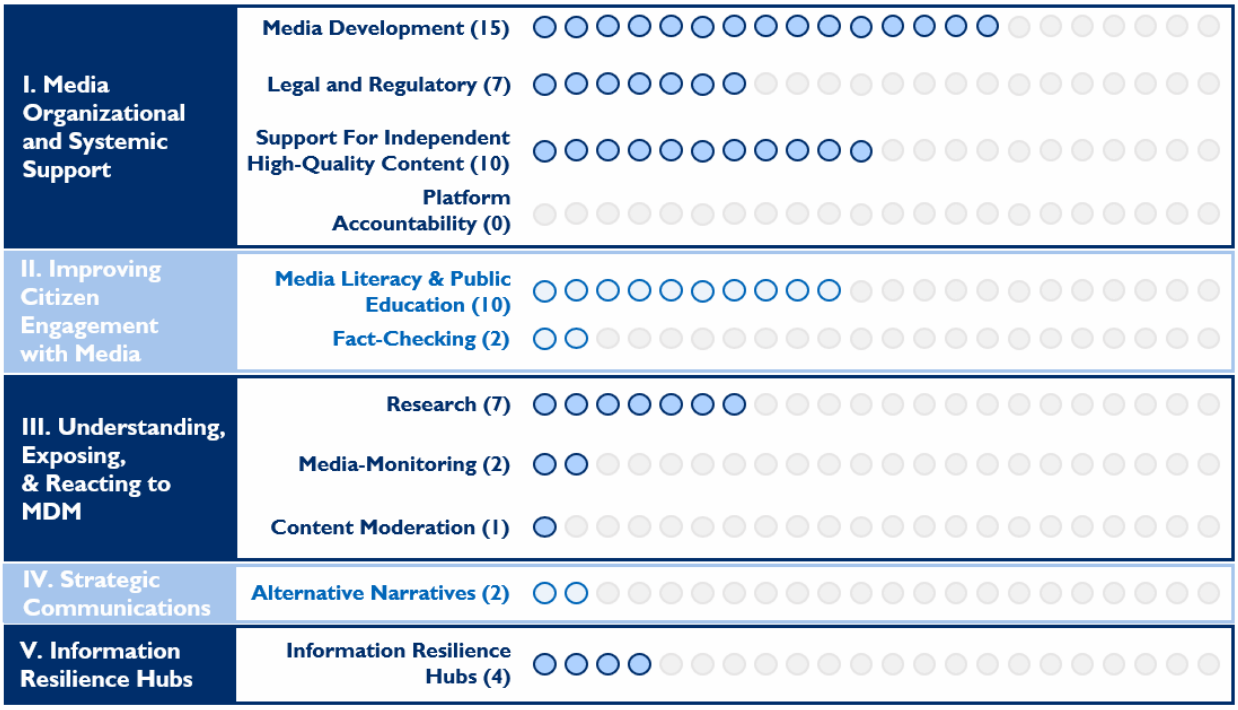
[5] This previously produced typology is available in Annex G of this report.

supply-demand categorization scheme that is commonly used to describe IRI/MDM approaches. Information resilience hubs, in the middle, increase capacity across other categories.

Figure 1. Revised Typology of USAID Information Resilience Programming.



Figure 2. How USAID Supports Information Resilience and Integrity



Notes: Figure shows the number or projects (out of the 23 contained in this review) that include activities related to each activity type. Because a project may contain multiple activity types, the total does not add up to 23.

Media Organizational & Systemic Support (17 out of 23 programs). These programs include efforts to support media at the environmental and operational levels—for example by supporting media reforms, improving the business environment for news media, providing legal or security assistance to journalists, or directly supporting content production. Theories of Change under this category tend to focus on increasing the "supply" of quality media. They may do this by improving the legal, regulatory, and financial factors within the enabling environment for media, or by improving the ability of individual media outlets to sustain themselves and create engaging content.

The words *organizational* and *systemic* were chosen purposefully for this exercise. Many of the programs in this review work to improve what is often called the "enabling environment" for media outlets—factors like the legal and regulatory regime and business climate for media. These programs help media as a system thrive. Other programs offer training, equipment, audience research, funding for content, or other forms of capacity and support to individual media partners. Some programs do both.

It is important to note that this report uses media in a broad sense, referring to any actor providing information to the public. Civil Society organizations, for example, are not typically classified as media—but when they produce content meant to be consumed as a supplement to news and information, they are treated that way by this typology.

One interview participant asked that media *infrastructure* be included in any new typology. “One of the types of programming we support is infrastructure, like supporting hard infrastructure around radio access to hard-to-reach areas,” they said. “This can be a theory of change of access to reliable information. Access to life-saving information is a piece in and of itself, but it’s also a place where disinformation can be particularly harmful.” The development of media infrastructure should be included here.

Finally, this typology separates out efforts to hold social media platforms accountable for their media effects into two distinct areas: the effects of their business models and content recommendations on the media environment as a whole fall under this category. Efforts to improve content moderation fall under a different category: understanding, exposing, and reacting to MDM. It is noteworthy that none of the programs reviewed for this report focused on the former type of platform accountability; it is included here to account for other projects which may not have been included in this review. Future projects may also fall under this area.

Common output indicators in this category include:

- Journalists receiving training or assistance (security, legal, etc.)
- Number of individuals receiving media literacy training
- The reach of specific news outlets or content

Outcome indicators include:

- Improvements in media professionalism, business practices, and sustainability
- Post-training assessments on topics like conflict and gender sensitivity
- the number of outlets which implement recommended reforms,
- policy and regulatory changes (or defeat of proposed negative changes)

Many projects in this category have indicators strongly tied to media development outcomes, but not every program ties its operational “output” indicators to outcomes this directly. For example, many projects measure the number of journalists trained or supported, without measuring changes in the impact that those journalists are able to make on the information environment. Some of the best indicators of support are qualitative, like the passage of certain reforms after an advocacy campaign. Causality can be difficult to quantitatively prove in these cases, but it is still useful evidence of impact.

Improving Citizen Engagement with Media (10 out of 23 programs). This category includes efforts to better equip citizens to navigate the information environment, identify credible news sources, and distinguish them from untrustworthy sources. This often involves some form of media literacy education—in schools, through adult training programs, or in other venues. Sometimes education occurs online through social media campaigns or games designed to

impart media literacy skills or best practices. It also includes forms of content, like fact-checks, designed to help individuals assess the veracity of claims. Many of these programs aim to amplify their reach by providing training to educators or peer-to-peer trainers, who share lessons learned with others.

Theories of change in this category often emphasize the relationship between a robust media and an informed citizenry capable of holding government actors accountable—what one program called a “vibrant, independent media sector capable of shaping democratic discourse.” They sometimes frame this as increasing “demand” for high quality content by helping citizens recognize and access trustworthy journalism. The relationship between supply and demand means there is significant overlap between Category I (systemic and operational support for media) and Category II (improving citizen engagement with media). Only two projects, in North Macedonia and Indonesia, were labeled as Category II but not also as Category I.

Common indicators under this category include output measures like:

- Number of events or trainings held, and number of individuals trained
- Reach of online media literacy campaigns
- Participants who share skills from media literacy trainings with others
- Adoption of media literacy curricula in educational institutions
- Fact-checks or voter educational materials produced by the implementer or their partners

Outcome indicators include:

- Number of individuals who show or self-report improved media literacy and (often measured through surveys or post-training evaluations)
- Changes in media consumer behavior such as use of verification techniques or avoiding biased sources
- Change in individuals’ ability to identify mis- and disinformation
- Changes in popular use of trustworthy and untrustworthy news sources

It can be difficult to draw a causal line connecting participation in media literacy interventions, retention of the lessons learned, their application in daily life, and finally changed behaviors. At their most rigorous, MERL plans for projects in this category may conduct controlled trials to establish a causal link between outputs like training and outcomes like improved literacy. More often, programs use qualitative research to help fill this gap in casual inference, but that research is not always included in MERL documents.

Understanding, Exposing, and Reacting to MDM (8 out of 23 programs). This category includes efforts to monitor disinformation, expose its sources, understand how it spreads, and evaluate or pursue appropriate responses. Sometimes this activity takes the form of media-monitoring; when fact-checking is used to inform programmatic or other responses in addition to correcting claims for the public, it can also fit in this category. Likewise, efforts to foster platform accountability fit in this category when they aim to identify social media content policy violations and escalate them to companies for moderation. Because these activities take MDM and its spread as their focus, they are considered to be "supply-side" activities looking to detect and reduce low-integrity information.

Relatively few projects of the 23 projects reviewed for this report fell in this category. Only two of them comprised activities other than "research," and their theories of change rarely hinged on these activities. Rather, research and monitoring often support other programming goals, such as capacity-building, media literacy training for election officials, or strategic communications.

There is a significant overlap between this category and Category V (information resilience hubs); three of the four projects included in this category were also included in Category V. This is probably a reflection of the fact that research findings are valuable to many organizations, making it useful to embed research activities in network-building activities so findings can be shared widely.

Common output indicators under this category include:

- Number of disinformation networks detected
- Number of misleading pieces of content fact-checked
- Number of partners who participated in creation of research plans
- Number of partners who use research tools developed by the project

Interestingly, this review found no outcome indicators for projects in this category, likely due to the small number of projects in this category and also the fact that the most obvious outcome indicator—the number of actors who take up research findings—does not measure whether or not that uptake improved their work in the desired way.

Strategic Communications (2 out of 23 programs). Only two programs focused on strategic communications. Of these, the most illustrative was the GIIP, which serves as a capacity hub helping civil society and media provide "alternative narratives" to MDM. These narratives are not debunking or fact-checking activities; rather, they are designed to reframe issues in ways that promote social cohesion and democratic governance. In doing so, they may make MDM less appealing for news consumers, or less impactful for those who do consume it. This category might be considered both supply- and demand-focused because the content produced by projects like this is meant (in part) to reduce demand for other, more harmful content.

Because the GIIP was conceived as a capacity-building network—included also in "Information Resilience Hubs," the fifth and final category in this typology—most of the indicators have more to do with capacity building of partner organizations than the effectiveness of their communications efforts. An exception is the reach of communications campaigns developed through the GIIP. The limitation is that reach says little about how those campaigns *impacted* the audience. According to interview participants, GIIP measures this through qualitative data from focus groups and sentiment analysis of social media comments, though this this information is not routinely included along with other monitoring data provided to USAID staff in Washington.

Information Resilience Hubs (4 out of 23 programs). Finally, information resilience hubs help coordinate and augment the activities of partner organizations linked together in a network. While the GIIP is a flagship program for this category, three other projects contain networking, coordination, and capacity building elements: CREDIBLE VOICES de la Juventud, Ecuador Verifica, and the Civil Society Innovation Initiative (CSII). These are not all related to strategic communications in the same manner as the GIIP; Ecuador Verifica and the CSII, for example, are more focused on researching, monitoring, and exposing low-integrity information, while CREDIBLE VOICES is concerned with the operational capacity and media literacy of key stakeholder groups.

Common output indicators under this category include:

- The number of organizations belonging to the network or hub
- The number of trainings held for hub members
- Number of participants in training programs or co-creation activities
- Financial support provided to network members for collaborative activities

Outcome indicators include:

- Reach of co-created communications campaigns or trainings
- Percent of individuals who improve in media literacy as a result of trainings delivered through the network
- Reported increase in norms around social engagement or other democratic processes

Because the emphasis of these programs is often on increasing capacity so partners can pursue some other type of work, MERL plans typically contain a mix of metrics intended to capture increased organizational capacity among partner groups, the degree of collaboration and sharing that resulted from the network, and the number and impact of key outputs like trainings or communication campaigns. In the programs reviewed for this report, these were often measured through a combination of hard numbers (such as individuals receiving training) and the use of surveys and other tools to gauge increases in partner capacity.

