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Developing a Prototype Handbook for Monitoring and Evaluating Department of Defense Humanitarian Assistance Projects

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

The impetus for the development of a handbook to guide the assessment of military humanitarian assistance (HA) projects came from a January 2008 workshop with combatant command (COCOM) HA managers, “Monitoring and Evaluation of DoD Humanitarian Assistance Programs.” Participants felt that a user-friendly handbook to clarify overall monitoring and evaluation (M&E) concepts and to facilitate project assessment would be particularly valuable to those responsible for overseeing the execution of HA projects in the field. Recent policy guidance and the development of this handbook are part of an increased emphasis on assessment across the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).

Developing the Handbook

The project team took a broad and systematic approach to developing and refining the prototype handbook, which is included as an appendix to this report. To develop the initial draft of the handbook, we first reviewed published reports from various government, nongovernment, and academic sources to better understand different approaches to project assessment. Second, we searched the Overseas Humanitarian Assistance Shared Information System (OHASIS) database to gain a better understanding of existing and proposed Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) HA projects. Finally, we conducted semistructured interviews, first with COCOM HA managers and then with others, to elicit views on perceived opportunities and concerns related to the assessment of HA projects.

Our interviews suggested that the handbook should include both an educational component—a primer on M&E—and a step-by-step user’s guide for conducting project assessment activities. The primer was developed to provide those tasked with project assessment with a concise, yet comprehensive, introduction to M&E terminology, concepts, and approaches, with an emphasis on the ability to coordinate and communicate with civilian agencies. The user’s guide was developed to walk users through the concrete steps of project-level assessment—from HA project conception and planning to project execution and monitoring for progress and results.

After we completed the first full draft of the handbook in December 2008, we asked stakeholders in DoD as well as experts from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration to review the draft and provide written feedback. As another avenue of feedback intended to inform revision of the first draft handbook, we sought at least one or two countries where it
could be field-tested. Ultimately, DoD HA staff in Albania and Morocco agreed to carry out the pilot tests.

Overall, stakeholders who reviewed the handbook felt that it represented a strong contribution to the M&E literature, not only for DoD but also for the larger international development community. These reviewers provided important feedback that informed our subsequent revisions. Those who pilot-tested the handbook in Albania and Morocco felt that it was a valuable resource aimed at the appropriate level for those conducting field-level HA project assessments. They provided useful comments regarding ways to streamline and simplify the document.

We revised the handbook based on the constructive feedback provided through the review and pilot-testing processes.

Discussion and Recommendations

Although we received extensive and valuable feedback from reviews of the initial draft, pilot-testing was limited to two countries, a small number of projects, and a relatively short time frame. Thus, several aspects of the handbook’s use could not be tested, including its use across all types of HA projects, its use over time (particularly when a project is handed off from one team to another), and the feasibility and usefulness of compiling data from many individual projects to inform higher-level assessments. Because of the limited pilot testing to date, we recommend that the prototype handbook undergo further testing, if possible, before it is broadly used.

Most staff responsible for HA projects are currently not undertaking any project assessment activities, including fulfilling the existing requirement to complete an after-action report, so the perception is that any project assessment activity will add burden. It is hoped, however, that the assessment approach outlined in the prototype handbook will actually reduce the burden on staff after an initial period of uptake and adjustment. However, the potential for reduced burden—both real and perceived—will be contingent on DoD both formally requiring HA project assessment and enforcing that requirement. DoD should explicitly require HA project assessment and enforce this requirement (e.g., new project nominations should not be accepted unless assessment requirements from previous projects are met).

The level of burden related to conducting project assessment activities will also depend on the way in which data are captured and stored. To reduce the burden of HA project-level assessment and to allow generated data to be compiled to inform higher-level assessments, the collection of project assessment information as outlined in the prototype handbook should be incorporated within current and future efforts to upgrade and improve the OHASIS database.

Without information captured in OHASIS or another similar system, project-level assessments will be of limited use. DoD will need to decide whether it will begin to require project-level assessment using the handbook before this retrofitting of OHASIS is complete or whether it would prefer to wait until the system is redesigned to support assessment activities. While starting sooner may be beneficial from the perspective of training and instilling best practices in project management, the potential for perceived additional burden and limited usefulness is higher without the systems support that would be provided by a redesigned OHASIS database. To the extent that funds are available, the capture of HA project assessment information
as outlined in the handbook should be incorporated into OHASIS before HA project assessment is required.

Although there are several different handbook formats that could be tested in an additional round of pilot tests, based on the feedback that we received, we recommend a letter-sized, spiral-bound handbook with a flexible protective cover and a CD insert that includes an electronic version of the handbook and all handbook worksheets.

It is hoped that a final handbook, though designed with a specific focus in mind, will be used more broadly over time by DoD and potentially beyond. To support its sustainable use by DoD, in particular, the handbook should be incorporated into the formal DoD handbook series.

Prototype Handbook

The prototype handbook is presented as an appendix to this report. It includes three major parts: an introduction, an M&E primer, and a step-by-step user's guide for project assessment. The M&E primer educates handbook users on basic M&E concepts and terms (including those that go beyond the scope of project-level assessment), how to plan for project assessment, and the appropriate use of indicators in various types of project assessment. The user's guide presents 11 project assessment steps and includes various worksheets to facilitate assessment planning and data collection. In addition, the prototype handbook includes its own table of contents and appendixes with supplemental information on community consultation and avoiding bias in project assessment, as well as a glossary of M&E terms.