

Assessment of Technical Advisory Groups



Australian Agency for International Development



Assessment of Technical Advisory Groups

Evaluation No: 10 - April 1998

Assessment of Technical Advisory Groups
Evaluation No: 10
April 1998

ISBN 0 642 22058 1
ISSN 1030-7249
© Commonwealth of Australia 1998

Acknowledgments

Appreciation is expressed for the assistance provided by all those interviewed as part of this activity. Ideas were shared freely by a range of project stakeholders, including AusAID staff in Canberra and at posts in Cambodia, Vietnam and Papua New Guinea. Valuable input was also given by Australian Managing Contractors, Technical Advisory Groups, Australian Team Leaders and their teams, as well as project counterpart staff and officials from recipient governments. The team was also greatly assisted by input from the Advisory Committee. The assessment could not have been completed without the excellent support and cooperation of so many with wide experience in the use of TAGs in projects.

Assessment Responsibilities

The assessment was undertaken by:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Rob Allaburton | Evaluation Specialist, Senior Consultant, W D Scott |
| Satish Chandra | Task Manager, Performance Information and Assessment Section, AusAID |

This study was undertaken by external consultants and does not
necessarily represent Australian government policy
Printed by CPN Canberra 1998

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Abbreviations | v |
| A Working Definition of a Technical Advisory Group..... | vii |
| Summary of Findings and Recommendations | 1 |
| 1 Introduction | 9 |
| 1.1 Role of Advisory Committee | 9 |
| 1.2 Projects selected for field study | 10 |
| 2 Reasons for Using TAGs..... | 11 |
| 2.1 Value for money | 11 |
| 2.2 Quality assurance | 11 |
| 2.2.1 TAGs and Quality Assurance: My Thuan Bridge Project Case Study | 12, 13 |
| 2.3 Risk management | 13 |
| 2.4 Lightening the load on posts | 14 |
| 2.4.1 TAGs and various types of monitoring | 15 |
| 2.5 Accountability..... | 16 |
| 2.6 To provide macro-view of project | 16 |
| 2.7 To provide input to the Activity Monitoring Brief..... | 16 |
| 2.8 To provide insight to AusAID on its own role | 16 |
| 3 Types of TAGs | 18 |
| 4 Ways of Contracting a TAG | 19 |
| 5 Composition of TAGs | 21 |
| 6 Timing, Duration and Frequency of TAG Field Visits ... | 24 |
| 6.1 Timing | 24 |
| 6.2 Duration..... | 25 |
| 6.3 Frequency..... | 26 |
| 7 Role of TAGs in Outputs Contracts | 27 |
| 8 Role of TAGs in Design/Implement Contracts | 29 |
| 9 Potential Conflict of Interest Issues | 30 |
| 10 Use of TAGs Versus In-House Advisors | 33 |
| 11 Managing Contractors’ Perspectives of TAGs..... | 35 |
| 12 TAG Members’ Perspectives | 37 |
| 13 Influence of TAGs on Project Decisions and Outcomes..... | 39 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 13.1 Technical | 39 |
| 13.2 Economic | 40 |
| 13.3 Financial | 40 |
| 13.4 Gender | 40 |
| 13.5 Social..... | 40 |
| 13.6 Environmental | 41 |
| 13.7 Sustainability..... | 41 |
| 13.8 General comments on the influence of TAGs..... | 41 |
| 14 Value of TAGs to Recipient Countries..... | 44 |
| 15 Lines of Communication/Roles of Various Parties | 46 |
| 16 The Risk of Deskilling AusAID Staff Through the Use of TAGs | 48 |
| 17 TAGs and AusAID’s Records Management System..... | 49 |
| 17.1 Activity Management System | 49 |
| 17.2 The Lessons Learned Database | 49 |
| 17.3 Library records | 50 |
| 18 Some Comparative Costs..... | 51 |
| 19 A Checklist When Considering a TAG | 53 |
| 19.1 Is a TAG necessary? | 53 |
| 19.2 How should the TAG be contracted?..... | 53 |
| 19.3 What should be in the TOR? | 53 |
| 19.4 What should be the nature of the TAG report? | 54 |
| 19.5 What should be the general mode of operation? | 55 |
| 20 Conclusions | 56 |
| Appendix 1: Terms of Reference for the Assessment | 57 |
| Appendix 2: Membership of the Advisory Committee | 63 |
| Appendix 3: List of persons interviewed..... | 64 |

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| ACLMP | Australian Contribution to the Land Mobilisation Project (PNG) |
| AGPS | Australian Government Publishing Service |
| AM | Activity Manager |
| AMC | Australian Managing Contractor |
| AMS | Activity Management System |
| AMB | Activity Monitoring Brief |
| APOG | AIDAB Programs Operations Guide |
| ASG | Advisory Services Group |
| ATL | Australian Team Leader |
| AusAID | Australian Agency for International Development |
| CAAEP | Cambodia Australia Agricultural Extension Project |
| CDC | Council for the Development of Cambodia |
| CJAP | Criminal Justice Assistance Program (Cambodia) |
| CLTB | Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma (a section in AusAID's Mekong Branch) |
| CPM | Country Program Manager |
| GOP | Government of the Philippines |
| LLDB | Lessons Learned Database |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MRG | Monitoring and Review Group (PNG Education Sector) |
| NEDA | National Economic Development Authority (Philippines) |
| OOW | Office of Works (PNG) |
| PASU | Project Administrative Support Unit |
| PCC | Project Coordinating Committee |
| PCG | Project Coordinating Group |
| PID | Project Implementation Document |

| | |
|---------|---|
| PD | Project Director |
| PDD | Project Design Document |
| PQG | Program Quality Group |
| PRT | Pacific Regional Team |
| PTMG | Project Technical Monitoring Review Group (PNG Roads) |
| QA | Quality Assurance |
| RGOC | Royal Government of Cambodia |
| RPNGCDP | Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Development Project |
| SMEC | Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation |
| TAG | Technical Advisory Group |
| TAP | Technical Advisory Panel |
| TOR | Terms of Reference |

A Working Definition of a Technical Advisory Group (TAG)

A TAG is an independent team, usually of one to three members, appointed by an AusAID desk officer to provide high-level technical advice to the Agency on specific aspects of an activity. TAGs normally make a brief (two-week) visit to the activity site(s) and perform monitoring of inputs, activities, outputs and problems occurring in the activity. They also measure the extent to which expected benefits are being achieved. A TAG may also be set up to carry out benefit monitoring at a program level and advise on the effectiveness of a number of activities, say, in a sector or region. Its duties and responsibilities are controlled by specific TOR, which are drawn up by the desk officer.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

The findings of this assessment represent consensus views provided to the consultant during the assessment. They were supported by his experience and judgement and that of the Advisory Committee for the assessment.

Technical Advisory Groups (TAGs) have been extensively used by AusAID over the past ten years. They help improve the quality of AusAID's activities and programs. TAGs assist AusAID's quality assurance checks and minimise activity risks. Through an appropriate use of TAGs, AusAID becomes more efficient and effective in the delivery of its development assistance programs. The benefits of TAGs far outweigh their costs. However, not all activities will benefit from a TAG's services.

For these reasons, this assessment found that that TAGs should continue to be used by AusAID provided their use is selective and well guided. Their primary role should be to provide high quality technical advice to the Agency. TAGs are best suited to assist in the management of project risks at critical stages during the design and implementation of projects. If the activity is functioning well, the TAG itself may not directly add value, except for its independent and expert advice that the project is on track. In terms of risk management and accountability however, this is a valuable contribution. However, if a project is not operating effectively, the TAG can fill a cost-effective role in making its independent and expert assessment and advising AusAID on appropriate remedial measures. The size, complexity, political sensitivity and the operating environment are all factors that alert the agency to the need for a TAG.

The desk officer's decision to use a TAG should be made after consultation with the relevant in-house advisor(s). These advisors should also have the opportunity for input into the determination of

the skills needed within the TAG, its TOR, and the selection, briefing and debriefing of the TAG's members.

Recommendation

1. **Because of the contribution they can make to the efficiency and effectiveness of a project, TAGs should continue to be used by AusAID where factors in the project and its environment indicate their suitability. In summary these factors include:**
 - ④ A large number of inputs;
 - ④ Significant risk factors in the project or project environment;
 - ④ A high degree of technical complexity;
 - ④ A complex operating environment and significant factors external to the activity which are critical to project success; and
 - ④ A high degree of political sensitivity.

The role of a TAG and the decision making process within AusAID

The TAG should not be seen as the decision-maker on technical issues within an activity, but as the source of independent technical advice. This high level technical advice is not the only input to the Agency's decision making process. It needs to be weighed by the desk along with other important inputs. These include the advice of the post, the project team, the Australian Managing Contractor (AMC) and the recipient government. The advice also needs to be seen in the context of other considerations such as contractual, political, cultural, financial and policy issues. Where appropriate, AusAID's in-house advisors should assist in the interpretation of technical issues raised by the TAG and be involved in the decision making process. These in-house advisors can also play a useful role, if conflict arises between the advice of the TAG and the advice of the AMC, by providing a link between the technical advice of experts and the actual management/administrative requirements of the project.

Recommendation

2. **A TAG appointed to a project should be utilised in such a way that the management of a project remains firmly in**

the hands of AusAID through the desk officer as nominated in the contract. The TAG should be seen as a valuable source of high-level technical advice. This advice should be weighed with advice from other sources both technical and non-technical. These sources include advice of the post, the project team, the AMC and the recipient government.

TAGs and Terms of Reference (TOR)

When AusAID commissions a TAG, it should be given clear TOR. These should not be generic. They should set out specific technical aspects of the project to be addressed by the TAG. These should be particular areas for which AusAID requires external, independent technical advice. This should not preclude the TAG noting and commenting on other areas on which they consider advice to AusAID is necessary, but the main focus of the TAG should be clearly specified.

The TOR should be reconsidered by the desk officer each time a TAG is used and supplemented, where necessary, in order to focus its activities for each visit, and thus optimise its effectiveness. The process of developing and reconsidering the TOR need not be an onerous task and can have input from in-house advisors, the post, the project team, the AMC, the recipient government and any previous TAG reports.

Recommendation

3. **Clear, detailed and specific TOR should be prepared for the TAG and these should be reconsidered before each TAG visit/assignment and revised where necessary.**

TAGs and their method of operation

The TAG can be established to provide advice to AusAID on a single activity, on a range of activities across a sector, or on a single project or group of projects across a region.