5. Stocktaking of Approaches Related to Cross-Cutting Issues

RQ3.1: What share of projects are addressing issues related to gender and marginalized groups (e.g., immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ communities, etc.)?

Primary Finding:

- Based on the documents reviewed, eight programs had incorporated these cross-

Across the 23 projects included in this review, there was significant variation in the approaches and extent to which programs prioritized and addressed cross-cutting issues, including gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) and engagement of marginalized groups (e.g., youth, immigrants, minorities, indigenous, disabled, LGBTQI+ communities, etc.). Of the 23 programs reviewed, eight incorporated these cross-cutting issues in meaningful[6] ways; nine had somewhat cursory[7] inclusion of these issues; and six had no evidence of inclusion in the documents we reviewed and/or the discussions we had with program staff. However, it should be noted that we only had interviews with two of the six organizations that had not incorporated GESI principles into their programs, and it is possible that we were simply missing the GESI-related documents for the other five programs.

Most interview respondents agreed that GESI and engagement of marginalized groups were important considerations in designing programs related to IRI. Respondents noted with concern that disinformation related to gender and marginalized groups can be used to stir up violence against these groups and to push women and marginalized people out of politics. Bad actors may exploit entrenched biases to defame political opponents and rivals, even within their own political parties. These problems are often difficult to address with traditional counter-MDM activities, like fact-checking, because they tap into implicit and explicit biases that may be deep-rooted in communities. Furthermore, some key informants reported that disinformation campaigns target women and people from marginalized groups differently than non-marginalized men. The attacks tend to be more personal and more likely to lead to real-world violence – calling for more attention to the distinct ways that MDM impacts men and women.

However, despite widespread support for the principle of addressing cross-cutting issues, these issues are often not a central priority during program design. One interviewee suggested that too often in USAID when people think about gender, they think only about gender-based violence (GBV) and tend to dismiss the need for gender approaches in programming that does not directly related to GBV. This was somewhat confirmed through the lack of consensus about the importance of GESI approaches in our conversations with USAID Mission staff and implementing partners. It was clear that respondents varied in the extent to which they thought such issues should be priority focus areas for IRI projects. Although the majority of the key

[6] By "meaningful," we mean programs that included activities explicitly designed to address issues/challenges faced by one or more of these groups. These activities showed a deep level of consideration of GESI issues, beyond simply ensuring that women and marginalized groups had access to their programming.

[7] By "somewhat cursory," we mean programs whose activities showed a relatively shallow consideration of GESI issues. This typically included ensuring that women and marginalized groups had access to their programming. We also included a couple of programs that, according to evaluators, had no documented GESI planning but whose activities happened to have a positive effect on women and marginalized groups.

informants we spoke to said they understood the importance of GESI approaches, a couple of interviewees shared the view that gender was not relevant to their programs. When asked how they build considerations of gender and marginalized communities into their programming, one respondent said, “not really much—information affects everyone no matter their gender. Disinformation narratives target men and women equally.” This view is inconsistent with the facts in most contexts.[8] Another respondent noted that because their program targeted small media organizations, most of which were run by women or people from other marginalized groups, there was no need to target these groups or program with a GESI lens.

Programs with somewhat cursory inclusion of GESI issues tended to intentionally target women and people from other marginalized groups to participate in their programs and/or had some indicators that were disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, or age. Programs with more substantial incorporation of GESI issues used a variety of approaches, including promoting GESI topics to general public audiences; elevating marginalized voices; fostering dialogue; ensuring accessibility; protecting marginalized communities; creating GESI MERL approaches; and supporting organizational change/capacity building. Specific examples of each of these approaches are presented in Table 1. Each of these programs used multiple of these approaches to ensure that their programs thoroughly addressed GESI topics.

[8] Scott, V. (2021). “Understanding the Gender Dimensions of Disinformation.” Available at https://counteringdisinformation.org/node/13/

Table 1. Strategies for Meaningfully Incorporated GESI Topics into IRI Programs

MEANINGFUL INCORPORATION OF GESI TOPICS
Supporting Organizational Change & Capacity Building • Ensured that activities and training sessions included a critical review of gender roles, norms, and dynamics in target communities, across partner organizations, and within participating organizations. • Raised awareness of the need for gender sensitive reporting within newsrooms. • Increased opportunities for women in media. • Increased the coordination and capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) to apply social and behavioral change principles that engage and empower communities to eliminate all forms of human rights violations and GBV against LGBTQI+ communities. • Increased inclusion of women in CSOs. • Mainstreamed gender issues into CSO daily activities. • Focused on developing media organizations' and CSOs' ability to advance GESI issues, empower women, and/or develop policies related to gender equity and inclusion.
Elevating Marginalized Voices & Fostering Dialogue • Used publications and live programming to make marginalized groups (e.g., women, indigenous communities, LGBTQI+ communities, and migrants) more. • Supported content creators, media organizations, and educators to promote equity by elevating women's voices and amplifying stories offered through perspectives of marginalized groups. • Supported the production of radio content in local languages and included audio and visual resources – in part in local languages – on social media platforms preferred by women. • Collaborated with media organizations and journalists from marginalized groups to disseminate stories. • Created a safe and democratic space for dialogue by supporting the dissemination of media content by, for and about women and youth, and incorporation of women's and youth's voices, issues and perspectives in talk shows, social media and online conversations.
Protecting Marginalized Communities • Provided gender sensitivity training for journalists and physical security training for female journalists in war zones. • Recognized the unique risks that marginalized groups face and analyzed/mitigated these.
Promoting GESI Topics to General Public Audiences • Focused on developing media organizations' and CSOs' ability to use a GESI lens to consider the way they report on issues. • Carried out gender awareness campaigns within their social networks. • Supported content creation on socially important topics such as gender equality, minority rights, rights of elderly people, and rights of persons with disabilities. • Created content on gender issues. • Encouraged journalists to commit to better gender balance in quoting experts.
Ensuring Accessibility • Ensured that all project activities are accessible for people with disabilities and provided accommodation as needed. • Considered issues related to internet/device access and connectivity for activities that required an online learning environment.
Creating GESI MERL Approaches • Incorporated a gender-sensitive and inclusion awareness approach to all MEL activities

and methodologies, to ensure an accurate understanding of the level of participation according to gender identity, ethnic and linguistic identity, rural/urban status, minority subgroups, etc.

6. Stocktaking of MERL Approaches

RQ4.1: What MERL strategies (and indicators) are currently being used by USAID and its implementing partners?

Primary Finding:

- The MERL strategies used by programs can be categorized into two types of approaches: theory-based MERL and complexity-aware MERL. These are two complementary approaches that are often used together.

RQ4.2: Are TOCs being used to inform MERL strategies?

Primary Findings:

- Where theories of change exist, they are being used to inform MERL strategies. However, for the most part, programs measure mainly the "if" statements and not the "then" statements of their theories of change.
- The complexity/wickedness of IRI/MDM and insufficient resources (including budget, time, and staff) prevent programs from more meaningfully assessing program impact.

The MERL strategies used by programs can be categorized into two types of approaches: theory-based MERL and complexity-aware MEL (CAMEL). These are two complementary approaches that are often used together, with theory-based MERL focusing on assessing the predictable aspects of a program (e.g., adherence to implementation plans, accuracy of a program's theory of change), and CAMEL focusing on monitoring unpredictable aspects of a program (e.g., identifying changes in the context, emergent outcomes, and other uncertain or contested aspects of a program).

All programs engaged in theory-based MERL by developing results frameworks and collecting monitoring data on preselected indicators.[9] However, the vast majority of indicators include in M&E plans measure program outputs (e.g., number of people reached, number of social media engagements) or short-term outcomes (e.g., percent of trainees with increased knowledge immediately after the training, average increase in revenue for supported media organizations). Few indicators of longer-term outcomes or impact were noted. (For a list of the most common indicators used, see Annex C.)

[9] We were able to obtain MEL plans, learning agendas, quality assurance surveillance plans (QASPs), or performance management plans (PMPs) for 12 of the 23 programs. However, through other documents (e.g., work plans, quarterly reports, evaluation reports), it was clear that other programs had monitoring indicators based on development objectives and intended results within a results framework.

Where explicit theories of change exist, they were used to i
most part, programs measured only the "IF" statements an
theories of change. Often, it seemed that the vague and ve
generational) nature of the "THEN" statements kept progra
As a result, we can see whether or not each program succ
they intended and met their desired objectives, but we can
desired impact or whether their theories of change held tru
stated, "There's a missing piece. We've got output indicato
sometimes huge impact indicators, like whether a country i
between." Thus, there are large gaps in our knowledge abo
particular interventions contributes to larger societal or insti
MDM. An illustrative example of the challenges programs have with theory-based MERL is presented in Box 1.

> *There's a missing piece. We've got output indicators, outcome indicators, and then sometimes huge impact indicators, like whether a country is a democracy. And nothing in between.*
>
> *– Interview Respondent*

Interview respondents repeatedly noted that building IRI and countering MDM are "complex" or "wicked" problems – posing significant challenges for developing appropriate MERL strategies. Complex problems are those for which there are key knowledge gaps in the scientific evidence about the problem and/or the solutions, and multiple stakeholders, each with different expertise and knowledge gaps, are required to address the issue. Evidence-based decisions are often difficult to make because of the gaps in knowledge. Wicked problems are those for which there is minimal scientific evidence about the problem and/or the solutions, and multiple stakeholders, often with conflicting values or interests, are required to address the issue. Making purely evidence-based decisions is often impossible, due not only to the lack of evidence but also to the lack of agreement among stakeholders.[10,11]

Because of this complexity or wickedness, and because addressing IRI/MDM issues typically requires changes to entire systems (e.g., media environments, social attitudes/cohesion), it can be difficult or impossible to predict all the effects a program will have on society. Many programs acknowledged this and integrated complexity-aware MEL approaches into their MEL plans to monitor for emergent program outcomes and/or changes in context that would affect the program's ability to meet their intended outcomes. CAMEL approaches used in the programs we reviewed include outcome harvesting; the use of sentinel indicators to watch for changes in context; developing and implementing learning agendas that cover complex aspects of a program, like how to build audience trust; and conducting learning activities, such as Pause & Reflect sessions.

Interview respondents noted several challenges in measuring the outcomes and impact of IRI and countering MDM programs. Chief among these challenges is the fact that IRI/MDM take place in complex, ever-changing contexts, and we have very limited knowledge about how changes in the context affect program goals. Thus, it is difficult to assess the degree to which observed outcomes and impacts can be attributed to the program.

The other major challenge reported was a lack of appropriate resources for MEL. Respondents were quick to point out that the resources needed include, but are not limited to, additional

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[10] Alford, John & Head, Brian. (2017). "Wicked and less wicked problems: A typology and a contingency framework." *Policy and Society*. 36: 397-413.

[11] Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development,* (United Nations, New York, 2019).

funding for MEL. Often, key resources needed include time and staff. It can be difficult to find MEL experts with sufficient complexity-aware and systems-thinking skills to support IRI/MDM programs. Furthermore, to do complexity-aware monitoring well, programs either need more time or they need to reduce the size of their theory-based monitoring plans so staff can shift their focus. Respondents also noted that it would be helpful for USAID to provide more encouragement to update theories of change and results frameworks as programs adapt to changes in the context or in USAID requirements.

Box 1. Illustrative Example of Theory-Based MERL Challenges

One program we reviewed had a theory of change that said, “If media independence is increased and if a more competitive and self-sustaining media environment is created, then citizens can be informed and hold their government accountable.” This theory of change has a few issues that make it difficult to evaluate.

1. This theory of change seems to be missing some critical steps/assumptions between the “IF” and “THEN” statements. What needs to happen between media independence increasing in a competitive and self-sustained media environment so that citizens can be informed and hold their government accountable?

6. Analysis of Impact

RQ5.1: Which of the current approaches seem to be working best to increase information resilience and integrity and to address MDM?

