Attachment 7 - Concluding Panel with the Current Administrator and

Three Former Administrators

In anticipation of a possible transition at USAID in 2017, Moderator John Norris (Center for American Progress) posed questions of Gayle Smith, Henrietta Holsman Fore, Brian Atwood and Peter McPherson about their own experiences settling in as Administrator and their recommendations to the next Administrator. The following notes summarize some key points but they cannot capture the full flavor and content of the very rich discussion - which was marked by agreement on most subjects.

**Looking back at your arrival at USAID, what do you wish you had known in advance about the agency and its mission?**

Three Administrators mentioned that they benefited from prior assignments at USAID, work on some aspect of development elsewhere in the US government, or experience in the field as a State Department-Foreign Service Officer. But most agreed that they didn’t really know enough about:

* The “internal mechanisms” of how USAID projects worked in detail;
* The history or “knowledge base” of USAID’s successes and failures over time;
* How to distinguish between cyclical fads (or “seasons”) in development work and long-term areas of US interest;
* How to focus on the agency’s true priority strategic objectives among myriad stated sector and regional priorities;
* How to motivate career staff to think out of the box and beyond their own areas of comfort;
* How to assess recent cross-cutting approaches such as public-private partnerships and trade-related activities, and how to support US interventions in the Middle East.
* How to assure USAID a strong voice and a “seat at the table” with cabinet secretaries on major issues with development implications.

**Once in place, what approaches helped you understand the agency, its mission and challenges and how to be a more effective administrator?**

Suggestions included:

* Get to know the agency’s internal processes quickly, and in detail, project design and evaluation, budgets and finance;
* Focus equally on inside agency matters (such as personnel and procurement) and outside matters (interagency congressional work, PR);
* Listen to career and field staff to benefit from their experience and insights;
* Focus on the balance between field missions and DC headquarters, decentralizing as much as possible;
* Develop a strong policy staff that links development objectives to broad US foreign policy objectives;
* Assess overall staffing competency, training needs and opportunities to attract and keep new staff despite budget constraints, such as the DLI program.
* Recognize that there will always be pressures to take on new “initiatives”; but rather than just adding priorities and programs, you must make tough decisions about what has to be eliminated in the process, and you have to keep your own house in order.

**What are some of the major challenges USAID faces today?**

* Clean up internal systems, especially human resources and procurement, to reduce the bureaucratic overload that gets in the way of staff doing their real jobs – in short, “get the organization straight”;
* Need to ensure USAID has high quality policy staff in areas where it is taking a leadership role;
* Information management and integration of new media, to build on the knowledge base about successes and failures, and to improve communications with field staff, partners, and Congressional staff and members;
* Getting used to the “new normal” of managing big programs in “messy environments” where there’s less opportunity than in the past to see what’s going on or to measure results;
* Staff, training and security needs of new officers being sent to high-risk areas with little experience, for short-term assignments that undercut learning opportunities, and without families.
* Reliance on new programming mechanisms such as DART teams to parachute into crisis areas with dedicated teams that may be in place for extended periods of time; need to hand off some activities to NGOs and other partners;
* Continued need, despite changes in the crisis-oriented programming environment in many areas, for insistence on program content, quality and evaluation so that USAID remains a learning organization.

**Any specific advice for the transition team about to land at USAID?**

* Don’t try to reinvent the wheel at every turn or assume that all past experience should be rejected;
* Take advantage of the vast knowledge of the career staff.