The TAG may consist of one or several members with different areas of expertise. Its membership may be fixed throughout the project, it may have a core membership which is supplemented with different expertise where a visit warrants this, or its membership may vary from visit to visit. The membership will be determined by the needs of the desk for particular specialist advice. Accordingly, the composition of the team should be decided prior to each occasion

the TAG is used. The actual skill mix will reflect the scope of services as set out in the TOR.

The TAG will usually be required to undertake field visits, though this should be determined on a case-by-case basis. Some TAGs have performed very successfully without visits to the project site.

Recommendation

4. **The way the TAG is structured and its method of operation should be as flexible as possible to maximise its effectiveness. Its membership throughout the project should vary, if and when necessary, to ensure the most appropriate technical advice is available to the Agency at each stage of the project. Field visits will not always be essential.**

The composition of TAGs

In selecting the TAG consideration should be given to the following:

- ④ The value of including a representative of the relevant line agency of the recipient government as a full, active member of the TAG team. This will not only provide another perspective for the TAG and enhance the opportunity for capacity building, but will also enhance the recipient government's ownership of the project and the findings of the TAG;
- ④ The importance of reducing the risk of real and apparent conflict of interest by ensuring the true independence of all team members, and the potential risks to the independence of a TAG's advice of using, as TAG team members, those involved in earlier aspects of the activity (eg. design stage);¹
- ④ The potential for confusion over roles of using the same personnel in a TAG team and in other project monitoring/review roles such as a mid-term review and/or using AusAID staff, including advisors, and/or AMC staff as members of a TAG team.

¹ Consideration of these points should not preclude, for instance, participation of project designers or those involved in mid-term reviews in TAGs. The points are intended to highlight the need to give attention to the independence of the TAG and the potential for confusion and conflict over roles. The assessment team found instances where the same personnel had been used with apparent advantage and others where significant problems arose as a result.

Recommendation

- 5. In determining the membership of a TAG, careful consideration should be given to the potential for conflict of interest and confusion over roles of the various TAG members.**

TAGs and lines of communication

Before commencing the assignment, the TAG should be given a comprehensive briefing by the desk officer as the officer responsible for the management of the project. The reporting line to the desk should be established and maintained. The TOR should be fully discussed and a clear understanding reached about the expected outcomes of the assignment.

On arrival in-country, the TAG should be thoroughly briefed by the post, and should itself brief the post while in-country on all significant issues arising during its visit. The accepted practice of the TAG being under the management of the post while in-country should be maintained.

It is important for a TAG to have, as far as possible, open discussions during its field visits, not only with the AusAID staff at the post, the Australian Team Leader (ATL) and the project team, but also with relevant staff from the recipient government. Face-to-face discussions of critical issues are often more effective than exchange of papers in reducing prejudices and misunderstandings that may have built up. They also are instrumental in focussing attention on, and building commitment to, the goals of the project.

In carrying out its assignment, a TAG should be prepared to fulfill some or all of a range of roles including:

- ④ Acting to affirm the existing direction of a project where it is appropriate;
- ④ Acting as a sounding board for new ideas developed by the team or recipient government;
- ④ Acting as an advocate for appropriate changes in the project;
- ④ Providing independent advice to AusAID on submissions from the AMC;
- ④ Providing new insights on project direction(s);
- ④ Monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of project effort; and

- ⊗ Monitoring project benefits.

In carrying out its work, the TAG should take care to:

- ⊗ Represent its views as its own and not necessarily those of AusAID;
- ⊗ Act to minimise the risk of expectations being raised about how AusAID might respond to its recommendations;
- ⊗ Maintain a transparency in its process; and
- ⊗ Establish and maintain a frank and open working relationship with the project team and recipient government counterparts.

Recommendation

- The TAG's existing reporting line to the desk officer should be maintained, with delegation to the post while the TAG is in-country. While the TAG has no authority to give any instructions to any party in relation to the project, this should not preclude open and frank discussions taking place with all parties having a stake in the project. This is especially important as the TAG will often have the task of providing independent advice to AusAID on recommendations made by the AMC or team on possible project changes.**

TAGs and reporting requirements

At the conclusion of any in-country visit, the TAG should prepare a written briefing note setting out key findings of the visit. This note should be provided to the post. All issues of concern to the TAG should be raised and discussed openly in meetings with the post, the team, the recipient government's aid coordinating agency and relevant line agency, and feedback sought. However, the note should not be made available to the stakeholders other than AusAID at this time.

Recommendation

- The current practice of a TAG, at the conclusion of its visit, conducting a briefing meeting with those involved with the project in-country, should be continued. A written briefing note should be provided to the post.**

As soon as possible after the conclusion of any in-country visit, the TAG should present a written report to the desk officer addressing the Terms of Reference (TOR). This report should be concise and

direct. In the interests of transparency, the Agency should circulate this report, or relevant sections of it, to all stakeholders.

Recommendation

- 8. At the conclusion of its assignment, the TAG should prepare a written report for AusAID. The report should address all the issues outlined in the TOR and should be concise and direct. After consideration, AusAID should circulate the report, or relevant sections of it, to all stakeholders.**

Timing, duration and frequency of TAG visits

TAG visits can cause a delay in the project schedule. Consideration should be given to TAG visits being kept to a maximum of two weeks and to timing the visits to take account of the existing project program. Postponing of project activities because of a TAG visit should generally be avoided.

The frequency of TAG visits should take account of the time required for previous recommendations to be considered, implemented and the effects observed. This may lead to a longer time period between visits. Account should also be taken of the dynamic nature of the environment in which some projects operate, and the need, in these cases, to have more frequent visits.

TAGs have often been scheduled to coincide with a Project Coordinating Committee (PCC) or Project Coordinating Group (PCG) meeting. This has enabled the TAG to present its findings to the committee before it leaves the country. The assessment team found wide acceptance of the view that the responses to a TAG's recommendations should be seen as more important to a PCC or PCG meeting than the actual TAG recommendations on their own. Accordingly, the timing of the TAG visit should provide an opportunity for the AMC, the team, the recipient government, the Post and the Desk to prepare their responses to the TAG's recommendations for consideration at the meeting.

Recommendation

- 9. The common practice of TAGs reporting direct to a PCC at the conclusion of its visit should be reviewed. TAG visits should be timed to fit in with the existing project schedule and should also enable all stakeholders in the project have an opportunity to consider the TAG's**

findings and prepare their responses for the next PCC or PCG meeting.

TAGS and AusAID's Records Management Systems

AusAID's Activity Management System (AMS) is a useful resource for the agency in facilitating access to information on its full range of activities. Because a TAG plays a significant part in monitoring a project's implementation, it is important that the Agency should be able to identify those activities where a TAG exists. However, the assessment team found that it was not possible to readily extract TAG data from the AMS by sector, size or country. This was because there are no business rules within the AMS specifically, or within AusAID in general, in relation to TAGs.

In some instances, Agency staff create a separate AMS entry specifically covering the TAG. In others, the TAG's contract details are subsumed within the AMS activity details for the project itself. A standard approach needs to be established to enable TAGS to be identified within the AMS. This could be achieved by identifying TAGs as a separate activity/contract type, or a better approach may be to identify the use of a TAG in the project description within the AMS.

AusAID also has a Lessons Learned Database (LLDB), which is managed by the Performance Information and Assessment Section (PIA) within the PQG of AusAID. Because TAGs will, from time to time, make findings that are applicable beyond the individual project, copies of all TAG reports should be forwarded to the PIA Section. They can then be reviewed and relevant lessons learned can be consolidated and included in the database.

Recommendation

- 10. The AMS should provide for TAGs to be identified within the database. A hard copy of the TAG report should be forwarded to the PIA Section for possible inclusion of findings in the LLDB.**

1 Introduction

Australia will provide \$ 1,430 million as official development assistance in 1997-98. AusAID places considerable emphasis on improving the quality and efficiency of Australia's development cooperation program. Each year AusAID undertakes a range of quality assurance activities. Some of these are through regular assessment and evaluation of projects, programs and strategic issues approved annually by the AusAID Executive.

This assessment of the effectiveness of AusAID's use of TAGs is one such approved strategic issues study.

The objective of the assessment is to evaluate the extent and variety of ways in which AusAID has used, and is using, TAGs. The assessment is to identify strengths and weaknesses in the use of TAGs and make recommendations for future practice, which maximise their efficient and effective use. The assessment is based on a review of current and recently completed TAGs. Information was obtained from AusAID's files and reports, and discussions were held with a large number of AusAID staff, both in Canberra and at some selected posts. AMCs, TAGs and selected recipient government aid coordinating and line agencies were also consulted for their views. The list of persons interviewed is shown in Appendix 3. An Advisory Committee of AusAID officers provided guidance during the assessment and also provided comments on the draft report.

The assessment was undertaken over a seven-week period, including fieldwork, in Cambodia, Vietnam and Papua New Guinea (PNG). The conclusions and recommendations were discussed with posts, TAGs, AMCs, project staff and recipient government officials. The report was finalised in Canberra. AusAID staff, including the Advisory Committee, reviewed the draft report. Their comments have been taken into consideration in finalising the report.

1.1 Role of Advisory Committee

AusAID established an Advisory Committee that agreed on the scope of the assessment as well as finalising the TOR shown in Appendix 1. They also prepared a work plan that divided the assessment into four phases:

- ④ Selection of projects, a preliminary review of documents within AusAID, and preparation of a detailed approach for the assessment;
- ④ A desk assessment including discussions with selected managing contractors and TAGs in Australia;
- ④ A short field mission to assess a small number of projects using TAGs; and
- ④ Finalising the report for circulation followed by revision after comments.

The Advisory Committee also provided useful advice during the assessment and reviewed the draft report. Membership of the Advisory Committee is shown in Appendix 2.

1.2 Projects selected for the field study

After reviewing many TAGs, the team proposed a smaller number to be the subject of the field review. In consultation with the Advisory Committee, the following projects were selected:

- ④ Criminal Justice Assistance Project (CJAP) Cambodia;
- ④ Cambodia Australia Agriculture Extension Project (CAAEP);
- ④ My Thuan Bridge Project, Vietnam;
- ④ Lae City Roads Upgrading Project, PNG;
- ④ Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Development Project (RPNGCDP); and
- ④ Australian Contribution to the Land Mobilisation Project (ACLMP), PNG.

2 Reasons for Using TAGs

AusAID uses TAGs for various reasons. These were discussed with the various parties in Australia and in the field and the findings are summarised below:

2.1 Value for money; investing money at the beginning of the activity

This was perceived as an important reason for establishing a TAG. It was felt that if a project had the benefit of independent technical advice from the beginning, it was more likely to “begin on track and stay on track”. Many of those interviewed had experienced the situation where a project commenced and encountered problems. The experience was that it was often some time before it became apparent that, without significant intervention, the required outcomes would not be achieved. This situation could be avoided in projects perceived as being high risk, by appointment of a TAG at the beginning of the project. A TAG which is built into the plan for a project was seen as better than one used as an emergency measure when something goes wrong or is in danger of going wrong.