Primary Finding:

- Media development has measurable achievements but there is insufficient evidence to say whether or not it mitigates harms from MDM.
- Projects guided by behavior change theory across media development, media literacy, and strategic communications appear promising and should be expanded.

RQ5.2: Which of the current approaches have the most evidence to support their effectiveness?

Primary Finding:

- Forms of media literacy can be effective, but USAID should be more exacting about how It approaches this work by incorporating lessons from outside research and its own work.

RQ5.3: What contextual factors affect the impact of these approaches?

Primary Findings:

- Programs should not assume that conclusions about who shares and believes MDM and why transfer across cultural and geographic contexts.
- The geopolitical orientation and regime type of a country has a dramatic impact on what types of programs are most likely to succeed there: media development is difficult in authoritarian contexts, and when government is adverse to information resilience efforts, strategic communication may be one of the best tools available.

Asking “what works” to improve IRI in the face of MDM challenges is much like asking “what works” to address climate change—the truth is, no intervention or even suite of interventions can solve the problem fully. The challenges MDM poses cannot be banished, but their worst effects can be mitigated: media literacy can diminish the impact of low-integrity information; media development can strengthen suppliers of trustworthy news; and strategic communication can provide authoritative information and promote beneficial behaviors.

This essential combination of systemic adjustments and individual-level interventions is reflected by the diversity of theories of change for projects included in this review. The challenges of monitoring, evaluation, and learning enumerated above make it difficult to definitively say “what works” for fostering IRI and countering MDM. Even the broader body of academic literature is inconclusive on many key questions.[12] Moreover, national context matters greatly, which limits the generalizability of findings from one place to other contexts.

[12] Blair, Robert J. et al. 2023. “Interventions to Counter Misinformation: Lessons from the Global North and Applications to the Global South.” Washington, DC: USAID.

Despite these challenges, some tentative conclusions – outlined more fully below – can be gleaned from the interviews and document review. First, media development interventions have produced significant, measurable results—though it is unclear if those results go on to limit the impact of low-integrity information by promoting healthy civic behavior. In fact, behavior change approaches inspired by other sectors like public health show great promise from both an impact and MERL standpoint, and should be considered for wider adoption. Second, citizen engagement interventions have also demonstrated positive effects, but some have much more evidence to commend them than others. Other approaches, like fact-checking and working directly with social media companies to improve content moderation, generally appear to work less well but might still have value in specific situations.

Is Media Development a Counter-MDM Strategy?

Media development—the most common type of program reviewed for this report—has significant achievements to tout. The Media Program in Ukraine, for example, has assisted many local and regional media outlets in their transition from state-run media to publicly funded media. Ukrainian Civil Society also successfully advocated for reforms to the Ukrainian national public broadcaster and against proposed legislation that would have hampered media freedom. In Serbia, the Strengthening Media Systems program tracks the revenue and audience growth of small local outlets who transitioning from government and grant funding to more commercially viable models of journalism, which have stymied their reach and innovation. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, radio stations that received USAID-supported trainings were rated as more professional by their listeners.

But those achievements do little to answer a key follow-up question: does this work lessen the impact of mis- and disinformation? It is noteworthy that of the five categories in the above typology, support for media is the only category solely located in the "information resilience" column—media literacy work, for example, spans both information resilience and harm mitigation. The ultimate goal of media development programs may be something other than mitigating harms from low-integrity information, such as strengthening the professionalism, sustainability, accessibility, and independence of the media system and individual outlets.

These are worthwhile objectives but neither USAID nor other stakeholders can say for certain they will go on to lessen the effects of MDM. Academic research suggests there is a relationship between the health of independent media—especially local media—and factors like civic participation, trust in institutions, belief in conspiracy theories, and political polarization.[13] For

[13] See, "Local News Outlets and Political Participation," Jackie Filla and Martin Johnson, Urban Affairs Review (May 25, 2010); "Local News Media and Voter Turnout," Martin Baekgaard, Carsten Jensen, Peter B. Mortensen, & Soren Serritzlew, Local Government Studies (January 2014); "The Decline of Local News and Its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Datav," Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, Journal of Politics (October 18, 2017); "Newspaper Decline and the Effect on Local Government Coverage," Jay Jennings and Meghan Rubado, University of Texas at Austin (November 2019); "Combating Disinformation by Bolstering Truth and Trust," Jeffrey Hiday, RAND Institute (May 24, 2020); "Misinformation in action: Fake news exposure is linked to lower trust in media, higher trust in government when your side is in power," Katherine Ognyanova, David Lazer, Ronald E. Robertson, and Christo Wilson, Harvard Misinformation Review (June 2020); and "Lack of Trust, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Social

instance, US cities with strong local newspapers tend to exhibit higher rates of civic engagement, political awareness, and split-ticket voting (a sign of low polarization). When local media declines, partisan national media and less trustworthy news sources on social media often fill the void it leaves behind; partially for this reason, social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic correlated with belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines. These findings are connected to, but distinct from, the effects of low-integrity information on attitudes and behaviors, and most of this literature is from the United States. Even in the American context, academic literature directly evaluating investments in local media against the effects of MDM is scarce.

If one goal of these programs and IRI writ large is to mitigate those harms, USAID should more purposefully measure progress against specific forms of harm caused by low-integrity information. This is also true of any proposal to step back from MDM-focused work and promote media development and IRI as alternatives. The strength of the relationship between these two objectives is not well understood at present. If, among its other benefits, media development is considered a primary means of mitigating harms from MDM, more evaluation is needed to demonstrate effectiveness.

These dynamics are especially apparent concerning various types of training. Given the prominence of training activities across the programs reviewed for this report, the measurement gap between receipt of training, retention of knowledge, and behavior change is a major challenge for evaluating program impact. MERL specialists interviewed for this report noted that "the natural bent is toward training and changing knowledge, without following up on behavior change"—which this report considers an important part of mitigating MDM harms.

One element of media development where USAID seems to have struggled is platform accountability. Few programs worked with platforms to improve content moderation, and interview participants noted that some, like the GIIP, had hoped to do more in this area. They were stymied, in part, by layoffs across the tech sector and other trends suggesting that platforms are becoming less, not more, responsive to concerns about content moderation from civil society.[14] Given USAID's relative success at improving media law and regulation in relatively open societies, it might in the future consider how to support policy advocacy around platform accountability as a means of improving the enabling environment for media. In the digital age, online platforms are an essential part of that environment.

Lessons from Public Health for Strategic Communications Programs

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Media Use Predict COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy," Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker, Hannah Bunting, Viktor Orri Valgarðsson, Jennifer Gaskell, Daniel Devine, Lawrence McKay, and Melinda C. Mills, Vaccines (June 2021).

[14] That said, monitoring MDM on social media can still be a relevant form of research or support for advocacy efforts—but little evidence from our review or elsewhere suggests it is a useful way of reducing the volume of MDM or spurring change within platforms themselves.

As with media development, strategic communications programs can benefit from a behavior change lens in both their design and evaluation. The use of strategic communications to shift behaviors and attitudes is a relatively novel area for USAID's media and democracy programming: the GIIP, by far the most strategic communications-oriented program reviewed here, was consistently described as novel, innovative, and distinct. But public health programs have been thinking about the link between communications, attitudes, and behavior since at least the AIDS crisis. The lessons learned by public health programs (and some counter-MDM programs like the Madani initiative in Indonesia) during the COVID-19 pandemic offer promising paths forward. Interviews revealed two key themes.

First, it is more straightforward to pursue and measure behavior change than to neutralize propaganda. Interview participants from USAID's public health programs stressed that the specifics of rumors and propaganda are a secondary concern: from their perspective, the important outcome is health-conscious behaviors like handwashing or avoiding contact with contagious individuals. Future media and strategic communications programming could benefit from similar concrete goals.

The second theme is that high-integrity information and media literacy alone cannot overcome the social determinants of behavior and belief; for that, programs need approaches that take the social dimension into account. An example comes from the 2014 Ebola outbreak, when rumors claimed that the bodies of deceased patients were being used for organ harvesting—a false claims that, in the words of an interviewee "get into the sacred." As a result, fewer individuals reported deaths of loved ones from Ebola, greatly increasing the risk of transmission as they chose to handle human remains themselves. USAID partners combatted these rumors directly by switching from black body bags to clear ones and even making the walls of some medical facilities transparent. People could confirm for themselves that no organ harvesting occurred. Without this verification, individuals were unwilling to trust official reassurances about the handling of their loved ones' remains.

Responses to MDM can do more than consider social dynamics—they can also incorporate and benefit from them. In an interview with USAID's public health team, the said that during the COVID-19 pandemic they noticed that a major determinant of whether or not an individual took up key behaviors was how they were received by their community: even highly educated individuals often became skeptical of health authorities if surrounded by friends and family who behaved similarly. For this reason, programs began working more closely with prominent local community figures like faith leaders to disseminate health information. A priest may not be more knowledgeable about medicine than a doctor, but they are probably more influential within their parish.

Other interviews about strategic communications programs revealed one final lesson: they require a great deal of experimentation and adaptability. Public discourse shifts quickly, and insights from audience research go stale fast. Interview participants stressed that strategic communications interventions require iteration, with flexible program strategies and MERL plans. Some lamented that longer-term MERL plans had been superseded by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing their value. Others warned that strategic communications probably involve a tolerance for failure. Campaigns can backfire, as they did in Ukraine when a video message featured a celebrity urging people to stay indoors during the pandemic—from the bedroom of their mansion.

It goes back to community values; [implementers] live and breathe for serving the communities they work in. They're not dealing with great power competition or propaganda; they are looking to serve communities as best they can. Programs need to make the distinction between the values in the community and sources of wrong information.

Some Approaches to Improving Citizen Engagement with Media Work Better than Others

As noted, projects designed to improve citizen engagement with media were the second most common program type in this review. Like media development programs, they can point to tangible metrics as signs of success: in Ukraine and North Macedonia, for example, USAID programs successfully integrated media literacy programs into schools. Interviews with key informants in Ukraine found that journalists and education professionals felt this was the most likely avenue to increase media literacy in the long-term. Likewise, online quizzes following consumption of media literacy content on social media found large increases in ability to identify false headlines (though it is unclear if this improvement persists over time).

IREX's Learn to Discern methodology was praised by interviewees and referenced in documents for multiple programs across regions. In evaluations, participants showed significant gains in their ability to assess sources and identify low-integrity information. Unlike the example from Ukraine above, these interventions *were* shown to persist over time. Interviewees described IREX's evaluation approach as best-in-class.[15] But Learn to Discern is primarily geared toward helping individuals recognize MDM when they see it so they can seek out other sources. This goal is distinct from other common goals across USAID programs—for example, the MIPS program in Serbia educated about the "complex media and information landscape," including knowledge of the workings of journalism and digital technology.

Outside literature provides less evidence for those approaches as means of reducing consumption of low-integrity information. "Media literacy" is not a term with a common consensus definition: the *Journal of Media Literacy*, an academic publication that has existed in

[15] For an example, consider: "Winning the war on state-sponsored propaganda: Gains in the ability to detect disinformation a year and a half after completing a Ukrainian news media literacy program," Erin Murrock, Joy Amulya, Mehri Druckman & Tetiana Liubyva, IREX (2018).

various forms since 1953, regularly publishes articles using competing terms and definitions for a broad family of concepts. These include terms commonly used by USAID programs like "media literacy," "information literacy," and "digital literacy." Only rarely do programs define or distinguish between these, but the distinctions can be critical to a program's impact. There is compelling academic evidence that, measured against the goal of being able to identify misleading news content, *information literacy*—which the American Library Association defines as the ability to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information"—outperforms knowledge of the media industry or understanding of internet technologies.[16] This may be in part because it promotes lateral reading—the evaluation of a claim against additional sources known to be credible, another strategy shown to be effective in media literacy trials.

