IFES Comments on USAID's Draft 2020 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy

August 26, 2020

Throughout its more than 30-year history, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has implemented hundreds of projects across the globe funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment underpins IFES' work to build democracies that deliver for all, and we appreciate the opportunity to leverage our experience to provide informed input on USAID's draft 2020 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy. IFES requests that USAID considers the following:

In the Vision, Objectives and Definitions section (page 10), IFES recommends that definitions for "gender," "gender identity" and "gender-based violence" be included. All of these definitions are necessary for a clear understanding of what the policy is seeking to address. IFES also recommends that the definition of "gender equality" emphasize not only equality of opportunity, but also equality of outcome. For example, girls and boys might have the same opportunity to attend school (equality of opportunity), but – because of harmful gender norms and cultural issues – girls might not graduate at the same rate (leading to inequality of outcomes). All USAID programming must strive to achieve equality of outcome in addition to equality of opportunity to be successful. For the definition of "gender" and "gender identity," IFES recommends using the U.S. Department of State's definition in the U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally (GBV Strategy) on page 33. For the definition of "gender-based violence," IFES recommends using the U.S. Department of State's definition in the GBV Strategy on page 6. IFES also recommends the replacement of the term "unalienable rights" with "human rights" on pages 5, 10, 16 and 25. The term "unalienable rights" is not agreed upon in national or international law, whereas "human rights" are clearly defined in international standards to which the United States is a party, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Overall, an application of an intersectional analytic lens to programming is essential to the success of USAID programs to promote gender equality and women's empowerment for all women, including those from multiple marginalized groups, such as women with disabilities and young women. The policy should acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group and that there are unique reasons why and how women experience inequality, which are often based on other identity characteristics, like ethnicity, disability or age. It is critical to analyze and respond to the needs of different women, and that consideration should be addressed and woven throughout all 13 sectors in this document.

In the Operational Principles section (page 11), IFES applauds the inclusion of "engage men and boys" and "do no harm" as part of USAID's key operational principles. IFES appreciates the text on page 12 that acknowledges the challenges that damaging conceptions of masculinity, harmful gender norms and the patriarchy have for men. In the "build partnerships across a wide range of stakeholders" section (beginning of page 12), IFES recommends including "country government institutions" as a key stakeholder. In IFES' experience, partnerships with a multitude of government stakeholders – including election commissions, government ministries and judicial bodies – to work toward gender equality have proved crucial in our efforts to build inclusive democratic societies. On page 14, IFES recommends that USAID's operational principle to "drive decision-making and investments by using evidence and data" includes an acknowledgement that data on gender equality and women's empowerment is difficult to capture and analyze, especially with programs with a shorter period of performance, and that we must both use innovative data collection approaches and acknowledge the methodological rigor of various qualitative approaches to measure gender equality and women's empowerment. Finally, on page 15, the principle to "pursue an inclusive approach" must include a commitment to be inclusive of all women and men, girls and boys, regardless of age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic area, migratory status, forced displacement or HIV/AIDS status.

Beginning on page 17 in the "conflict and insecurity" section, USAID should consider specifically acknowledging the unique challenges of refugees and internally displaced people, the majority of whom are women and children. These communities are recognized as key populations in the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security.

The "democracy, human rights, and governance" section beginning on page 19 focuses narrowly on women's political participation. USAID and its beneficiaries and partners would be better served if the policy focuses more broadly on creating an enabling environment for women's participation, in addition to empowering women to lead in politics. Specifically, IFES encourages USAID to strengthen this section by including: promoting and protecting human rights (including but not limited to political rights); strengthening the rule of law and equal access to justice; supporting civic organizing and advocacy; and encouraging gender and conflict-sensitive reporting. These key elements of democracy and governance work should also be reflected as part of USAID's policy. IFES appreciates the acknowledgment that descriptive representation – while important – is not enough and should be accompanied by efforts for more meaningful symbolic representation, including overcoming ingrained social and cultural barriers.

In USAID's sector approach on "gender-based violence" (beginning on page 25), IFES appreciates the acknowledgement of how negative gender and cultural norms can affect how

girls and boys experience violence. IFES recommends that USAID include in its policy an acknowledgement of other forms of gender-based violence, including psychological, emotional and verbal abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation. Women with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to experience gender-based violence, so this is an example of how applying an intersectional approach could inform targeted programming. This policy should align with the United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally, which acknowledges the variety of ways gender-based violence manifests itself across the globe. IFES appreciates USAID's acknowledgement of the harms violence against women in elections can cause on page 20.

IFES recommends that in addition to "agency requirements" (beginning on page 36), USAID should include a section on requirements for implementing partners. Requirements for implementing partners could include: requirements to have a gender adviser (either at headquarters offices and/or in field offices of significant size); requirements to mainstream gender into all parts of the program cycle, including monitoring, evaluation and reporting; and required introductory training on gender equality and women's empowerment among staff of implementing partners. This section would mirror the agency requirements, reinforce existing requirements of implementing partners and ensure that gender equality is a part of all USAID and implementer efforts.

One particularly troubling omission throughout the policy is any mention of individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community, in particular trans women and individuals who do not conform to the gender binary. Given that this policy aims to achieve gender equality, it is important that it addresses the needs and experiences of women from the LGBTQ community and across the gender identity spectrum. Women from the LGBTQ community and gender nonconforming individuals often experience compounding marginalization because of their identification with multiple marginalized groups, and thus, it is especially critical to address their needs as part of this policy. Further, it is essential to bring the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment policy in line with USAID's LGBT Vision for Action, which notes that working with the LGBTQ community is an "integral part of [USAID's] success." The new policy also does not yet align with USAID's Automated Directives System, which highlights the importance of considering gender identify when conducting analysis.

IFES also recommends that USAID ensures that this policy aligns with USAID's policies on youth, people with disabilities and Indigenous people.

While it is important to acknowledge all of the positive gains that will be realized in achieving gender equality – more successful development programs, economic prosperity and safer states and communities, among others – the policy should clearly articulate that the reason the U.S. promotes gender equality and women's empowerment is because gender equality is a

fundamental human right, enshrined in international treaties and in the values to which the American people aspire.