2.2 Quality assurance; AusAID not having sufficient technical expertise to advise on and monitor activity progress

Some of those interviewed perceived a TAG as of considerable value in respect of quality assurance. On the other hand, there was also a strong view expressed by others (AusAID, AMC and TAG personnel alike) that other mechanisms would generally be more effective in ensuring quality. This was because the TAG was usually not involved with the project frequently enough to have as significant a role as other parties. These respondents had the view that the TAG’s contribution to quality assurance was to ensure that logframes and normal monitoring and evaluation procedures were in place and that the AMC and team were using them to assure quality on a day-to-day basis.

2.2.1 TAGs and Quality Assurance: My Thuan Bridge Project Case Study

While it was agreed by most of those interviewed that a TAG cannot really be regarded as a major contributor to quality assurance in a project (as this is something that is achieved by all parties involved in the project on a day-by-day basis), a Quality Assurance (QA) TAG has been appointed to the My Thuan Bridge Project.

This QA TAG was engaged by AusAID to examine the processes at the site and provide them with a report recommending ways in which these could be improved. A further outcome was to be the development of a reporting system on the quality processes, so that AusAID could have confidence that work was proceeding as planned.

The TAG member first carried out a desk review of project documents, including the Quality Plans of both the construction contractor and the supervising engineer. A review was also carried out of the recently completed audit performed by the supervising engineer on the quality plan of the construction contractor.

The review team was at the bridge construction site when the QA consultant carried out his field review. His approach was to review the systems already in place in discussions with the supervising engineer and to suggest modifications. This also involved review of the reporting system between the contractor and the supervising engineer, and between the supervising engineer and AusAID. Essentially, the TAG listed all the requirements of the contract and specifications and examined the processes and reporting systems to establish whether they adequately documented compliance for each of the key points. Where this was not clear, the TAG suggested ways that compliance could be confidently assured.

While the TAG officially reported direct to AusAID, there was, of necessity, a high degree of interaction between the TAG and the supervising engineer during these field meetings. When an area emerged where the TAG could not reasonably be assured from the documents that there was compliance, a suggestion was made as to how this could be achieved. The supervising engineer was not obliged to follow the suggestion of the TAG. However, since the TAG would be recommending to AusAID that the area was one where some change was needed from a QA perspective, the supervising engineer would need to propose some modification to

address the issue. The interactive process appeared quite economical from a time point of view and provided an immediate indication to the engineer of areas where there was no concern and those where some modification to the Quality Plan was desirable. It also provided an opportunity for agreement to be reached on acceptable ways of resolving the concern. The responsibility for QA thus remained with the supervising engineer, but they were able to receive expert advice from the TAG on how best to fulfill that responsibility. The discussions with the TAG also enabled a clearer understanding to be reached between the supervising engineer and AusAID about the required level of reporting needed to establish that work is being maintained at an appropriate quality standard. There was a consensus view that the exercise also contributed to a reduction in the amount of paper flow that would be needed between the various parties in the future.

2.3 Risk management; getting a second opinion on complex technical matters

There were many examples given of situations where the complexity of the project and the technical issues that emerged meant that a TAG was able to provide effective input in this way. It was stressed, however, that the seeking of a second opinion could raise its own problems, though these should not prevent a second opinion being sought where it was required. Since the desk officer receives advice from the managing contractor and also from the TAG, there is the possibility of differing advice causing conflict. When this has occurred, general experience has been that openness of communication, sometimes involving participation by both the TAG and the AMC in a combined meeting with the desk, has been a useful approach in sorting out the most informed and “reasonable” view. In-house advisors can also often be of assistance. When the desk is considering the advice of the TAG as to recommended project changes, other factors such as cultural, political or financial may be of greater significance overall. In such cases, the advice of the TAG, AMC or ATL, while it might be technically valid, may not always be followed.

It was also stressed that the TAG does not actually make any decisions for AusAID, but, by providing advice and recommendations to the desk, enhances the ability of AusAID to make informed decisions. The desk officer should not relinquish

responsibility for management of the project simply because a TAG is providing specialised technical input. Regardless of the technical input of the TAG, the desk officer has the responsibility to weigh the advice along with relevant contractual, cultural, political, financial and other factors, such as bilateral arrangements and multilateral agency policies and processes, before making the final decision.

2.4 Lightening the load on posts; for activity monitoring

While some respondents saw this as an appropriate and quite important reason for setting up a TAG, others saw it as inappropriate. Some key points that emerged during discussion of this issue were:

- 🌐 Rather than lightening the load on posts, many personnel (including TAG members and AMC staff) observed that TAG visits often impose a significant additional workload on posts;
- 🌐 On the other hand, some posts have a large number of projects to handle and the use of TAGs can be useful means of ensuring projects remain on target;
- 🌐 Posts experiencing a high workload in monitoring projects should seek to make greater use of locally engaged staff, who generally have greater continuity of service at the post, to carry out day-to-day monitoring of projects;
- 🌐 Where locally engaged staff do not have the necessary skills to effectively carry out regular and routine monitoring of projects, training should be provided to the Project Administrative Support Unit (PASU) to enable it to relieve the monitoring overload. This can be more cost-effective than engaging a TAG to carry out regular and routine monitoring. This needs to be balanced by the fact that the project is usually being implemented because of a lack of suitable expertise in-country, and this will make the training of PASU staff more difficult;
- 🌐 A properly run TAG will complement the role of the post, as it performs a task that the post is rarely equipped to do in providing highly expert technical advice on the project; and
- 🌐 By providing technical advice, a TAG that is well set up, with appropriate TOR and which is well managed, can, as a consequence, lighten the load on the post. However, a TAG

should not be set up simply to lighten this load as there are more cost-effective means of achieving this end.

2.4.1 TAGs and various types of monitoring

AusAID recently commissioned a study entitled “Monitoring and Evaluation Capacity Building Study” (December 1997). In this study, the various types of monitoring were defined as follows:

- Input/output monitoring – recording and reporting inputs, activities, outputs and problems.
- Benefit monitoring (project level), sometimes termed performance monitoring – measurement of the extent to which expected project benefits are being achieved.
- Benefit monitoring (program level) – measurement of the effects of a program (eg the health program), which will usually include a number of projects as well as normal operational activities.

The author quotes from a recent UNDP publication which discusses monitoring as follows:

“Monitoring enables management to identify and assess potential problems and success of a program or project. It provides the basis of corrective actions, both substantive and operation to improve the program or project design, manner of implementation and quality of results. In addition it enables the reinforcement of initial positive results”.*

On the basis of the above definitions and the data gathered on TAGs during the assessment, TAGs, as currently used by AusAID, are clearly engaged in input/output monitoring and are often engaged in benefit monitoring. Their high level technical advice frequently provides as assessment of the extent to which expected project benefits are being achieved.

**(Who are the question makers? A participatory evaluation handbook. Office of Evaluation and Strategic Planning, UNDP, 1997)*

2.5 Accountability; expenditure of public funds in an appropriate way

While there was agreement that TAGs improve accountability in a project, they are not the only means available, and should not be used for this reason alone. Not all projects require the use of a TAG and they should only be used when other means of ensuring accountability are judged to be insufficient.

2.6 To provide a macro-view of the project; influence contractor's and counterpart's perceptions/concepts/methods

A number of respondents spoke of situations where a TAG, in discussion with the project team, was able to provide another point of view that may not have been seen previously. The TAG often had the advantage that they were looking at the project from a fresh viewpoint. Because they had not been “socialised” by the day-to-day issues involved in running the project, the TAG was sometimes more able to question basic assumptions and provide new insights into the project that could improve its implementation.

2.7 To provide input to the Activity Monitoring Brief (AMB)

The AMB reports on the status of a project and provides recommendations for action during its implementation. This is used to guide desk officers in their decisions on the future of an activity based on monitoring to that time. Since the TAG carries out a significant monitoring role, input from its visits can form a useful part of the information used in developing the AMB. The AMB can then highlight the major problems/issues and recommend actions to be taken by AusAID.

2.8 To provide insight to AusAID on its own role in the project

TAGs not only advise on progress of the AMC and counterpart agencies/staff, but can also provide advice on areas where AusAID itself, through its actions/inactions, may be affecting the project negatively. Such advice may result in AusAID changing its approach or procedures to improve the efficiency of project delivery. Advice of this type was noted in the reports of a number of TAGs.

However, comments were made that sometimes a TAG is reluctant to give what might be seen as advice which is “unpalatable” to AusAID as there is a concern that they may lose some opportunities for future work with the Agency. Elimination of this possible problem, which undermines the whole concept of a TAG, depends on the development and maintenance of a learning and evaluative culture within the Agency and the professionalism of TAG members and their employing agencies.

Caution was also expressed about the danger of a TAG taking on a “life of its own”. It is possible for the TAG to become so much part of the project that it seeks to ensure its continued involvement instead of the desk determining just how and when the TAG will be used. It is clearly possible for a TAG to even undermine the monitoring that is already being carried out by the post and the project team. It was stressed by many that a TAG should not be commissioned without first establishing the definite need for its advice. It was also stressed that this process of reassessing the need should be followed each time it is proposed that a TAG visit the project. The real value of a TAG is in the advice it gives to the desk. The desk officer needs to make the decision as to when that advice is needed and in which areas of the project it is required.

3 Types of TAGs

TAGs have developed into a number of different forms since they were first used. In general terms they can be described as being:

- ④ Single project TAGs, generally with a fixed membership of two to three, making regular visits (once or twice per year) to a project (eg Cambodian CJAP);
- ④ Single project TAGs, with highly variable membership and highly specialised technical input, which are engaged on a needs basis. They are also often very short term and may not need to visit the project site(s) (eg My Thuan Bridge Project); and
- ④ Sector based TAGs, with specialised individual team members, and with team composition for each visit varied depending on specific TOR (eg Philippines Health, PNG Education, and PNG Health). These are usually called a Project Technical Monitoring Group (PTMG) as in the case of infrastructure projects or a Monitoring and Review Group (MRG) in the case of PNG Health and Education. It is also possible for a sector based TAG to cover a number of projects in several countries.

This last example of a TAG could provide a model for a further type - one that serves a regional project. These regional projects often encounter difficulties because of the number of sites (countries) involved and the possibility of fragmentation, leading to a less coordinated approach to the project because of the number of recipient governments and posts involved.

Because all of the above examples above are similar in purpose, they are all considered as TAGs for the purpose of this assessment.