The delivery mechanism also matters. Implementers noted that while getting media literacy into school classrooms can be a major achievement, it can be harder to provide these skills to busy adults. For this reason, they have experimented with games, virtual reality (VR) exhibits, and public art displays to engage the wider public. However, to date they have little evidence on whether these strategies are effective.

Fact-checking is the other major form of activity in Category II: Improving Citizen Engagement with Media, and many interviewees were wary of it. In the words of one individual, fact-checkers "may measure how many people were reached online," but may not "actually get the attitude change that they want." But others cautioned against discarding approaches out of hand, warning that USAID should be "careful about deciding what is valuable." Fact-checks, for instance, can be invaluable during life-or-death emergency situations when rumors and disinformation fill voids not yet covered by credible media.

MERL Strategies and Takeaways Depend on Time Horizon and Local Context

The time horizon on which media development is expected to show results varied across programs, and interview participants expressed frustration that the US

What will work and what is less likely? Depends on what issue you are trying to address. Critical thinking skills just scratch the surface… When we really think about something that will drastically create measurable change, in terms of changing perceptions and action, this is very slow. It takes many years… We don't have time to do this. We are restricted by resources.

[16] For this definition of information literacy, see "Information Liter (accessed July 5th, 2023), https://literacy.ala.org/information-liter

For evidence on information literacy's effectiveness and discuss literacy, see "Does Media Literacy Help Identification of Fake Ne Other Literacies Don't=," Mo Jones-Jang and Tara Mortensen, A 2019); see also "Taking Corrective Action When Exposed to Fal Literacy," Brigitte Huber, Porismita Borah, and Homero Gil de Z Education (July 2022).

For more information on lateral reading, consider: "Lateral reading and monetary incentives to spot disinformation about science," Folco Panizza, Piero Ronzani, Carlo Martini, Simone Mattavelli, Tiffany Morisseau, and Matteo Motterlini, Nature (April 2022) and "Lateral Reading on the Open Internet: A District-Wide Field Study in High School Government Classes," Sam Wineburg, Joel Breakstone, Sarah McGrew, Mark D. Smith, and Teresa Ortega, Journal of Educational Psychology (April 2022).

government does not always take the long view. For example, respondents involved with the Media Program in Ukraine lamented that most funding for media development work there dried up after the end of the Orange Revolution in 2005. Because of the scale of their project—bolstering media literacy and journalistic sustainability across a country of more than 40 million people—they think of the change they seek as generational. In Serbia, on the other hand, USAID mission staff said they have a narrow goal of professionalizing the media sector by improving its business operations, and hope to be doing something different in 5-10 years. Broadly, MERL experts interviewed for this report said that programs should either be comfortable taking the long view or should specify measurable goals that are achievable in a specified period of time.

The challenge is compounded by outstanding answers to key questions, many of which depend on local context. Research into these issues can be counterintuitive: interview participants cited demographic studies in Ukraine and Indonesia, for example, that found no significant difference in receptivity to MDM from age or education. Public health projects have reached similar conclusions. In Indonesia specifically, an interview informant said that this research also disproved their assumptions about who shares MDM and why—but these findings may not apply in other contexts.

When USAID staff change mission postings, interview participants said it is especially important for them to keep these geographic particularities in mind. Some described prior experiences with USAID mission staff who changed country postings and sought to apply lessons from previous posts that did not translate well to their new post. An authoritarian context like Venezuela calls for approaches significantly different from what is useful in Ukraine, a relatively open society where reputational risk is nonetheless high because of a persistent adversary determined to discredit USAID's partners. Because there are some similarities between contexts, interview participants were eager to trade observations with others, but cautioned against establishing best practices expected to be applied universally.

> *We want to know what is useful everywhere that could be applied but don't want it to be prescriptive across the board: Don't expect every country to take this as a mantra. But best practices and tools from other places are helpful.*
>
> *Interview Participant*

Media development programs provided several examples of how context matters for program success. One came from Serbia, where interview participants said that pursuing regulatory reform was a low-impact strategy that they discarded. In the Serbian context, the lack of business fundamentals in most local independent media was assessed to be a much bigger challenge than legal or regulatory restrictions on media. Years of dependence on grants meant many journalists had no working experience building subscription bases or attracting ad revenue. Further, in Serbia, rules around things like licensing are not the primary mechanism for government control of information; access to capital is a more powerful and more commonly used means. However, in Ukraine USAID programs demonstrated concrete gains in the legal and regulatory environment that furthered goals of reforming a media apparatus that still

showed signs of the Soviet era, like heavy state ownership. Both of these programs boast concrete successes, but context determined which approach made more sense in each country.

Another example came from Nicaragua, where almost all independent media is now in exile. USAID works with these outlets to help them professionalize and establish credibility with audiences wary and cynical after years of propaganda. Past assessments of USAID programs there found that without programs like this, there might be no alternative to government-controlled media. In a context like authoritarian Nicaragua, survival itself might be a metric of success—even though in more favorable environments it would hardly be considered so.

Strategic communications programs also demonstrate how crucial context can be. When asked about the GIIP's goal of creating attitudinal change, as opposed to more behavioral media literacy approaches elsewhere, interviewees said Georgia's specific geopolitical situation—on the Black Sea, far from most of Europe, partially occupied by Russia, with a government that is increasingly skeptical of Western partnerships—explains a great deal about the GIIP's distinct approach.

The GIIP offers another lesson: despite calls for a "whole of society" approach to MDM in the field of international development, local context often makes this impossible. But in many places, government is not a partner but a major if not the primary source of the problem. Further, it sometimes works to actively undermine USAID programs. In these contexts, the provision of alternative narratives may be one of the most effective avenues available.

Even though geographic and political context can be constricting, cross-country learning is not fruitless or impossible. Many lessons can and do transfer across environments, and different settings can share many things in common. Assessing which best practices are truly "best" in a given place, however, requires sensitivity to local context.

8. Recommendations

Programmatic Recommendations

1. Expand programming informed by behavior change theory and designed for adaptability, iteration, and learning. USAID's Office of Transitions Initiatives runs projects on significantly shorter timeframes than most USAID teams; their timelines are measured in months, not years, and include frequent pauses to reflect, assess, learn, and adapt. This iterative process treats research and practice as a loop in which each component continually informs and supports the other. It is essential to OTI's work because of the crisis and conflict contexts in which OTI typically does programming. USAID programs run by other teams could benefit from this approach.

This is especially true for programs whose ultimate objective either includes or implies some form of behavior change (as well as, but much less commonly, attitudinal change). Many programs—especially those related to media development, media literacy, and strategic communications—focus on the relationship between the supply of and demand for quality

information. These programs typically believe an informed citizenry is desirable for a reason—that informed citizens will be less susceptible to propaganda, act to hold governments accountable, be more engaged politically, be more tolerant of their neighbors, be less prone to violence, or some other outcome.

This change in behavior is often the ultimate aim of a program, but it is often left unmeasured. A program might for example measure whether citizens who received media literacy training changed the sources of media they consume; but few go on to assess whether or not this changed their daily behavior and attitudes in ways that benefit social cohesion and democratic governance.

Efforts to inform, educate, and communicate with the public should not only be evaluated on consumption of information or knowledge gained from training—they should also measure whether or not those outcomes affected ultimate behavioral objectives. Some programs measure this through outcome harvesting, focus groups, or other forms of qualitative research. These are valid learning opportunities but could be combined with RCTs and other experimental approaches for even greater insights about whether the selected intervention drove the desired change. It may be, for example, that citizens do consume more credible sources of information after training but do little else to further democratic governance owing to social factors (e.g. their friends and family still hold certain beliefs, leading to peer pressure), economic factors (e.g. they remain unable to participate politically because of financial obstacles), or political factors (e.g. credible news coverage does not change their political apathy or sense of powerlessness). These would be important insights for overcoming barriers to change, and programs should be designed to collect and account for them.

2. Prioritize refining and expanding media literacy programs. Both USAID MERL data and academic literature suggest that media literacy can be effective if approached in specific ways. This is an ongoing area of research and USAID should assess the effectiveness of media literacy programs more deeply and iteratively, in keeping with recommendation 1 above.

Unfortunately, few USAID programs are set up to assess whether the provision of media literacy education leads to enduring changes in behavior like verifying source credibility or avoiding untrustworthy outlets. Some programs, like the Media Program in Ukraine (SBU), attempt to measure this through national surveys—but these are a poor instrument because changes cannot be causally attributed to programs (see MERL Recommendation 6). The SBU acknowledged as much in a mid-term evaluation:

> In order to independently verify whether ML efforts actually increased citizens' abilities to determine quality information and to consume more high-quality content, it would be necessary to study citizens who have been reached by MPU ML activities, rather than the journalism professionals who were interviewed or surveyed for this evaluation. Even in a mass survey, the issue of the link between ML efforts and any changes in the mass data would be elusive without an experimental setup comparing control and treatment groups.

Likewise, in Indonesia, the Advancing Media Literacy for New Digital Arrivals in Developing Countries' (AML's) FY22 first quarterly progress report reached similarly conclusions: Moonshot, one of the implementing partners, wrote that it is planning a "series of experiments" on media literacy to "establish a more accurate measurement for behavioral and attitudinal change."

In keeping with recommendation 1 above, media literacy programs should be evaluated not just on national surveys or post-training test scores but also on whether the conveyed skills make a difference in the daily lives of citizens and their communities. This can be more difficult to measure but is ultimately more important. It is also important to avoid self-assessments as a metric for media and information literacy. Research has also shown individuals to be susceptible to the Dunning Kreuger effect when evaluating their own ability to navigate the media environment—that is to say, many individuals are overconfident in their level of literacy.[17]

3. Consider expanding strategic communications programs related to information resilience. The strategic communications campaigns under GIIP are among the more innovative activities reviewed for this report. Disinformation often involves narratives, beliefs, and social divisions that are subjective and non-falsifiable; alternative narratives are an appropriate way of addressing these issues. For example, the GIIP program attempted to create economic links between Tbilisi and regions of Georgia that felt economically isolated and exposed to a hostile Russia—addressing the sort of social divisions and economic inequities that make societies vulnerable to disinformation in the first place. They are also amenable to the kinds of flexible, iterative implementation and learning approaches advocated for in recommendation 1.

Despite the promise of strategic communications, the GIIP was one of only two programs categorized as strategic communications by this review. While USAID teams working in public health and conflict resolution often use strategic communications and counter-messaging programs in their work, this review found some hesitance to do so for IRI programs. In an interview, one USAID staffer involved with the GIIP said it could be characterized as promoting attitudinal change; they expected, but to date have not heard, concerns that it is out of scope for USAID and more befitting a State Department public diplomacy program. Some DRG implementing partners also described discomfort with the notion of pursing behavior and attitudinal change in their work.

USAID should pause to consider whether and how it wants to proceed with this area of programming, which carries both promise and risk. In an interview, one USAID staffer also expressed concerns that "counternarratives" are not effective, raising the possibility that to justify investments in strategic communications programs, "alternative narratives" must be sufficiently distinct from attempts to merely present USG perspectives more assertively in the face of adversarial propaganda.

4. Consider ways of integrating non-media programming more fully in the information resilience and counter-MDM toolkit. Information resilience, the benefits attributed to it, and

[17] Jones-Jang and Mortensen (2019).

the harms caused by its absence have important drivers that are only tangentially related to the media field. During this review, USAID staff and partners frequently mentioned projects using the arts and other avenues to promote social dialogue around key issues. There are likely other programmatic approaches within USAID that are useful but not captured by the typology of media-related programs included in this assessment. USAID staff should consider making greater use of them. The most fertile soil for MDM is found in preexisting social fissures like economic inequality, gender norms, and ethnic division. Interventions that tackle these issues head on also have a relationship to IRI. USAID should create more dialogue and linkages between media and other programs, so it does not miss valuable opportunities to address these issues more holistically.

5. Develop theories of change that match project timelines. USAID programs are often developed and renewed on five-year cycles, but many interviewees described the changes they hoped to achieve as generational. Theories of change often include "then" statements with lofty macro-social goals like more accountable government, social stability, or resilience against attempts to undermine democracy – outcomes that typically cannot be realized on a five-year cycle. Theories of change should include a series of more modest discrete steps that can be achieved and measured in the allotted timeframe. It may be the case that the ultimate objective is still generational change, and programs may even stipulate this in writing—but they should make clear how each iteration of a five-year program will incrementally contribute toward the envisioned end goal.

6. Reconsider how USAID approaches relationships with social media platforms in its programming. As mentioned above, few programs in this review explicitly worked either with social media platforms to improve content moderation or with civil society advocates to improve regulation of social media companies. What evidence did surface during this review suggests that the latter—a focus on regulating social media's financial and editorial impact on media as part of the wider enabling environment—is more promising. Even before widespread layoffs in the tech sector depleted trust and safety teams, the USAID programs in this review struggled to interface effectively with platforms. USAID should examine potential strategies beyond engagement on content moderation.

7. Encourage IPs to design programs with deeper consideration of gender equity and social inclusion (GESI) issues. From the documents we reviewed, we found that only about a third of all programs had meaningfully incorporated GESI considerations in program designs. Another third of the programs addressed GESI issues but in a cursory way. When planning programs, IPs should think beyond ensuring that women and people from marginalized groups benefit from their programs. They should also think about 1) whether/how issues of IRI/MDM and their programs impact women and people from marginalized groups differently than men and people from non-marginalized groups and 2) how to make the positive impacts on women and people from marginalized groups sustainable. For example, instead of addressing GESI solely by ensuring that a certain percentage of the journalists trained are women, media development programs can train journalists to have a GESI lens when reporting on major issues. They can also help media organizations and government institutions develop and implement GESI policies that promote equal opportunities for women and people from

marginalized groups—activities that will likely produce sustainable results and have a greater long-term impact on women and people from marginalized groups. Similarly, media literacy programs can acknowledge that, although many people may be exposed to the same MDM, the messages may affect non-marginalized men differently than women and people from marginalized groups. Using this knowledge, these programs can include in their trainings information on how MDM is often targeted to certain groups and against other groups to disturb social cohesion.

MERL Recommendations

1. USAID should dedicate more resources to MERL for IRI/MDM programs. The biggest modifiable challenge related to assessing the impact of programs was a lack of resources, including budget, time, and staff. USAID should prioritize funding of MERL, dedicating a minimum of 5% of each program's budget to monitoring, internal evaluation, and learning. In addition, USAID should plan to set aside funding for external evaluations, including impact evaluations, for a subset of high-priority programs that are amenable to this type of evaluation (see recommendation 6 below). Beyond funding, USAID should also recognize the time required to design and implement high-quality MERL plans and allow programs more flexibility for program learning and adaptation. Finally, USAID can encourage IPs to update theories of change and results frameworks as they adapt their programming.

2. Programs should consider increased usage of complexity-aware MERL strategies. Programs facing high uncertainty that aim to quickly test interventions, adapt, and iterate, can benefit from MERL systems that can adapt with the program. This means reducing the size and burden of their theory-based MERL systems (results framework, indicators, etc.) to allow time and resources for complexity-aware and flexible approaches.

Often when thinking about complexity-aware approaches to MERL, people think about data collection methods, like outcome harvesting or most significant change. Although these methods can be used in complexity-aware ways, CAMEL is first and foremost a set of principles that guide the way programs use MERL. These principles include:

1. Attend to the blind spots of program theory-based monitoring and evaluation. Identify and assess uncertain and unpredictable cause and effect relationships in the project logic model.
2. Monitor systemically (interrelationships, perspectives, and boundaries).
3. Synchronize MEL with the pace of change.

CAMEL is particularly appropriate when:

- There are uncertain and unpredictable cause and effect relationships in the project logic model.
- A project is subject to influence by contextual factors.
- A project is likely to contribute to emergent (unpredictable) outcomes.

- Stakeholders bring diverse perspectives; goals and strategies are contested; and consensus is impractical.
- The pace of change is dynamic, and changes in the context lead to new opportunities and/or needs.
- Adaptive management is necessary to effectively implement a program.

Programs will always have limited resources and will need to prioritize what they monitor. Most programs will have some parts of the program that are particularly sensitive to complexity and others that are not. When prioritizing what and how to monitor, USAID and IPs should use CAMEL approaches to monitor the aspects of the program that are sensitive to complexity and theory-based MERL approaches (e.g., indicators) to monitor the parts of the program were uncertainty is lower.

3. USAID and IPs should track how programs affect women and people from marginalized groups as part of routine project monitoring. Many current programs' only monitoring of their GESI impact is a disaggregation of the numbers of people served, usually by gender but sometimes by other marginalized groups. Some programs also assess GESI impact in their external end-of-program evaluations, but often there is little data available for external evaluators. Programs should do more to monitor their GESI impact throughout the project life cycle with a combination of indicator data and qualitative data. For indicators, programs should consider disaggregating their outcome and output indicators by gender and any other targeted marginalized groups. For example, in addition to disaggregating an output indicator on "number of people trained," training programs can also disaggregate an outcome indicator on "percent of trainees who demonstrated increased knowledge after the training." Programs can also disaggregate average post-test training scores and training satisfaction surveys by gender/marginalized groups and analyze results (e.g., with a question analysis) to see if there are aspects of the training that are understood/appreciated differently by different groups. These learnings, along with program staff observations and conversations had with training participants, can then be used to improve the training and/or identify other types of interventions that may be needed to better support women and marginalized groups. As another example, programs that have output indicators related to the "number of people reached" can, to the extent possible, disaggregate the numbers reached by gender or marginalized community, based on social media profiles. Furthermore, they can conduct content analysis on comments to see 1) if women and marginalized groups tend to have different responses than non-marginalized men, and 2) whether any comments are about women or marginalized communities and if so, what kinds of attitudes are represented in those comments.

4. National opinion surveys are useful for tracking attitudes and behaviors but in most cases should not be used for outcome indicators. USAID projects often include measures based on national public opinion surveys as part of the larger set of indicators included in M&E plans, typically to measure media consumption habits, specific beliefs, or media literacy skills. National opinion surveys are valuable for understanding baseline attitudes and behaviors and tracking their evolution over time. For this reason, it may be valuable to conduct such surveys at the start of projects and throughout their lifespan. However, survey-based measures are

typically not appropriate for use as outcome indicators and in most cases should not be used for that purpose.

There are at least three challenges related to survey-based outcome indicators. First, even the most successful projects generally produce small marginal changes in attitudes and behaviors that may be too small to be detected in nationally-representative surveys of 1,000 to 1,200 respondents (the typical sample size for many surveys). Small changes (positive or negative) in self-reported attitudes and behaviors from one survey to the next are likely to be attributable to random variation between survey samples, rather than statistically-significant shifts. Second, survey-based measures are subject to response biases that may be difficult to detect. For example, short-term changes in self-reported media consumption data could reflect shifting perceptions about the social desirability of "admitting" which media sources respondents consume. Also, shifting contextual factors can affect self-assessments of media literacy skills, as noted in KIIs with respondents in Serbia. Third, and most important, it is typically not possible to isolate the effect of USAID-funded projects on national-level measures of attitudes and behaviors from surveys. Doing so requires identifying and accounting for the myriad other factors that influence these measures, which is usually not possible. Due to this attribution problem, USAID should discourage IPs from using survey-based measures as outcome indicators.

5. Content reach is not a strong outcome indicator and should be coupled with other means of assessing audience impact, when possible. Many programs use indicators of audience reach as evidence that media content supported by a program was effective. This might be true if the goal of a program is simple to expand the audience (and perhaps the advertising or subscriber base) of an outlet or set of outlets. However, it says very little about audience reaction to or uptake of messages included in that content—and for some programs like media literacy or strategic communications, uptake and impact of the content on the consumer is all-important. Reach can also be somewhat beside the point: content with high reach could potentially backfire, for example, while content with lower reach might have important effects in specific communities.

To complement indicators that measure reach, programs should consider both qualitative and quantitative approaches that track impact. During the KII interviews, Mission and IP staff indicated that they sometimes use qualitative assessments to determine how content is received. For example, many programs use focus groups, while the GIIP also conducts sentiment analysis of the comments under social media posts. Additionally, experimental approaches – including survey experiments and randomized-controlled trials – may be useful in some contexts to document the impact of content on citizen attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, as described in recommendation 6.

6. USAID should increase the use of impact evaluation methods for some types of projects. Impact evaluations based on randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are the gold standard for evaluating program impacts. RCTs have several well-known limitations: they are costly and time consuming; they are not appropriate for some types of projects and contexts; they are difficult to implement and sometimes fail due to non-compliance with the randomization

protocol; and they sometimes do not produce actionable insights. Despite these limitations, it is critical to include RCTs as part of a broad set of M&E strategies for learning about what works (and what doesn't) in building resilient information ecosystems. However, in our document review, we identified only a single RCT-based evaluation in the 23 programs examined (for a journalist training activity in Tanzania[18]). Building a stronger evidence base will require selectively identifying opportunities for adopting RCTs as part of the broad suite of monitoring and evaluation strategies. We stress that RCTs should complement, not replace, routine monitoring and performance evaluation strategies that are critical for tracking project implementation and learning lessons through other data collection methods, including those described in recommendations 1 and 5.

RCTs are most useful and appropriate for interventions that meet three criteria. First, the activity type is being (or has the potential to be) implemented in multiple countries. For projects that are specific to a small number of countries or distinct contexts, there is generally less value in conducting RCT-based evaluations since the results will not have relevance to a large set of countries. Second, the intervention must be amenable to a randomized implementation approach that creates control and treatment groups.[19] Some types of projects are not appropriate because there are not enough participants to allow for this division and/or it would be contrary to program goals to exclude some individuals or organizations in order to create a control group. Third, RCTs are most useful when there is a limited or mixed evidence base for an intervention, either because there is a lack of prior research, previous findings are mixed, or there is considerable skepticism about its efficacy within USAID or IPs.

In our assessment, all USAID-funded activities included in this review have widespread usages (or potential usage) and would be amenable to an RCT-based approach (at least for some project components). Table 2 identifies the four interventions that meet the other two criteria, making them most suitable for RCT-based impact evaluations. First, projects that provide support for independent high-quality content frequently include a journalist training component with a large number of participants, potentially allowing for a randomized implementation plan. Moreover, the Tanzania RCT-based study mentioned above found that the training program had no measurable effect on key outcomes, suggesting a need for additional research. Second, while platform accountability projects are less commonplace, it is conceivable that they will be implemented in an increasing number of countries over time. A recent literature review of MDM interventions found that few studies have examined strategies for altering, labeling, or removing social media content.[20] Third, the literature review found limited evidence that media literacy projects produce durable shifts in skills or behaviors in the Global South. Fourth, we are unaware of any RCT-based research on alternative narratives.

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[18] USAID. 2021. "Impact Evaluation of An Intensive Journalism Training Activity in Tanzania: Final Report." Washington, DC: USAID.

[19] While model-based impact evaluation strategies (including regression discontinuities, natural experiments, instrumental variables, and matching) are widely used, designed-based approaches that integrate randomization into project implementation is often viewed as the preferred strategy.

[20] Blair, Robert J. et al. 2023. "Interventions to Counter Misinformation: Lessons from the Global North and Applications to the Global South." Washington, DC: USAID.