4 Ways of Contracting a TAG

AusAID selects and contracts TAGs in a number of different ways. The approach that is used for selection may vary slightly depending on the particular project. In some cases, tenders may be invited, in others specific or limited selection processes not involving tenders are used. In some cases the Agency is dealing with very specialised, limited fields of expertise and is engaging acknowledged leaders in their respective disciplines. In others, selection may be made from personnel nominated in unsuccessful bids for similar activities. Such personnel may have been ranked by a TAP as exceptional, notwithstanding the failure of the overall bid. In this way the market has been tested in spite of tenders not having been called. These procedures are consistent with Commonwealth Purchasing Policy and Procurement Guidelines.

In the first model, proposals are invited for the supply of services on the basis of a certain number of visits, and days of work, during the life of the project. In these cases, TAG members know exactly how many visits are required (or how many tasks, such as review of documents, are needed). They are also aware, well in advance, of the approximate times at which the visits will be required. Availability of the TAG is generally assured. A disadvantage is that project circumstances may change and it may be necessary to increase or reduce the number, duration and timing of visits, requiring re-negotiation of the contract. It may also lead to use of the TAG when an independent judgement might find the visit unnecessary. With this approach the Agency loses much of the flexibility which is an important part of the effective use of a TAG.

In a second form, proposals are invited for the supply of a range of services and particular technical specialisation(s), and a schedule of rates is proposed in each submission. In this model, contractors would generally prepare a bid that nominates a team having the required combination of expertise. Under the terms and conditions of the submission, it is usual for the Agency to retain the right to use the whole team as nominated, or to select individuals from various bids to make up the final team. This approach was used with the MRG in the Education Sector in PNG. Such an approach enables

the Agency to have greater flexibility in the final make-up of the TAG team. An indicative number of visits, and total number of days to be provided, is usually outlined in the proposal document. The actual timing and number will depend on the circumstances within the project as it proceeds. The particular consultant(s) who will make up the team on each deployment of the TAG is also decided on a case by case basis. Such an approach retains a high degree of flexibility. However, in this case, difficulty can be experienced in having the contracted consultant (or the desired combination of contracted consultants) available at the time the desk needs the service.

In a third model, TAGs have been used on what is essentially a period contract. In this case, the appropriate expertise is sought when the need arises from the pool of consultants already under the period contract, and detailed costings are obtained. This approach provides a high degree of flexibility, but even less assurance of continuity of availability.

The assessment found that the most effective model has generally been the second, despite the apparent disadvantage of possible non-availability at the specific time required by the Agency. When all parties take a reasonable approach, experience has shown that the needs of the desk for particular advice at a specific time in the project cycle can usually be accommodated.

5 Composition of TAGs

The approach used in determining the composition of a TAG has varied considerably. In some projects, the TAG members are appointed at the commencement of the project and they remain as a team for the duration of the project. An example of this type of TAG is the one established for the Criminal Justice Assistance Program (CJAP) in Cambodia. Here, the same two TAG members have worked together on each visit. In other cases, different personnel are selected for each visit, depending on the issues covered in the TOR for that visit. An example of this type of is the Philippines' Health Sector TAG. In the case of this TAG, five visits have been made, utilising a total of sixteen personnel. In most cases the consultants were used on only one TAG visit, with only two members visiting on two occasions.

In the case of the MRG for the PNG Education sector, which is in its initial stages, a TAG of four consultants has been established and different combinations of consultants may be used on each occasion advice is required. In some situations it is envisaged that only one member will be used, and on others all four may visit together. There is no preset sequence or timing of visits, and the team will be utilised in a similar way to consultants engaged from a period contract.

There is also wide variation in the source of team members. In most cases, the consultants are engaged from Australia but, in others, consultants from some of the recipient departments or ministries are utilised. In the five TAGs used in the Philippines Health Sector, all but one has had one specialist from the Department of Health in the Philippines, and one also utilised a division chief from the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), the aid coordinating agency in the Philippines.

In some cases, AusAID staff, such as in-house advisors and program officers, have been used in the TAG, and in one case the AusAID Country Program Manager (CPM) was the team leader and an AusAID advisor was a team member. On other occasions, AusAID staff such as advisors, contract officers and desk officers have accompanied the TAG but not been members of the group. In the

first example above, where AusAID staff were used as an integral part of the TAG, the TOR clearly specified the areas where they would have input. However, in such a situation with the desk officer leading the TAG, it cannot effectively fulfil its primary role of providing independent technical advice to the AusAID desk. It also appears that such an approach creates a confusion of roles in the minds of the team and recipient government and consideration should be given to maintaining the independence of the TAG as an advisory group by not using AusAID staff as TAG members. In the case cited above, the TAG lost some of its effectiveness because counterpart staff on an AusAID project do not often see an AusAID desk officer. As a consequence, they perceived this AusAID presence as an indication that they had not been doing their job well and were “being checked up on”. This was reported as affecting their willingness to openly discuss ideas. In general TAGs provide a means for project teams, including counterpart staff, to speak frankly about the project to a “neutral” party that has no direct stake in the project. For this reason consideration should be given to this issue when deciding the composition of the TAG to ensure that this opportunity is not lost.

There was a view that participation of desk officers by being “attached” to the TAG did not necessarily incur all the above risks. This was satisfactory, provided it was made clear from the outset that they were not present as TAG members and that this distinction was reinforced whenever questions were raised about the project in discussions with the various parties. A number of post officers reported that, by sitting in on discussions, they often obtained useful background to the project and, in discussions within the TAG itself, could provide AusAID’s point of view, which could sometimes be of assistance to the TAG in more readily understanding procedures and policies.

In some cases the project director has also requested that they be able to visit the project at the same time as the TAG. Feedback from TAGs where this has occurred has indicated that this could be a most effective strategy as it has the potential to shorten the time needed to go through the more formal “communication loop” from TAG to desk to project. However, it is important that roles are made clear and the project director remains simply as an observer during discussions with other parties. In one case cited, the project director had recently completed staff appraisals with the project team and his presence was seen to inhibit open discussion of the project between the TAG and other team members. Care should be taken if

additional personnel are to be “attached” to the TAG to meet other perceived needs, that their presence does not restrict the TAG in its primary role. As in most cases, much of the success of the TAG approach depends on the professionalism, personalities and sensitivity of the various parties.

The My Thuan Bridge Project has used TAGs in a different way from many other AusAID projects. In addition, because of its size and technical complexity, this project has had many layers of technical input other than TAGs. For example, the project commissioned a feasibility study (SMEC, McMillan Britton and Kell, Acer Wargon Chapman and PPK International) followed by a contract for detailed design and preparation of tender documents (Maunsell Pty Ltd in association with Norconsult International, Flagstaff consulting, Monash University, Transport Engineering Design Institute, Coffey MPW, ID & A, and AIC Maunsell (Vietnam)). A joint venture of SMEC International Pty Ltd and Mc Millan Britton and Kell Pty Ltd was subsequently appointed as Proof Check Engineer. Tenders were then called and Baulderstone Hornibrook Engineering Pty Ltd were awarded the contract for construction of the bridge. The management and supervision of the construction contract was awarded to Maunsell Pty Ltd.

As well as the above technical input, TAGs of particular specialists have been used on many occasions on the My Thuan Bridge Project. These have included specialists in areas such as economic, environmental and social factors, transport planning, project engineering, cable stayed bridges, geotechnical aspects, river geomorphology, quality assurance, as well as legal and contractual issues. In most cases, individuals have been engaged, often for only a single occasion. Visits have not always been made to the site, and, on occasions, the consultant has carried out the work while based overseas.

6 Timing, Duration and Frequency of TAG Field Visits

While not all TAG teams necessarily visit the project site, a significant number make scheduled visits. During the assessment, views were expressed that suggest some guidelines could be established that might enable the timing, frequency and duration of these visits to contribute as effectively as possible to the project implementation.

6.1 Timing

The timing of TAG visits has been influenced by a number of factors. Some TAGs have operated on the basis of cyclical visits tied, say, to a PCC meeting schedule. Others have operated under arrangements similar to AusAID's period contract system and have been activated when the desk officer perceived a need for additional technical advice. In a third model, the TAG visits have been linked to critical events in the project such as the load tests on piles in the My Thuan Bridge Project.

In the most common approach, TAG visits have been timed to coincide with the regular (often six-monthly) meetings of the Project Coordinating Committee or Group (PCC or PCG). In this approach, the TAG visits the various project sites and prepares its draft recommendations which are then presented to the PCC on what is often the TAG's last day in-country. While this has been a frequently used approach, there is also a widely supported view that this does not recognise the real purpose and value of a TAG, ie to provide advice to AusAID on the project. For this reason, it is the reactions and responses of AusAID, the AMC, the ATL and team and the recipient government to the observations and recommendations of the TAG that are of greater importance for the PCC than the observations and recommendations themselves. For the TAG to table the recommendations at the PCC before these other parties have had opportunity to consider them more fully and respond, gives disproportionate emphasis to the TAG's views

compared to AusAID and the other stakeholders, and ignores the primary role of the TAG to provide advice to AusAID.

Examples were given of issues raised by the TAG at the PCC in its technical advisory role, which, when weighed by AusAID against other relevant non-technical factors, might have been regarded as of little overall significance for the project. Examples were also given of considerable time being spent by a PCC discussing an issue raised by the TAG at the conclusion of its visit. It was felt that the matters raised could have been dealt with much more quickly had the other relevant parties (AusAID, recipient government counterparts, AMC and ATL and team) been able to individually consider the TAG's findings. They could then have tabled their responses for the PCC's consideration at a PCC meeting scheduled some weeks after the TAG visit.

6.2 Duration

The assessment found that there was also consensus on an appropriate duration for a TAG visit. This was partly influenced by the delay caused to normal project activities that is unavoidable when a TAG is present, as well as the time required before and after the visit for preparation and response. The general view was that the maximum duration should be of the order of two weeks. Where the scale of the project (eg. number of sites and separate activities) means that it is impossible for the TAG to spend an appropriate amount of time at each site in a two week period, there was support for an approach that provided for the TAG to cover each site at least once in two visits. The desk can be guided in the selection of the sites for a particular visit by input on the needs of each site from the post, AMC, ATL and team, recipient government and the TAG itself. This advice would be affected by many factors such as the scale, complexity, perceived risk, and stage of the project and rate of progress at a particular site. It would also be affected by the need to actually visit a site to check on progress and the possibility that team members might regularly come to meetings at the project headquarters, and the TAG's visit could be arranged to coincide with one of these meetings. Because of the individual characteristics of projects, it was felt that, in some cases, some sites could be included in every visit and others may not even be covered on each second visit.