Table 2. Suitability for RCT-based Impact Evaluations

Project Type	Amenable to RCTs	Weak / mixed evidence base
Media development		
Legal and regulatory		
Support for independent high-quality content		
Platform accountability		
Media literacy and public education		
Fact checking		
Research		
Media Monitoring		
Alternative Narratives		
Information Resilience Hubs		

We suggest two strategies for increasing RCT-based research to expand the evidence base for information resilience and integrity programming. First, USAID could make provision for impact evaluations in current or new projects. Because RCTs require significant buy-in from Missions and IPs, USAID would need to be opportunistic in identifying suitable projects where there is considerable interest in supporting an RCT-based evaluation. Second, USAID could provide support to a learning partner to implement a set of linked studies that examine a particular project type. One useful model to consider is the Metaketa approach that EGAP has used to study interventions related to information and accountability, taxation, policing, women's inclusion in politics, and others.[21] In this model, the learning partner would collaborate with academics and implementing organizations to conduct a set of related studies on a single topic in multiple countries, providing a strong evidence base for determining whether the intervention works overall and across contexts.

[21] https://egap.org/our-work/the-metaketa-initiative/

Annex A. Tanzania Case Study

[NOTE: We will provide the case studies as a separate document by July 14. This case study provides an illustration of the format we propose for all case study. Comments and suggestions regarding the structure and content would be most welcome.]

Name:	The Tanzania Media and Civil Society Strengthening (TMCS) Activity (also known as The Boresha Habari / Better News Project)
Type:	Media Development
Implementer:	FHI360 / Internews
Period:	2017-2022, extended to July 2023

THEORY OF CHANGE & OBJECTIVES

The TMCS project aims to strengthen the information environment in Tanzania through the provision of capacity building and material support to journalists and media organizations, civil society groups, and other related stakeholders. The overall goal is "to support an open, inclusive environment in which media and civil society provide accurate and impartial information that promotes participation, inclusion, and accountability" (from the Call for Proposals). The Theory of change (TOC) proposes that this goal will be achieved if four related objectives are achieved, related to: 1) the media environment, 2) journalist capacity, 3) community radio station capacity, and 4) civil society capacity.



"Our stories were one-sided and based on whatever we found online…These days, before sharing content with the public, we check it and apply all the ethical principles of sound journalism." Head of News, Community Radio Station (from Internews: https://internews.org/tanzania-small-community-radio-stations-flourish-boost-

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Internews' primary partners included seven large grantees over the life of the project. These are mainly local media-support and human rights groups, as well as the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), a U.S.-based international NGO, plus a core group of 16 community radio stations. The project also provided small grants to 20 CSOs to implement advocacy campaigns using traditional and social media. In addition, the project supported over 100 Tanzanian media outlets and local CSOs with training, mentoring, stipends, and workshops to help them report on legal reforms, the Covid-19 pandemic, elections, reconciliation, and reform processes, gender-based violence, youth, disability, and other social inclusion issues.



"Before, I was aware of sexual and gender-based violence, but to be honest, I did not really pay it much attention…But my perspective has changed…For the first time, I met survivors who were willing to talk to me. I interviewed them at length. Their shocking stories were published. It was my first report on gender violence." Reporter (from Internews: https://internews.org/story/coverage-of-gender-violence-in-tanzania-prompts-action-from-local-authorities/)

GENDER / MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

While none of the project's core objectives relate primarily to gender or marginalized communities, the TOC does anticipate that the project will lead to better representation of the "voices of all citizens, including women and youth" in media reporting. The final evaluation (November 2022) notes that "in terms of Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI)…there have been consistent efforts by Internews and almost all partners to ensure it is integrated into the project activities and grants, with significant achievements recorded." The evaluation outlines several key contributions. First, the project prioritized the inclusion of women in journalist trainings, leading to positive increases in professionalization and promotion within media outlets. Second, the project encouraged greater coverage of issues that affect marginalized groups, including women, the disabled, and others. The final evaluation observed a significant increase in reporting of relevant issues, including gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, and the perspectives of disabled citizens. Third, by raising awareness about sexual harassment, the project has improved the working environment for female journalists within media outlets. It is important to note that the project was not designed to focus on countering online harassment of women or vulnerable communities.

MERL APPROACHES

The MERL approach for this activity included two core components: 1) routine monitoring of output and outcome indicators by the IP, and 2) evaluations conducted by independent evaluators.

Project Monitoring. As described in the Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan (AMELP), the TMCS project used 18 indicators to monitor and evaluate activities and implementation. The indicators mainly focus on outputs related to the number of organizations and individuals that receive technical assistance training and other types of support and the expected outcomes that should follow from this support, including increased skills among journalists and capabilities among community radio stations. The project also includes several indicators related to impacts that could plausibly be attributed to program activities, including changes in the legal framework, the strength of the network of media and CSO organizations, and particularly the quality and content of media reporting. As part of the IP's efforts to document program impacts, Internews also collected a series of short narratives that illustrate key project achievements.[22]

Evaluations. A final evaluation, conducted by iMedia Associates, was completed in November 2022. This performance evaluation drew on interviews with implementers and stakeholders, focus groups, and survey data. A separate impact evaluation (IE), conducted by NORC, was completed in June 2021. The IE assessed the effectiveness of one project component: trainings provided to university students in journals (and related) programs at two partner universities. Due to COVID-19, some components of the IE could not be completed.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

The final evaluation concluded that the TMCS project largely succeeded in achieving its main objectives. Specifically, the project increased the capacity of hundreds of journalists and 20 community radio stations, and increased coverage of issues of national importance, including priority issues among women and marginalized groups. Evidence for these conclusions comes mainly from self-reported anecdotes among program beneficiaries (journalists and radio station personnel) and output indicators related to the number and focus of news items produced by participating organizations. The report notes that less progress was achieved in improving the operating environment for journalists, due to the restrictive nature of the Magufuli regime, particularly from 2018 to 2020. Likewise, less progress was achieved in strengthening civil society's ability to work with the media to communicate and advocate on key issues. While the report provides an overwhelmingly positive evaluation of the project's achievements, it also notes that no evidence is available on broader impacts, related to the "quality and quantity and diversity of media output, or on audience knowledge, attitudes." The impact evaluation of the journalism training program for university students found that the activity had no discernible effect on the two target outcomes: (1) knowledge of practical journalistic practices and (2) ethics and gender diversity and inclusiveness. These results are based on surveys and an implicit association test conducted with students before and after participation in trainings implemented by the IP. However, as noted above, some components of the IE could not be completed due to COVID-19.

[22] https://internews.org/?s=Tanzania

Annex B. Theories of Change

The document review found that 12 of the 23 projects included explicit Theories of Change (TOCs) in the materials provided to the research team.

(1) Ukraine Media Program in Ukraine (SBU)

The Media Program's underlying hypothesis remains that IF transformational media reforms are implemented, high-quality, engaging content is increased, public demand for quality journalism grows, and self-governance of the sector improves, THEN the civically relevant role of media will be strengthened and citizens will be equipped with quality information that counters malign influence and supports European integration.

(2) Georgia Information Integrity Project (GIIP)

IF USAID GIIP is able to map the actors, vectors, channels and audiences within the disinformation ecosystem in Georgia; AND IF: the project can bring together a diverse network of private and public sector actors across Georgia, building their capacity to work collectively to develop and test responses to disinformation identified through the ecosystem map, THEN Network Partners can develop evidence-based, effective, scalable initiatives to counter disinformation in Georgia, sharing learnings throughout the network;

AND IF stakeholders can understand the impact of scalable solutions on target audiences, enabling the identification of sustainable responses to disinformation, and using learnings to drive advocacy for policy change at government level; THEN vulnerable audiences in Georgia will develop and awareness of and response to disinformation, increasing societal resilience to misinformation and malign influence.

(3) Serbia Media Initiatives and Partnerships Support (MIIPs)

IF citizens obtain the skills to critically assess information and information sources AND

IF consumers, civil society groups, and media organizations effectively advocate for increased journalist adherence to existing ethical and professional standards, THEN

[there] WILL be an increase in demand for professional, accurate and unbiased reporting across media platforms.

(4) North Macedonia YouThink

IF youth in North Macedonia gain and apply media literacy and critical thinking skills as part of their education and in other youth-friendly formats, and

IF they become champions of creative, responsible, empathy-driven use of information to engage with each other and in their communities, and

IF they demand and drive increased volume of high-quality, fact-based, and relevant professional media content,

THEN youth will be able to not only navigate but also shape an information ecosystem that informs and engages as opposed to divides and polarizes, resulting in increased resilience to disinformation and efforts to undermine democracy.

(5) Azerbaijan Media and Journalism Activity (MJA)

IF independent media outlets and journalists have improved capacity to produce high quality, engaging information, include improved digital security skills; and IF critical thinking skills and media information literacy among citizens are strengthened; and IF countering disinformation skills among media practitioners and media consumers are strengthened; THEN the availability of high quality, social relevant information is increased; and citizens will use more accurate, objective news and information in their decision-making.

(6) Tanzania Media and Civil Society Strengthening (TMCS) Activity

IF the media enabling environment in Tanzania is improved and legal restriction on the press and freedom of expression are reduced while journalist safety is promoted; and

IF the skills and capacity of national media outlets, community radio stations, and journalists including women and youth is strengthened; and

IF the capacity and sustainability of community radio stations is increased to provide accurate, impartial, and relevant information; and

IF civil society organizations improve their ability to engage with media outlets to communicate about their advocacy efforts,

THEN media and civil society will be better able to provide accurate and impartial information that represents the voices of all citizens, including women and youth, and enables citizens to engage in democratic processes.

(7) Democratic Republic of the Congo Media Sector Development Activity (MSDA)

IF the media sector legal and regulatory framework is improved, and IF targeted media outlets become more sustainable and professional, and IF the content produced by these outlets improves, and is more appealing to the public, THEN, the media sector will be more vibrant, independent and capable of shaping democratic discourse.

(8) Ecuador Combatting Disinformation and Developing Digital Citizenship (Verifica)

IF the GoE are provided with technical capacity and resources through broad partnership with private sector, civil society, and international partners; IF more civil society, academia, and private sector stakeholders have the capacity to collaborate and participate in the OGP process

and cycle, THEN the new GoE will effectively increase citizen participation and improve transparency and accountability in governance.

(9) Indonesia MADANI Civil Society Support Initiative

IF the organizational and technical capacity of civil society groups at the local level increases and sustainability is enhanced, THEN Indonesian civil society can effectively strengthen government accountability and promote tolerance.

(10) Philippines Initiative for Media Freedom

Internews posits that IF we improve the operating environment for a free press by creating diverse coalitions of civil society and media stakeholders to apply political pressure on government;

AND IF we improve the operating environment for journalists through building skills in preventing and mitigating digital, physical, and legal threats while managing psycho-social stress;

AND IF we bolster the capacity of media actors (outlets, journalists, editors, owners) and CSOs and empower the media and young people to pro-actively battle information disorder through factchecking, improved media literacy, and the use of ICT tools;

AND IF we strengthen media sector self-regulation through building skills while strengthening accountability mechanisms and ensuring an ongoing commitment to an open digital space;

AND IF the media listens more carefully to and engages with citizens and its reporting reflects their needs and concerns;

THEN, the media will be able to play an essential role in buttressing the Philippine's democracy by informing citizens and serving as a watchdog of the government;

AND IF the media is able to inform citizens and serve as a watchdog on the government;

THEN, the country will benefit from engaged citizens who are empowered to demand more accountable democratic governance that provides improved economic, political and social inclusion, as well as advances social stability.

(11) Libya Elections and Legislative Strengthening Activity (LELSA)

If the HNEC, CCMCE, and institutions with election-related responsibilities institutionalize best practices in the areas of professional development, operational and internal management systems, and electoral administration, AND political parties, legislators, and government officials improve and reform policy- and decision-making practices and integrate all parts of Libyan society, including women, youth, and marginalized groups into those processes, Then a political

culture of transparency, accountability, and citizen trust inclusive of all Libyans, including women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, will be strengthened.

If targeted civil society actors work actively to engage citizens to stimulate civic and electoral participation, AND the HNEC, CCMCE, and Ministry of Interior are capable of implementing effective election security measures, Then candidates will be able to safely and securely conduct campaigns AND citizens will be able to freely express their preferences for political candidates.

If Libyan civil society is well informed on their role in monitoring and reporting on political activities and mitigating conflict AND are able to serve in an organized and effective oversight role, Then electoral processes can be fairer and citizen confidence will be strengthened.

(12) Civil Society and Media – Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) for Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

IF civil society and independent media strengthening interventions are implemented and supported with state-of-the-art technical guidance and resources that take into account evolving trends, new lessons learned, and the latest program innovations in the sector…

AND these timely interventions are able to adapt based on shared learning within these multi-regional civil society mechanisms..

THEN USAID will be able to employ more impactful, sustainable, and effective approaches to improve civil society capacity, elevate citizens' voices, and promote self-reliance.

Annex C. Illustrative List[23] of Indicators by Program Type

Indicator	Indicator Type
Content Support Programs	
• Number of reports/pieces of content produced with USG support	Output
• Audience of socially relevant content produced with USG support	Outcome
Information Hubs	
• Number of partners trained	Output
• Number of partners who benefit from the developed support packages	Output
• Number of jointly developed interventions	Output
• Number of initiatives developed into pilots	Output
• Number of sprints	Output
• Number of responses to ad-hoc and long-term events of the coalition	Output
• Number of private sector partners engaged or interacting with interventions	Output
• Number of stakeholders, organizations, and partners in the network	Output
• Increased capacity to communicate high quality content (qualitative)	Outcome
• Percentage of coalition members using and adopting MEL frameworks in their programming	Outcome
• Number of new actors who started counter disinformation interventions	Outcome
• Value ($) of non-donor resources	Outcome

[23] We will develop out the entire list within the next week, but we wanted to give you a taste of what it will look like now.

mobilized for local development priorities	
• Percent of target population able to identify disinformation	Outcome
• Percent of target population that has taken action to counter disinformation	Outcome
• Number of TV programs/online media regularly featuring disinformation and information integrity issues	Outcome
• Audience reach of communication efforts through comms hub	Outcome
• Number of interventions resulting in cross-sectoral collaborations	Outcome
• Increase cross-sector information sharing related to disinformation (qualitative)	Outcome
• Audience reach of responses to ad-hoc and long-term events	Outcome
• Number of new policies/strategies/initiatives developed by the network and the government	Outcome
Legal & Regulatory Support Programs	
• Number of instances of legal advice provided to journalists and media managers	Outcome
• Number of milestones achieved in strengthening regulatory mechanisms	Outcome
• Number of public policies adopted, repealed, changed, or implemented with USG assistance	Outcome
Media Development Programs	
• Number of journalists trained and supported	Output
• Number of participants trained in content production	Output
• Number of users of the platform	Output
• Number of online users who complete course	Output
• Number of individuals participating	Output

in blended learning program (sign up and complete)	
• Number of people participating in USG media literacy interventions.	Output
• Number of media practitioners supported to network with regional and global fact-checking initiatives	Output
• Number of fact-checking organizations receiving USG assistance	Output
• Number of non-state news outlets assisted by USG	Output
• Number of USG-assisted media-sector CSOs/institutions that serve to strengthen the independent media or journalists	Output
• Number of journalists participating in citizen journalism platforms	Outcome
• Number of citizen journalism stories published by participants in the training	Outcome
• Number of journalists applying new media tools following participation in program activities	Outcome
• Number of media outlets that have adopted or apply new media tools	Outcome
• Improved digital safety and security practices among participants	Outcome
• Number of journalists participating in program activities, who are connected with digital outlets in the region	Outcome
• Average percent improvement in media and information analysis skill	Outcome
• Percent increase of users in program's partner fact-checking platforms	Outcome
• Number of media institutions which play a convening/leadership role in the media sector	Outcome

	• Number of milestones achieved in laying the foundation for sustained local media actors' engagement in democratic processes	Outcome
	• Percent of USG-assisted organizations with improved performance	Impact
	**Media Literacy Programs** • Number of milestones achieved in laying the foundation for sustained local media actors' engagement in democratic processes	Outcome
	**Media Monitoring Programs** • Number of media monitoring reports published/ presented for public discussion	Output
	**Research Programs** • Number of partners engaged in investigations	Output
	• Number of learning products created based on audience research findings	Output
	• Number of investigations powered by the ecosystem map	Outcome
	• Audience reach of learning products (investigation findings, audience research findings)	Outcome
	• Number of articles/media content (including TV programs) created based on investigation findings	Outcome

Annex D. Projects Included in the Document Review and Case Study Research

Country	Project
Ukraine*	Media Program in Ukraine (SBU)
Georgia*	Georgia Information Integrity Project (GIIP)
Serbia*	Media Initiatives and Partnerships Support (MIPS)
Serbia*	Strengthening Media Systems
Serbia*	Media Innovation Activity (MIA)
North Macedonia	YouThink
Moldova	Media Enabling Democracy, Inclusion, and Accountability in Moldova (Media-M)
Kyrgyz Republic	Cultivating Media Independence (Media-K)
Azerbaijan	Media and Journalism Activity
Tanzania*	Tanzania Media and Civil Society Strengthening (TMCS) Activity
DRC	Media Sector Development Activity
Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Rwanda	Breakthrough ACTION
Ecuador	Combatting Disinformation and Developing Digital Citizenship (Ecuador Verifica)
Guatemala, Peru, Dominican Republic	CREDIBLE VOICES de la Juventud
Venezuela	Assisting Independent News Supply
Nicaragua*	Media Strengthening Program
LAC Regional	Promoting Security and Freedom of Expression for the Media Program (PROSAFE)
Indonesia*	Advancing Media Literacy (AML)
Indonesia*	MADANI Civil Society Support Initiative
Philippines	Initiative for Media Freedom
Libya*	Libya Elections and Legislative Strengthening Activity (LELSA)
Global	Civil Society Innovation Initiative
Global	Civil Society and Media -- Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND)

*indicates countries included in the case study research

Annex E. Key Informant Interviews

The research team conducted 20 Key Informant Interviews that included a total of 41 individuals from USAID HQ, USAID Missions, and Implementing Partners, including the following:

USAID HQ

USAID HQ – Health

USAID HQ – Office of Transition Initiatives

USAID HQ – Gender Specialist

Pact

The Consortium for Elections and Political Processes (CEPPS)

The Tides Foundation

USAID Libya Mission

USAID Georgia Mission

USAID Ukraine Mission

USAID Nicaragua Mission

USAID Serbia Mission

USAID Indonesia Mission

ABA Libya

BBC Media Action (Libya)

Zinc (Georgia)

Internews (Ukraine)

Propulsion One (Serbia)

IREX (Serbia)

Annex F. Key Informant Interview Guide

[Note: The KIIs included a variety of respondent types, including USAID HQ and Mission staff, implementing partners, and other organizations. The research team adapted the generic questions listed here as appropriate for each respondent type.]

- Describe to us your relevant project(s). From your perspective, what are the most important activities and outputs in these projects?
    - How does this work intersect with the broader programmatic strategy for the relevant USAID team?
    - In your view, what is the goal of this work? What problem is it trying to solve? What change is it trying to create?
    - Is this work primarily about…
        - …disseminating information? What kind, and through what medium?
        - …citizen education? On what topics? Led by whom? Through what mechanisms or venues?
        - …promoting accountability for tech companies and social media platforms?
        - …producing journalism or improving access to information?
        - …changing some aspect of public behavior, e.g. vaccine uptake?
        - …changing public views or attitudes on a topic or toward something?
        - …improving regulations and other aspects of the media ecosystem?
    - What is the target audience or sector?
        - Whose beliefs, behaviors, or circumstances is this aimed at changing?
        - How does this work recruit or reach that audience?
    - Can you describe the information environment in the country or region where this work is relevant?
        - Is there a robust free press?
        - Does it compete with state or state-friendly media?
        - What is the relationship between the media and the state?
        - What are the most used and most-trusted sources of news?
- Our report is focused on projects addressing mis-, dis-, and malinformation. How do you understand or define those terms?
    - How does this work address those themes?
    - What is the source of the harmful or misleading information of concern to you?
        - What specific actor, if any, is responsible for producing and spreading this information?
        - What are the most concerning results of this information?
        - Are you able to measure the resulting harms? How?
    - How, if at all, do you think about this work as promoting “information resilience,” however you personally define it? Is this a more useful frame than “countering disinformation”?
    - How does this work engage and empower local partners?
    - How does it interact with national or local governments?

- How would you articulate the theory of change behind this project?
    - How was it developed?
    - How and through what means was this work informed by research on the efficacy of counter-disinformation interventions?
    - How did it influence design of the program?
    - How would you adapt the theory of change based on your experience with this project?
- In your view, what has been most successful about this work?
    - How does that success relate to the theory of change you articulated earlier?
    - What has not worked as well? For what reasons? (Ex. Program design, problems in implementation, broader contextual factors, etc.)
    - What third party actors, if any, provided feedback on this project?
    - What did you learn through this project's implementation? How were these lessons preserved and shared across USAID and its partners?
- How did you measure or assess success in advancing desired outcomes?
    - What indicators did you use for this project or projects?
        - How were they developed?
        - How well have you found them to work for capturing effects?
        - How do you collect data on these indicators, and how well has that process worked so far?
    - On what time horizon are you best able to measure impact? Why?
    - If this project were repeated, what would you change?
    - What if anything surprised you about this project's outcomes?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us about this project?

Annex G. Initial Typology of Information Resilience and Integrity

Activity Type	Definition
Fact Checking	Fact-checking is a process that seeks to verify sometimes factual information, in order to promote the veracity and correctness of reporting. Fact-checking can be conducted before or after the text is published or otherwise disseminated.
Investigative Journalism	Investigative journalism is a form of journalism in which reporters deeply investigate a single topic of interest, such as serious crimes, political corruption, or corporate wrongdoing.
Legal and Regulatory	Support to Government or Civil Society to ensure international and democratic norms and principles of FoE, FoAssociation, FoAI, and HR are respected
Alternative Narratives	Communications efforts that seeks to help audiences find common ground independently from fact/counter-fact debates that overwhelm the political and social dialogues.
Media Literacy/Public Education	Media literacy encompasses the practices that allow people to access, critically evaluate, and create or manipulate media.
Platform Accountability	Actions to compel social media platforms to take responsibility and be accountable for their own actions to manipulate, rank, filter, moderate and take down content or user accounts.
Research	Undertaken to understand the prevalence, networks, dynamics or perceptions of information disorder, or to independently inform MEL of interventions
Media Development	Complex support to independent media (includes legal and regulatory, newsroom support, safety / security, participation, etc.)
Disinformation Hubs	Support for the establishment or operations of units or coordination functions coordinating government, civil society, and industry activities
Other	Any activity relevant to MDM which cannot be sorted into the categories above.