With respect to the delay to project activities mentioned above, there was a widely accepted view that the practice, sometimes followed, of

making modifications to scheduled project events, such as training courses, in order to ensure the team members were available to the TAG, should be carefully reviewed. Late notification of, and modifications to, a TAG's schedule are inevitable when dealing with an agency such as AusAID, and independent consultants. It can, however, be very disruptive to a project if it is the practice to postpone general project activities during the TAG visit. While some modification may be desirable in order, for example, to maximise feedback between the TAG and team members, there is also considerable value in a TAG observing the realities of "business as usual" in the project.

6.3 Frequency

While there was general agreement on timing and duration of TAG visits, there was not consensus on a suitable frequency for field visits. In one project the TAG has fairly consistently visited twice per year for approximately three to four weeks. It was the view of the team that, because of the dynamic and high-risk nature of the environment in which the project operates, there was considerable merit in considering a change to three visits per year each of two weeks as an alternative. This would give the team and the project the benefit of the TAG's advice in a more timely manner. In this project, issues on which the TAG's advice would be helpful to the achievement of the project goals have been emerging in the project at such a rate that six months between visits was regarded by both the team and recipient government counterparts as too long a period.

On the other hand, in another project, both project team members and recipient government counterparts expressed the view that visits once per year would be more appropriate. This view was based on the fact that such a time gap would give a reasonable time for recommendations to be considered, implemented and the effects observed. It was felt, at present, that six-monthly visits did not provide enough time for the project to have achieved progress for the TAG to assess on its next visit. This slower progress was not caused by project inefficiencies but by the nature of the project that involved a longer cycle time between implementing a change and observing results.

7 Role of TAGs in Outputs Contracts

In the last five to six years, AusAID has experienced a shift to outputs based contracts, i.e. lump sum contracts with payments being made on reaching milestones specified in the contract. With inputs contracts, the post, in its monitoring role, basically checked that the contractor had made the specified inputs (eg. had the required staff in-country, had installed the specified equipment etc). Their primary focus was on these details of the project. With outputs contracts, this type of monitoring is not really required and the post assists project progress by monitoring the project environment (eg. recipient government policies and practices etc.) seeking to ensure these factors are favourable to project implementation.

Since a well prepared outputs contract clearly specifies what is required as output(s), this may be seen as obviating the need for a TAG. However, no matter how well the contract has been drawn up, and the outputs clearly specified, there will often be a need for an independent expert to assess the output(s) and provide “arm’s length” advice to the desk as to whether the contract requirements have, in fact, been met. In this situation, the TAG provides a second opinion to AusAID in understanding, for example, complex technical issues. As a result of this, the Agency is better able to make appropriately informed decisions. In addition, the very fact that a TAG has been proposed can provide incentive for a higher level of performance by the contractor to ensure that the independent monitoring confirms appropriate standards of outputs. A further benefit is that, while other parties to the project (CPM, AMC and post) are all close to the project, a TAG consultant can come in with a fresh eye and is sometimes more able to question basic assumptions. This is because the TAG does not have the disadvantage of having perhaps been “socialised” by the prevailing culture or the project environment. This can sometimes lead to changes being proposed to the project which have significant positive impact on the outputs achieved and which would probably have not been generated by personnel who are more closely involved with the project.

The suggestion that a TAG may have no role in a well designed outputs contract assumes that, when objectives have been set and agreed as being appropriate, they will remain just as valid for the life of the project. In reality the situation often changes and the TAG can have useful input to the process of establishing new, more appropriate outputs for the project, thus ensuring that it remains responsive and relevant. In this respect, AMCs saw the TAG as a useful part of the decision making process. If a contractor approaches AusAID with suggestions for alterations to project outputs, they may be perceived as seeking changes simply based on commercial interest or to establish more easily achieved project outputs. In such circumstances the TAG can take on the role of a dispassionate advisor on the benefits of the proposed change. In this respect the TAG can become a most effective advocate for the project and thus ensure the greatest good. This dispassionate view, and the resulting advice from the TAG, can be very useful to AusAID if a project needs significant modification in order to remain effective. It is also of considerable value if the project needs to be curtailed.

It was also observed that a TAG is often able to engage in discussions with recipient government agencies at a very senior level with a degree of independence that is not possible for an AMC.

There is also, however, the risk that a TAG can become overly critical about the contract process in a situation where the AMC is entitled to get to the output any way they wish. This risk can be minimised by proper briefing of the TAG and careful management by the desk officer to ensure the TAG does not seek to start “running the project”, but rather continues to provide useful advice back to the desk on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the project.

8 Role of TAGs in Design/Implement Contracts

In this type of project, AusAID gives the contractor a relatively free hand. An advantage of this approach is that the contractor is generally more committed to the design that is eventually used. A disadvantage is that AusAID doesn't necessarily have the same opportunity to appraise the design. It is possible that a TAG in this situation may feel that its hands are tied. However, with proper prior planning, it is possible to use TAGs quite effectively in these circumstances. They can be used as an additional, flexible way of providing strategic advice to the desk and thus contributing to the appropriateness of scale, scope, focus and direction of the project.

For example, the recently established monitoring and review group (MRG) for the PNG Education Sector, has been set up to provide advice on four projects in the education sector in PNG. At the time the MRG was selected, three of the projects were still to be contracted out. One of the projects is a modified design/implement program within the education sector and the MRG is planned to have a significant role in this activity. This program involves preparation by the AMC of a design for a pilot program in basic education. The MRG will then be used to appraise this design. Once the final design is agreed on, the MRG will then monitor the AMC's implementation of the pilot. Based on experience with the pilot, the design of the full program will be prepared. The MRG will again be involved in appraisal of this design and will subsequently have the task of monitoring the implementation of the overall program. In this case, the involvement of the MRG was proposed from the outset, and its role was clearly specified in the tender documents for the program.

9 Potential Conflict of Interest Issues

Dealing with ethical issues, especially the key one of conflict of interest (real and potential), has become more difficult with more recent forms of TAGs. Previously it was usually a relatively straightforward matter to ensure that the consultant(s) chosen for the TAG had no commercial ties or involvement with the contractor responsible for the project.

However, there has been a trend to appoint TAGs which cover more than one project (often a whole sector within a country), and this has made the issue of conflict of interest of greater significance and potentially more difficult to resolve fairly. For instance, AusAID has recently established a Monitoring and Review Group (MRG) in the PNG Education Sector which will be responsible for providing input on four major projects (costing approximately A\$100m) which will run for over five years. At the time of advertising the MRG, tenders had yet to be called for three of these projects. In this case the desk dealt with the issue in a number of ways. Firstly, AusAID ruled as ineligible any applicant for the MRG who had a contractual or commercial association with the firm already contracted to carry out the first project to be monitored by the MRG. However, if an applicant's only association with the AMC was under a period contract, the applicant was considered eligible provided he/she agreed to withdraw from the period contract for the duration of the MRG should they be selected.

In addition, in the example cited above, MRG members are precluded from taking up any contractual or commercial association with a firm that has any responsibilities relating to any project currently being monitored by the MRG. Similarly, once a company, employer or organisation entered into a contract to provide a member of the MRG, they were ineligible to bid for the other projects that will be monitored by the MRG.

While this approach deals with the issue of real or apparent conflict of interest, it involved some hard decisions by AMCs as to whether to proceed, if selected for the MRG/TAG, because of the possibility of loss of future opportunities for work.

Even when a TAG is only engaged to assist with a single project this problem can occur. It is often the case that, because of the highly specialised nature of the project, and the limited number of experts available with experience and/or interest in developing countries, there are unavoidable close personal and professional links between the AMC and potential TAG members. In the Cambodian CJAP, where the expertise required was in the areas of prisons/policing/justice, and experience was also required in developing countries, the pool of potential consultants was extremely limited. In briefing the selected TAG, issues of conflict of interest were raised and personnel were asked to sign a statement that addressed this question. On the other hand, instead of having close links, it is possible that the most expert parties available when establishing a TAG may have been unsuccessful bidders for the original project and thus be commercial rivals of the AMC.

The specific situations described above are not covered in “Commonwealth Procurement Guidelines” (Australian Government Publishing Service {AGPS} July 1997). However, the general principles relating to ethics and fair dealing (Section 5) especially the ‘disclosure of interest’ paragraph, and those in the paragraph relating to the use of consultants in Section 11 (conducting the procurement project) provide some general guidance. Often a potential conflict of interest issue is adequately dealt with simply by disclosure to the Agency. In discussions during the review, it was clear that AusAID staff are aware of the potential problem(s) and are attempting to deal appropriately with issues of real, apparent and potential conflict of interest.

In section 7, the possibility was raised of a TAG needing to advise AusAID that a project should be significantly changed, reduced or even curtailed. Because of the possibility that such advice may be necessary, and in order to reduce the likelihood of a conflict of interest arising, an argument exists for TAG members, generally, to be selected from those who have not been involved in earlier stages of a project. This includes areas such as project design; appraisal or membership of a TAP involved in considering tenders for the project. However, examples were given, during the assessment, of TAGs where members had been involved in the design of the project. In these examples, the TAG seemed to have been able to distance itself from “ownership” of the design when acting as a TAG and make recommendations for change in the project where this was appropriate.

One project director suggested that “paranoia over possible conflict of interest” could be dealt with more effectively by ensuring that the “professionalism of TAG members” was a significant factor in the selection process. This view was widely supported during the assessment.

In summary, the independence of the TAG, in terms of the advice it gives, is more related to the professionalism of the TAG members than its lack of other (earlier) involvement with the project itself or the AMC. For example, the Cambodian CJAP uses a TAG that is widely regarded as being highly successful, and yet the TAG had been involved with the project design as well as aspects of implementation (facilitation of visits to Australia etc). This does not appear to have prevented the TAG providing independent advice to AusAID on project matters.

10 Use of TAGs Versus In-House Advisors

Desk officers sometimes set up a TAG without reference to in-house advisors in AusAID. These in-house advisors were formerly part of the Pacific Regional Team (PRT) or Advisory Services Group (ASG). They have now been reorganised into the sector groups in the Program Quality Group (PQG). When consultation does not take place with this existing AusAID resource, it can lead to difficulties arising between sections and may result in inefficient use of TAGs and consequent unnecessary expense. Some consultation mechanism needs to be built-in to ensure that in-house sources of advice are utilised to maximum advantage before expenditure is approved for outside advisors. The in-house advisors can often provide a more generalist view before narrower technical advice is sought and help define the specialist area where more technical advice is needed. In addition, they can often propose suitable technical experts based on their experience of using them in other projects.

While the potential exists for conflict between in-house sources of advice and advice from an external TAG, experience has shown that apparent differences can be resolved in discussions between the desk officer, the in-house advisor and the TAG. Rather than being a “difficulty” in the use of advisors from two sources, it provides an opportunity for ideas to be tested and refined in an efficient manner. Because of their more “generalist-specialist” role, the in-house advisors can have a more macro role while a TAG visits the particular site and provides more micro advice in specific areas. In general, AusAID staff believed that in-house advisors and external advisors (as appointed to a TAG) played complementary roles and their concurrent use provided many benefits.

AusAID’s in house advisors can also have a useful role in providing input to the preparation of the TOR for the TAG, selection of the TAG, as well as assisting in the briefing prior to commencement of work. There could also be real benefit in TAGs consulting with in-house advisors on any contentious findings on its return. The in-

house advisors can form a bridge between the TAG and other AusAID staff, but the management of the project must remain with the desk officer. Both the in-house advisors and the TAGs can have significant effect on project management through giving good advice to the desk officer.

AusAID's in-house advisors are also able to take a more global view of their sector and keep the Agency's staff aware of the influence, for example, of any changes in policy or approach of major multi-lateral agencies on AusAID's programs.

In addition, it is unlikely that in-house advisors will be able to be involved in actual membership of TAGs if only because of the time-frames under which TAGs usually operate. The participation of in-house advisors in TAGs is discussed in greater detail in section 5.

11 Managing Contractors' Perspectives of TAGs

While many AMCs had experienced difficulties as a result of the use of TAGs, all of those interviewed expressed positive views about them. Many spoke of experiences with a TAG where there was a difference of opinion that, on more detailed discussion, emerged as more a difference in emphasis which could readily be resolved in discussion. Others spoke of situations where the project had begun to run off the rails and the TAG, because of its independence, was able to provide useful advice on what changes were necessary to bring it back on track. TAGs were also seen as providing a broader view of project issues, while the AMC, because of its continuing involvement with the intricacies of the project, can sometimes have a more detailed view.

Some AMCs described what they perceived as a general suspicion of contractors by some AusAID staff and saw TAGs as a useful means of mediating this situation when it occurs. They were sometimes seen as a friendlier, more participatory way of resolving issues in a project as they could relate to the project, and the AMC, on a technical level rather than a purely administrative level.

One consequence of the use of TAGs that can affect AMCs is the requirement for additional time to be spent by an AMC in responding to a TAG's observations. Once a TAG has expressed a concern to AusAID, the Agency will often pass the comment on the AMC for a reaction. While the AMC may be legally entitled to ignore the comments, careful consideration and formulation of a response back to AusAID is a more effective option. Because of the unexpected nature of some of these comments, and the time required to prepare an appropriate response, there has sometimes been the need for AusAID to allow for reimbursement of the time as an extra. In the case of the My Thuan Bridge Project, the TAG, the

desk officer and the in-house advisor, meet regularly together, in Australia, to discuss project issues. It has been found very effective for the Project Director (from the supervising engineer) to also attend part of these meetings to enable face-to-face discussion. The direct contact has been found to be very useful in dealing efficiently with some of the matters of concern to TAG members.

All AMCs interviewed saw TAGs as a very useful means of independently reviewing ideas they and their teams might have for project changes.

12 TAG Members' Perspectives

Some TAG members indicated that there was sometimes a degree of confusion in their minds as to the roles of various parties in a project (especially AusAID desk officers and AusAID post staff). While not wishing to distinguish too much between the desk and post officers in relation to projects, as they are both key AusAID staff, the desk officer is shown in the contract document as the project manager, so his/her responsibility is a legal one. Officers at the post support the project through their role of monitoring projects. This means that under present arrangements, the reporting line for the TAG is to the desk with a degree of delegation to the post existing while the TAG is in-country.

There appears to be a general policy or procedure, reflected in TOR and contracts for TAGs, that a TAG is required to prepare a report on each of its missions and present this to AusAID (represented by the desk officer) soon after the end of each mission. Before this report is completed, AusAID usually also requires some form of written outline of issues which will be addressed in the report as a basis for discussions with the post, and the ATL, while the TAG is still in-country. Often the recipient government's aid coordinating agency as well as the relevant line department and counterpart staff are included in these discussions and receive a copy of the outline. This written outline may be in the form of an aide-memoire or a series of "dot points" of issues, and should cover any areas of concern. This process sometimes enables additional information to be provided by the post, the team or the counterpart staff that may alter the way the TAG sees the issue(s). This reduces the time needed to go through the feedback loop and can reduce misunderstandings. It also removes an undesirable impression of secrecy that may occur in the TAG's deliberations and reporting.

In some cases, the TAG has been requested by the line department to provide a draft copy of the report proposed to be submitted to AusAID when it concluded its work in-country. Concern was expressed to the assessment team that, once such a draft copy has been left with, say, the line department, this document can take on a life of its own. This is especially true if multiple copies are taken and

widely circulated. For example, in one case where a draft was supplied, the TAG found that expectations were raised in the line department about what AusAID might do in relation to changes proposed by the TAG. Early release of a TAG's draft report can also create problems if the TAG needs to make comments that might, for example, reflect on local organisations. This is especially true when these comments are taken out of the context of a report for which the primary aim is usually to give independent technical advice to AusAID. While all TAGs consulted advocated openness with project teams and counterparts when conducting their missions, the report itself, whether in draft or final form, in general needs to be first given to the desk officer to avoid the above situation. The desk officer, having had the opportunity to consider the report and all its recommendations, can then decide how widely the full report, or relevant extracts of it, should be distributed. Care should be taken before a decision is made to distribute advance copies, even in draft form, before this point has been reached. This care is necessary because of the effect such a procedure could have on the frankness, clarity and directness of the TAG's comments. The primary purpose of the TAG is to provide the best possible advice to AusAID through the desk officer and the report needs to be written without any other factors interfering with this purpose.

An alternative to this approach is based on the fact that the report of the TAG is simply the report of a consultant to AusAID and quite clearly does not necessarily represent the Agency's views. In this case, in the interests of openness, the report can be made available to staff in the line department for comment prior to being submitted to the desk officer. Supporters of this view maintain that requiring the desk officer to "clear" the report before it is circulated is counterproductive to the aim of openness with all parties.

13 Influence of TAGs on Project Decisions and Outcomes

Many examples were cited where a TAG was able to make recommendations that significantly influenced both the efficiency and effectiveness of a project. The most common area of influence was technical, but examples were provided where financial improvements had been made and others where the changes were primarily gender, social and environmental. Some of these key influences are discussed under the individual headings below, followed by general influences:

13.1 Technical

This was perceived as a very important aspect of a TAG's role. There was also strong evidence from TAG reports as well as responses from the wide range of those interviewed, that TAGs have a strong influence in this area. The importance of well prepared TOR for a TAG which set out specific technical aspects of the project to be addressed by the TAG was stressed as a significant factor in ensuring this was achieved in a focussed way. It was regarded as important that the TAG received its general focus for a visit from the desk rather than "writing its own brief". The advantages of TAGs suggesting areas for follow up on subsequent visit(s) should not be lost, while maintaining the management of its work clearly under the control of the desk officer. In order for this technical advice to be in an appropriate context, there was support for TAGs generally to have had prior overseas project experience to improve their understanding of implementation issues. For example, if this understanding is not present, the TAG might have unrealistic expectations as to an appropriate rate of progress in the project, and be unduly critical of this aspect of project implementation.

It was observed that few, if any, projects stand or fall solely on technical issues. There was a widespread view that to “over focus” just on this isolated issue can mean that those involved in decision-making lose sight of the other real issues in the success of the project. As has been stressed elsewhere in this report, interpersonal skills and professionalism play a major part in the success of any project, and care needs to be taken that opportunity is provided for them to be fully exercised.

13.2 Economic

While the project itself is often likely to have significant economic impact, few respondents saw a major influence of the TAG as being in this area.

13.3 Financial

Many respondents saw TAGs as having influence in this aspect of a project. Examples were given of TAGs suggesting more appropriate areas for emphasis and areas where project effort could be reduced leading to some redistribution of funding allocations within the project and greater cost effectiveness. Again, the My Thuan Bridge provides a particular example of TAGs which have led to reductions in costs in the overall project without reducing the benefits. These are discussed in greater detail in section 13.8.

13.4 Gender

This is an area of policy priority within AusAID and TAGs were seen as filling a useful role, mainly by increasing the sensitivity of those involved to the gender policy of AusAID. Degrees of influence varied, possibly dependent in part on the level of personal commitment by TAG members to the issue. The degree of focus of a TAG on this issue and its subsequent influence on this aspect of the project can be enhanced by ensuring appropriate emphasis given in the TOR and the selection of the TAG.

13.5 Social

In a number of projects where TAGs were used, significant issues of concern to the surrounding community were encountered. Examples were given of projects where the TAG was able to have significant influence on this aspect of a project because of its ability to examine issues with a greater degree of independence and “freshness”.

13.6 Environmental

While not all TAGs were seen as having influence in this area, a number of examples were provided where a TAG was able to influence projects positively by proposing changes that enhanced environmental aspects. In one example cited, a mine waste project, a significant proportion of the TAG's influence centred on such issues.

13.7 Sustainability

While this feature is built into project design, many examples were given of situations where the independent view of a TAG enabled advice to be given that significantly boosted the sustainability of a project.

13.8 General comments on the influence of TAGs:

When preparing TORs for TAGs the cross-cutting issues such as gender, social and environmental aspects should be given sufficient consideration. These directly relate to Australian Government policy in bilateral activities and the TAG can be a useful means of maintaining the focus of the project on their importance.

The actual mechanisms by which the influences listed above are exerted are of considerable importance, as examples were provided where they were most effective and also where they were relatively ineffective.

One ineffective example was reported during discussions. The implementing agency was a line department of the recipient government and an AMC was appointed to supervise the work. In addition, a TAG was appointed with four members, all with different specialisations. The TAG members each reported to AusAID individually, rather than as a group. They noted in their individual reports many of the shortcomings of the implementing agency. However, it was the view of the desk that they missed opportunities to give vitally needed coordinated advice to AusAID. This coordinated advice could have outlined significant changes that were needed to the project overall.

When the TAG for this project was interviewed, the view was that, because of the way the project had been structured, the AMC was fulfilling many of the functions of a TAG. The appointment of a TAG as well, created confusion over roles. They reported that they had submitted to AusAID that the group, as set up, was not good

value for the agency, and site visits were subsequently curtailed, but they were nevertheless asked for further technical advice on the project. It appears that in this case the most effective strategy may have been to review the situation and perhaps disband the monitoring group. If this course of action had been followed, the TOR for the supervising group (in this case the AMC), could perhaps have been modified to ensure that appropriate technical advice was still available to the desk.