Programs Developed by USAID

Annex H. Materials Included in the Document Review

1. Georgia Information Integrity Project (GIIP)
    a. Year 1 Annual Report
    b. MEL Plan
    c. Year 2 Annual Report
    d. Annex II: Program Overview and Key Highlights from Year 2
    e. Annex III: GIIP Audience Research Results
    f. Annex IV: Rapid Research Findings
    g. Annex V: Media Consumption Focus Group
    h. Annual Workplan Year 3
2. Azerbaijan Media and Journalism Activity (MJA)
    a. MJA Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan
    b. IREX Report on Audience Research in Azerbaijan
    c. Year 2 Annual Work Plan for NORC Assessment
    d. FY23 Q1 MJA Quarterly Performance Report
3. Media Program in Ukraine (SBU / MPU)
    a. Attachment 1 MONITORING EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLAN October 2018 – Sept 2019
    b. Attachment 2 List of Subgrants (2019)
    c. Attachments 3-6
    d. MPU Annual Report
    e. Annual Report October 2019-September 2020
    f. Attachment 1 MONITORING EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLAN AROct19Sep20Final
    g. Attachment 2 List of Subgrants (2020)
    h. Attachment 3 Success Stories
    i. MPU Annual Report Oct 2020 Sept 2021
    j. Attachment 1 MONITORING EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLAN
    k. Attachment 2 List of Subgrants
    l. Attachment 3 Success Stories
    m. Attachment 4 Outcomes Harvesting
    n. Attachment 5 Media Sustainability Prospects in Ukraine
    o. MPU Annual Report October 2021-September 2022
    p. Attachment 1 MONITORING EVALUATION AND LEARNING PLAN October 2021-September 2022
    q. Attachment 2 List of Subgrants October 2021-September 2022
    r. Annex 3 Success stories September 2022
    s. Annex 4 Outcome Harvesting
    t. 7201 Media Program Description
    u. Ukraine MPU Midterm Program Evaluation Report
    v. MPU Cost Extension Program Description August 2022
    w. MPU Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan September 2022
4. Moldova Media-M (Media Enabling Democracy, Inclusion, and Accountability in Moldova)
    a. MEDIA-M Annual Report October 2020 - September 2021

    b. MEDIA-M Annual Report October 2021 - September 2022
    c. MEDIA-M Annual Report October 2020
    d. MEDIA-M Narrative Report October 2019
    e. Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Table for Annual Report October 2021-September 2022
    f. Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Table for Annual Report October 2021-September 2022
    g. Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Table for Report October 2019-March 2020
5. Serbia Media Initiatives and Partnerships Support (MIPS)
    a. Annual Program Performance Report Year 1
    b. Annex 1: MIPS MEL Annual Report Year 2
    c. Annex II: MIPS Social Media Campaign Report Year 2
    d. Cable Wars – United Group Telekom Serbia March 22
    e. Q4 – MIPS Program Performance Report
    f. Q4 – MIPS MEL Report – Annex 1
    g. Q4 – MIPS Success Story – Annex V
    h. Q4 – MIPS Social Media Campaign Report – Annex II
6. Serbia Media Innovation Activity
    a. Quality Assurance Surveillance Plan (QASP)
    b. QASP Baseline Status Report
7. Serbia Strengthening Media Systems
    a. PA00Z4J7
    b. PA00Z4J7
    c. SMS Demand Side Report Serbia
    d. SMS SMMTA Updated Report 15 February 2019
    e. USAID Serbia SMS Infographic
    f. SMS Final Report AID
    g. SMS PEA report
    h. Rapid Assessment of Media portfolio
    i. SMS PEA report
8. North Macedonia YouThink
    a. Annual Learning Event Report
    b. Learning Agenda
    c. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan
9. Krygyz Republic Cultivating Media Independence Initiative Activity in the Kyrgyz Republic (Media-K)
    a. CMII Media-K Final Report (4-7-2023)
    b. Annex 1 Media-K ME Table
    c. Annex 2 SCS MediaK MediaLit
    d. Annex 3 SCS MediaK PressInfo
    e. Annex 4 SCS MediaK ContentProduction
    f. Annex 5 SCS MediaK DataJournalism
    g. Annex 6 SCS MediaK Disinformation
10. Venezuela Assisting Independent News Supply
    a. IRI Assisting Independent News Supply Workplan FY23 - External

    b. IRI Venezuela AID-OAA-A-14-00034 FY23 Q1 - Attachment B Performance Management Plan
    c. IRI Venezuela AID-OAA-A-14-00034 FY23 Q1 - Narrative Report
    d. IRI Venezuela AID-OAA-A-14-00034 FY23 Q1- Attachment A Performance Tracking Table
11. Ecuador Verifica Combatting Disinformation and Developing Digital Citizenship
    a. 7205… Fundamedios-Signed
    b. Ecuador Verifica Plan de Trabajo
    c. FAA 7205… Ecuador Verifica Fundamedios Plan de Trabajo PY2
    d. Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Ecuador Verifica - Resultados Ano 1
    e. Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Ecuador Verifica - April 2022
    f. Milestone 3 report FAA No 7205…
    g. Fundamedios - Milstone 5 report FAA No. 7205…
    h. Resumen proyecto Ecuador Verifica USAID
12. Guatemala, Peru, and Dominican Republic CREDIBLE VOICES de la Juventud
    a. Workplan Year 1
    b. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan
    c. Annex 1 - Monitoring and Evaluation Data Q4 FY22
    d. Annex 2 - APII Report
    e. CREDIBLE Learning Agenda
    f. CREDIBLE Master Indicator Tracker
    g. Workplan year 2
    h. Annex 1 - Monitoring and evaluation data Q1 FY23
13. Latin America Regional Promoting Security and Freedom for the Media Program (PROSAFE)
    a. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY20Q2
    b. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY21Q1
    c. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY21Q2
    d. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY21Q3
    e. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY21Q4
    f. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY22Q1
    g. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY22Q2
    h. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY22Q3
    i. ICFJ PROSAFE Quarterly Report FY22Q4
    j. PROSAFE Evaluation Summary YR8 Q2
    k. PROSAFE Evaluation Summary YR10 Q2
    l. PROSAFE Evaluation Summary YR10 Q3
    m. PROSAFE Evaluation Summary YR10 Q4
    n. DRG Team Feedback LACLEARN Memo - Quality Assurance
    o. Workplan PROSAFE FY2022
    p. Workplan PROSAFE FY2023
14. Nicaragua Media Strengthening Program
    a. SBU --- VIBE 2021
    b. SBU Nicaragua Gender Assessment II
    c. SBU IREX Insight 4
15. Democratic Republic of the Congo Media Sector Development Activity
    a. Award

    b. Award 72066019LA00001
    c. EPP Annual QPR FY2023 Q1 AOR
    d. Mod 5 - 72066019LA00001 MSDA FHI 360
    e. MSDA QPR FY2023 Q1 AOR
    f. SCS DRC MSDA Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan
16. Tanzania Boresha Habari (Better News) Project
    a. Final Evaluation Report - Boresha Habari - iMedia
    b. TMCS Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan FY 2022
    c. Global VAX PIRS
17. The Philippines Initiative for Media Freedom
    a. Cooperative Agreement
    b. IEAP
    c. Initiative for Media Freedom Annual Report 2021-2022
    d. Internews IMF AIP Y4
    e. Internews report - information dystopia and Philippine democracy - Jan 202
    f. December 2021 TotooBa Data Analysis – Monthly Brief
    g. January 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    h. March 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    i. April 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    j. June 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    k. September 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    l. October 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    m. November 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    n. December 2022 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
    o. January 2023 TotooBa Analysis - Monthly Brief
18. Indonesia MADANI Civil Society Support Initiative
    a. January 2023 Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan MADANI Midterm Evaluation Report
    b. Annex 2 - Performance Indicator Tracking Table Q4 FY22
    c. Combating Covid-19 Disinformation, longer
    d. Combating Covid-19 Disinformation, submitted to USAID
    e. Final report Atma FHI360 October 2020-September 2021
    f. MADANI Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan December 2022
19. Indonesia Advancing Media Literacy
    a. Copy of Report on Meme Image Clustering Results.pdf
    b. Copy of Annex 2 - Interim Report - Online Disinformation Indonesia
    c. Copy of Final UND Media Literacy Project Indonesia FY22 Q2 Report April 30
    d. Copy of UND Media Literacy Project Indonesia FY22 Q1 Report January 31
    e. Copy of UND Media Literacy Project Indonesia FY22 Q3 Report July 31
    f. Copy of UND Media Literacy Project Indonesia FY22 Q4 Report October 31
    g. Copy of UND Media Literacy Project Indonesia FY23 Q1 Report January 31
20. Libya Elections and Legislative Strengthening Activity (LELSA)
    a. ABA ROLI Libya CSO Handbook on Election-related MDM
    b. ABA ROLI Libya HSD Legal Analysis
    c. ABA ROLI-PGI Libya Disinformation Trends March 2022
    d. Annex I - Program Implementation Update
    e. Annex III - LELSA ITT FY22 Q3-4 Semi Annual

f. Annex IV - CEPPS Data Validation
g. Annex V - Success Stories
h. FY22 Q3-4 CEPPS EPT LELSA Semi-Annual Report
i. Annex I Program Implementation Update (2)
j. Annex II CEPPS Workplan Activity Update (2)
k. Annex III Indicator Tracking Table
l. Annex IV CEPPS Data Validation
m. Attachment 1 ROLI CEPPS LELSA HSD Campaign Posts
n. FY23 Q1-2 CEPPS EPT LELSA Semi-Annual Report
o. Tahra Program Brief (March 2023)

21. Civil Society Innovation Initiative (CSII)
    a. CSII Disinformation Activities 2021-2023
    b. CSII Combatting Disinformation
    c. Tides CSII Quarterly Report January-March 2022 Submitted April 29 2022
    d. Tides CSII January-March 2022 PMEP Submitted April 29 2022
    e. Tides CSII Quarterly Report April-June 2022 Submitted to USAID July 26 2022
    f. Tides CSII April-June 2022 Grants Annex Submitted to USAID July 26 2022
    g. Tides CSII Quarterly Report July-September 2022 Submitted to USAID on October 28 2022
    h. Tides CSII July - September 2022 PMEP Submitted October 28 2022
    i. Tides CSII Quarterly Report October - December 2022 Submitted January 30 2023
    j. Tides CSII October - December 2022 PMEP Submitted January 30 2023
    k. Guide for Engaging Chinese Stakeholders in the BRI
    l. East Asia Innovation Hub Safe Brave Spaces Coloring Book
    m. Annex 1 Africa Innovation Hub December 2022 USAID Presentation
    n. CSII Final Report 2020
    o. FY19 Revised PMP Narrative
    p. PMP narrative FY20
22. Civil Society and Media—Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND)
    a. CSM-STAND Asia-EE-LAC Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan Revised Submission 011922
    b. CSM-STAND Asia EE LAC Y2 Workplan Revised - 2022-10-20
    c. CSM Stand Asia EE LAC FY2022Q1
    d. CSM STAND Asia EE LAC FY2022 Q2
    e. CSM STAND Asia EE LAC FY2022 Q3
    f. CSM STAND FY2022 Q4 Asia EE LAC Annual Report
    g. CSM STAND Asia-EE-LAC FY2023 Q1
    h. CEA El Salvador CSM-STAND Learning Agenda Development Feb 2023
    i. CSM STAND Africa-MENA FY2022 Q1
    j. CSM STAND Africa-MENA FY2022 Q2
    k. CSM STAND Africa MENA Y1 Q2 Annex 5
    l. CSM STAND Africa-MENA Y1 Q2 Annex 6
    m. CSM STAND Africa-MENA FY2022 Q3
    n. CSM STAND FY2022 Q4 Africa MENA Annual Report
    o. CSM STAND Africa-MENA FY2023 Q1 Report

p. Khutlo Co-Creation Design Workshop Report
q. CSM-STAND Africa MENA Y2 Workplan Revised Clean- 2022-10-20
r. CSM-STAND Africa MENA Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan - 2021-11-30
s. CSM-STAND Africa MENA Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plan - 2022-01-07

23. Breakthrough ACTION
    a. Breakthrough ACTION Cote D'Ivoire GHSA FY22 Workplan
    b. Breakthrough ACTION Cote D'Ivoire GHSA FY23 Workplan Narrative
    c. Breakthrough ACTION Mali CN31 Global Workplan (February 2023)
    d. Breakthrough ACTION Exemplary Infodemic and RMS Activities (April 2023)
    e. Cote D'Ivoire Annual Report
    f. COVID-19 Annual Report
    g. Mali GHSA Annual Report