The My Thuan Bridge Project provides an interesting case study illustrating an effective strategy for handling this situation where one or more layers of technical input to the project already exist. In this case, TAGs have been used strictly on a needs rather than a scheduled basis. In addition, the preparation of appropriate TOR for each TAG by AusAID has ensured that there is no real overlap or duplication of responsibility between the TAG, the desk, contract officers, in-house advisors and contractors engaged for the various phases of the project. It should be noted that, on a number of occasions, despite the highly expert nature of the advice given by TAGs, specific technical advice has been weighed by the AusAID staff against other factors and a different path followed. As a result of this flexible approach to the use of TAGs and the maintenance of the responsibility of the desk for the final decision, significant cost savings on the project have been achieved. In one case, a TAG costing approximately \$20,000 enabled savings of \$3-4 million to be made and in another, a TAG cost of approximately \$5,000 resulted in savings of \$0.5-0.75 million. These savings also involved a saving to the recipient government as the project is jointly funded. The recipient government's reduced contribution will improve the economic rate of return of the project. In another case on the same project, the Project Management Report, made during the feasibility study, recommended a design-and-construct approach be taken. A TAG supported this approach. When AusAID considered all the advice in the light of the lack of previous experience with this approach on such a large project, and the risk of fast tracking, it was decided to separate the design and the construct contracts. There is wide support for the view that this decision has been vindicated by subsequent experience on the project.

A TAG appointed to advise on legal aspects of the My Thuan Bridge Project also made useful suggestions concerning risk management on the contract. These were aimed at removing, or at least minimising, uncertainties in delivery of goods and services related to the construction of the bridge. After discussing this advice with recipient

government counterparts, project specific regulations were passed by the legislature to deal with the issue. These regulations enabled tenders to be priced lower as significant risk elements in the project were eliminated.

All TAGs interviewed were consistent in their view that it was important for the TAG and the team to see each other as working to improve the project. It was also seen as of considerable value if the TAG, without prejudice to the independence of its advice to AusAID, could develop its findings in such a way that its final report was clearly aimed at improving the project and had the general agreement and support of the team.

14 Value of TAGs to Recipient Countries

All recipient government staff interviewed spoke favourably of the value of TAGs. One of the key values of TAGs was seen as the way they were able to look independently at the project and provide independent feedback on its effectiveness. Counterpart staff especially spoke highly of the input TAG members were able to make when consideration was being given to possible changes to the project.

In general, however, TAGs relate most closely to the desk officer, the project team and the post. They have more limited involvement with the other parties such as the managing contractor and even less involvement with the recipient government (either aid coordinating agency or line department). In some other cases, such as the Cambodian CJAP, the TAG plays a crucial role in the success of the project through its involvement with the recipient agencies (in this case police, courts and prisons). Because a key element of the project involves changing the attitudes of the Cambodian personnel involved, and because of the way Khmer society operates, it is important that the changes being proposed are seen to be supported from the top of the organisation. In this project, the two TAG members were involved in the design of the project and, during this process, developed good relationships, gained the confidence and obtained the commitment of senior police, court and prison officials. These relationships, which were built up over a period of time, and the commitment to the project that resulted, were seen by key AusAID staff to be crucial to gaining acceptance of the procedures proposed for introduction by the project. The well developed relationships also make it more likely that the TAG receives honest feedback from Cambodian authorities as the project progresses. Because the project is assessed to be high risk, the TAG, through its on-going relationship with senior police and prison officials, is an important means of maximising the return on the investment in the project. The project is somewhat different from other projects because of the degree of overall involvement of the TAG in the

project itself. For instance, the TAG members were involved from the outset in the design of the project and were also instrumental in facilitating a field visit by senior Royal Government of Cambodia (RGOc) counterparts to Australia prior to actual commencement of the project. The TAG, having earned the trust of local authorities, was also able to be present in Cambodia when the team arrived and was seen by local staff as “handing over” to the new team who then also gained acceptance more quickly. This facilitated the project start-up. In this instance, it is conceded that it is quite likely that the TAG was seen by the recipient government simply as part of the overall Australian input, and not as an independently functioning group. As a result, the TAG took steps to ensure that its role was seen differently once the project team arrived.

15 Lines of Communication/ Roles of Various Parties

There are many parties involved in projects and the TAG must interact with them all to effectively carry out its work. However, for most effective use of a TAG, there must be a clear understanding of the responsibility and accountability of the desk officer as far as project management is concerned. It must also be clear that the TAG's only reporting line is to the desk. In interviews with AusAID staff as well as AMC staff and TAG members on the question of lines of communication and respective roles, the following key points emerged:

- ④ The TAG is not AusAID;
- ④ The TAG is there to provide “independent technical advice” to AusAID;
- ④ The TAG is responsible to AusAID through the reporting line to the desk;
- ④ These clear reporting lines should not preclude frank and open discussions between the TAG and project staff. It is quite possible that the TAG may have developed concerns about some aspect(s) of the project during a brief visit and when these are disclosed to the team, additional information is able to be made available which significantly modifies the TAG's view. Failure to disclose at an early stage can cause concerns to be raised unnecessarily and a great deal of time to be wasted responding to written reports. The key to success in this area is “consultation without collusion”;
- ④ AusAID is represented in the field by the AusAID staff at the post, and, while in the field, the TAG is under the overall authority of the post. (This can pose problems and further

discussion of this point is contained in Section 12 on TAG Members' Perspectives);

- ④ While the TAG may need to engage in discussions with other parties, particularly the AMC, TAG members must not give instructions about the project to any party; and
- ④ The TAG is a legitimate and most useful part of the cycle of change but it does not make changes.

16 Risk of Deskilling AusAID Staff Through the Use of TAGs

This issue was of concern to AusAID staff and contractors alike. It was clear that the use of a TAG does not, of itself, lead to deskilling of AusAID staff. However, it was generally agreed that deskilling could occur if AusAID staff effectively pass over responsibility for project decisions to the TAG. Important points that emerged during the assessment were:

- It is not cost effective for a TAG to be appointed to provide regular/routine monitoring of the basic elements of a project. Its key role should be to provide highly specialised technical monitoring and to ensure that the appropriate day-to-day monitoring procedures are in place. It should be considered as a risk management tool;
- Setting up a TAG, or seeking a TAG input, each time there is a decision to be made can lead to a de-skilling of AusAID desk and post staff;
- Proper use of a TAG to provide input to technical decisions can be an effective means of increasing the skills of AusAID staff; and
- While there are real advantages in a TAG being involved in a project between visits, say, by reviewing reports and plans (as this also serves to keep them up-to-date with project progress), there is a risk that a desk officer can “over consult” the TAG between its project visits. This was described as a very fine line that needs to be drawn back closer to the desk as the party having overall responsibility for project management.

17 TAGs and AusAID's Records Management System

17.1 Activity Management System (AMS)

AusAID's Activity Management System (AMS) is a useful resource for the Agency in facilitating access to information on its full range of activities. Because a TAG plays a significant part in monitoring a project's implementation, it is important that the Agency should be able to identify those activities where a TAG exists. However, the assessment team found that it was not possible to readily extract TAG data from the AMS by sector, size or country. This was because there are no business rules within the AMS specifically, or within AusAID in general, in relation to TAGs.

In some instances, Agency staff create a separate AMS entry specifically covering the TAG, while in others the TAG's contract details are subsumed within the AMS activity details for the project itself. A standard approach needs to be established to enable TAGs to be identified within the AMS. This could be achieved by identifying TAGs as a separate activity/contract type, or a better approach may be to identify the use of a TAG in the project description within the AMS.

17.2 The Lessons Learned Database

AusAID also has a LLDB that is managed by the Performance Information and Assessment Section (PIA) within the PQG of AusAID. Because TAGs will, from time to time, make findings that are applicable beyond the individual project, copies of all TAG reports should be forwarded to the PIA Section. They can then be reviewed and any relevant lessons learned can be consolidated and included in the database.

17.3 Library records

It was difficult to research TAG reports within the Agency, as these were not all held centrally. Some, presumably because of their value mainly to the desk officer, were retained in individual or section filing systems. Office Procedure Circular 10 of 9 August 1995, outlining responsibilities under the Archives Act of 1983, requires AusAID staff to lodge two copies of AusAID reports with the Library. While this circular does not specifically mention TAG reports, they are clearly covered by the Act. The Library is taking action to clarify this with desk officers.

In addition, those TAG reports that were placed in the Agency's library were not always easily retrieved as "TAG reports". In fact, because of variations in titles given to reports by TAG teams, the keywords "TAG" or "Technical Advisory Group" did not always appear in the cataloguing of the reports and thus the report could not be easily identified in a keyword search.

There would appear to be benefit in adopting a more standardised approach to the titles of TAG reports, as this would make systematic cataloguing easier. As a result of the findings of this assessment of TAGs, the Library is already taking action to provide guidelines to desk officers to ensure this occurs. Because of the number of these reports, consideration could be given to their storage in electronic rather than hard copy form. This should not prove difficult, as TAG contracts provide for such a disk to be supplied to the Agency on conclusion of each assignment.

18 Some Comparative Costs

As outlined in section 17, AusAID's records management system does not enable systematic collection of information on TAGs. As part of the assessment, AMS printouts were manually examined for Indonesia and PNG to compare the money spent on TAG contracts for a thirteen month period to March 1998 with the total value of contracts for the same period. The results are summarised below:

| Country | No. of contracts | No. of TAGs | Cost of contracts | Cost of TAGs |
|-----------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Indonesia | 82 | 5 | \$ 16.68m | \$ 379,000 |
| PNG | 184 | 5 | \$ 121.65m | \$ 48,554 |

While these figures provide a summary of contracts signed during the period surveyed, they do not necessarily present a true picture. For instance, as can be seen from the following table, there are a number of TAGs operating in PNG at present where the contracts were signed outside the period surveyed. If TAGs were readily identified in the AMS, results could be searched electronically and more valuable comparative information on the use of TAGs could be obtained.

In order to obtain some comparative information on the cost of TAGs and the cost of the projects they serve, information was manually obtained for a total of nine current projects (or sectoral groupings of projects), all of which used TAGs. The total amount approved for the project was compared with the total approved for the TAG. The results were as follows:

| Project | Approx. Project Cost (Australian Component) | Approx. TAG costs |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| My Thuan Bridge Project Phases 2-4 | \$ 91m | \$750,000 Note: 17 separate TAGs |
| Cambodian Australian Agricultural Extension Project (CAAEP) | \$ 12.2m | \$110,000 |
| Criminal Justice Assistance Project Cambodia | \$ 12.6m | \$ 477,000 |
| Kiritimati Water Supply and Sanitation Project | \$ 3m | \$ 250,000 |
| PNG Education Sector | \$ 100m (4 projects) | \$ 400,000 |
| Philippines Health Sector | \$ 23m (5 projects) | \$ 250,000 |
| RPNG Constabulary Development Project (Phase II) | \$ 84.5m | \$ 700,000 |
| ACLM Project (PNG Mapping) | \$ 10.5m | \$ 200,000 |
| PNG Roads Projects | \$ 155m (4 projects) | \$ 1.2m |

While none of the above data is statistically robust, it provides an indication of the range of costs involved in TAGs in a wide variety of projects, and a similar indication of the level of expenditure involved in TAGs compared to overall project costs.

19 A Checklist When Considering a TAG

19.1 Is a TAG necessary?

A TAG might be appropriate if one or more of the following apply:

- The project is technically complex (cutting edge technology, sophisticated, narrow range of specialisation);
- the project is large in size (cost, scale, geographical spread, range of line agencies involved);
- The project is to operate in a complex environment;
- The project environment is one where external factors may be critical to project success (availability of resources, links with multi-lateral agencies, unclear or changing government policy); and/or
- The project is in an area of high sensitivity politically (e.g. human rights, waste management).

19.2 How should the TAG be contracted?

- On a schedule of rates with indicative number of days per year specified;
- On a fixed contract with approximate times for visits and length of visit specified and actual deployment decided by the desk; or,
- On a period contract with times decided by the desk as and when need arises.

19.3 What should be in the TOR?

- If the TAG is engaged on a fixed contract the TOR will need to be detailed fully at the commencement. If a schedule of rates approach is used, a broad set of TOR will be needed for tendering purposes and these will be included in the general

contract. Specific TOR will then be developed for each mission.

- ④ Is the work to be carried out in the field or can it be done as a desk study?
- ④ What specific issues should be addressed by the TAG in its visit(s)?
- ④ What area(s) of technical expertise are required? How will these be defined? (e.g. input from in-house advisors)
- ④ How many members are needed in the TAG?
- ④ Should the membership be fixed or is different expertise required at different stages of the project?
- ④ Should the recipient government be represented on the TAG?
- ④ How frequently should the TAG be used?
 - Is the nature of the project such that more time is required between visits to allow time to implement recommendations and achieve results?
 - Should visits be more frequent because of the highly changeable nature of the project environment and the need for TAG input more often?

19.4 What should be the nature of the TAG report(s)?

- ④ Should the TAG present written findings (aide-memoire/briefing notes) to the AMC, RG, and ATL and team with a more detailed report compiled soon after return to Australia?
- ④ Should the final TAG report be directed to the AusAID desk (and circulated more widely after consideration of the findings) or should it be written for a wider initial audience?
- ④ What specific issues should be covered in the report?
- ④ What format should be used and what should be the approximate length?
- ④ How should the TAG findings relate to the PCC or PCG?
 - Present findings to the RG, AMC, and ATL to enable their responses to the TAG findings to be presented to the PCC/PCG?

19.5 What should be the general mode of operation?

- ④ What form of briefing is required (by desk, in-house advisors, and post)?
- ④ How can full and frank discussion with the recipient government, AMC, ATL, post and desk be facilitated?
- ④ Should visits be made to every location at which the project operates or should these be sampled?

20 Conclusions

In general the assessment found that TAGs contribute significantly to project efficiency and effectiveness. Some TAGs were found to contribute more effectively than others and a number of findings were made that will assist those involved with TAGs to optimise their use. A summary of the key findings and the recommendations can be found at the beginning of this report.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference

1 Background

About 10-20 per cent of AusAID's recently funded large projects have incorporated a Technical Advisory Group (TAG). A TAG is usually established to: (a) advise on an implementing contractor's performance of a complex technical task, (b) monitor and review project progress, and (c) assist the development of a country sector strategy. The group comprises one or more consultants with relevant expertise and qualifications. The need for a TAG is commonly identified in the Project Design Document (PDD) which sets out its role, the review plan, the frequency of visits to the project, and cost estimates for its operation. TAGs report to AusAID on the performance, appropriateness and achievements of projects, and alert the desk officers of existing and likely problems. They are established by arranging one or more consultancy contracts.

TAGs sometimes assist Project Coordinating Committees or Groups (PCCs or PCGs) to make technical decisions during project implementation. Most TAGs regularly visit projects for short periods and sometimes participate in PCC meetings.

AusAID has decided to undertake an assessment of TAGs to find what lessons can be learned to improve their usefulness in activity design, implementation and reporting. A sample of projects with TAGs will be assessed. The selection will be based on project size, sector, region and nominations by desk officers. The selected TAGs will be assessed as a group using the cluster evaluation approach, rather than individually, to make the assessment more cost-effective.

2 Assessment Objective

The objective of the assessment is to evaluate the extent and variety of ways in which AusAID has and is using TAGs. It will identify strengths and weaknesses in the use of TAGs and make recommendations for future practice that maximises their efficient and effective use.

3 Scope

The overall scope of the assessment will include issues such as: How extensively has AusAID used TAGs? What is their spread geographically, by sector, by size? At what stage was it decided that the TAG was required? When was the TAG appointed, how appointed, and for what purposes? What are the perceptions of recipient Governments, posts, desks, advisory services groups and contract areas of their costs and benefits? How useful have TAGs been in helping AusAID to be effective and efficient?

The scope of the assessment will recognise the context in which projects were designed and implemented, including country strategies. The recommendations will be applicable to future AusAID programming. Project reports, consultations with managing contractors, TAGs and AusAID officers in Canberra and at posts, will form the basis of the data collection.

The assessment team will undertake an analysis of a sample of projects selected in close consultation with desk officers. The selection will be based on such characteristics as project size, sector, region, and nominations by desk officers. It is expected that several large projects in Asia and PNG will be represented in the sample as these two areas have many current TAGs.

Under the direction of the AusAID Task Manager, the consultant will:

- In consultation with AusAID officers, select a representative sample of projects with TAGs for assessment based on characteristics listed above;
- Identify the main reasons for having TAGs in AusAID projects. These could include such reasons as: (a) value for money; investing money at the beginning of the activity; (b) quality assurance; AusAID not having sufficient technical expertise to advice on and monitor activity progress; (c) risk management; getting a second opinion on complex technical matters; (d) lightening load on posts; for activity monitoring; and (e) accountability; expenditure of public funds in an appropriate way;
- Assess the desks' and posts' experience of TAGs in the selected programs. In addition, assess the costs and benefits of TAGs on AusAID's resources;

- Consider the role of TAGs relative to other monitoring mechanisms and advisory functions in AusAID. What is the role of TAGs in outputs contracts? Consider the impact of TAGs on contract management, given that aid contracts already have a complex association between three players (AusAID, managing contractor and recipient Government);
- Consider whether TAGs have a greater role in design/implement projects;
- Analyse managing contractors' experience of TAGs in several sectors. Assess how differences of opinion are resolved to the satisfaction of AusAID;
- Interview selected TAGs to assess their experience;
- Meet with relevant Government officials in counterpart and implementing agencies in two or three countries and obtain their views on the performance and benefits of current and recently completed TAGs;
- For each selected project assess whether the TAG's findings and recommendations were able to influence the key decisions undertaken in correcting designs or changing project activities. Assess the usefulness of any such decisions noting whether technical, economic, financial, gender, social or environmental effects were particularly influenced;
- Identify and assess any unintended outcomes of TAGs;
- Assess whether TAGs increased the likely sustainability and development outcomes (and, if possible, development impact) of projects; and
- Assess whether TAGs helped improve recipient officials' knowledge, attitude, and perception of projects in terms of consideration of different approaches to achieving project objectives.

4 Assessment Team

Dr S. Chandra, Performance Information and Assessment Section, AusAID will be the Task Manager. A short-term consultant will be the Evaluation Specialist for eight weeks. This person's TOR are listed under section 7.

Dr Chandra's prime responsibility will be to manage, coordinate and oversight the work of the consultant to ensure that the contents of the draft report, including the conclusions and recommendations,

meet AusAID's requirements. In addition, he will be responsible for ensuring that the final report meets AusAID's requirement for publication.

5 Workplan

The workplan for the assessment will consist of four phases:

- ④ Selection of projects, a preliminary review of documents within AusAID, and preparation of a detailed approach for the assessment by the consultant for 10 days beginning on 2 February, 1998;
- ④ A desk assessment by the consultant for 10 days beginning on 16 February 1998. This will include discussions and interviews with selected managing contractors and TAGs in Australia;
- ④ A short field mission to assess about three or four projects with TAGs over 12 days beginning on 28 February, 1998; and
- ④ Finalising the report for circulation by the consultant for 3 days beginning on 12 March 1998. An additional 5 days (at dates to be advised) will be set aside for the consultant to revise and produce the final report after comments are received.

6 Reporting

A short report of no more than 30 pages of text and any essential appendices is expected. The report will be forward looking and constructively written to assist AusAID officers in the use of TAGs in future. The conclusions will be discussed with the recipient Government agencies as well, whilst the draft report is being completed in-country. Within AusAID a seminar with SAC and other officers will be used to help finalise the report. The lessons learned will be incorporated into the AusAID's lessons learned database. A flier will be produced publicising the findings. The report will contribute to an ASG seminar on the use of TAGs.

7 Evaluation Specialist's Terms of Reference

The Evaluation Specialist will:

- ④ Be responsible to the Task Manager for the overall conduct of the assessment;

- In consultation with Dr Chandra and AusAID officers, select a sample of projects with TAGs for assessment;
- Analyse the Activity Management System (AMS) and the contracts register for information on TAGs identifying their: (a) current number; (b) past number; (c) type by sector, size, and country; (d) cost; (e) duration; (f) function; (g) type of contract; and (h) point of appointment;
- Assess the desks' and posts' experience of TAGs in the selected programs. In addition, assess the costs and benefits of TAGs on AusAID's resources;
- Consider the role of TAGs relative to other monitoring mechanisms and advisory functions in AusAID. What is the role of TAGs in outputs contracts? Consider the impact of TAGs on contract management, given that aid contracts already have a complex association between three players (AusAID, managing contractor and recipient Government);
- Consider whether TAGs have a greater role in design/implement projects;
- Analyse managing contractors' experience of TAGs in several sectors. Assess how differences of opinion are resolved to the satisfaction of AusAID;
- Interview selected TAGs to assess their experience;
- Meet with relevant Government officials in counterpart and implementing agencies in two or three countries and obtain their views on the performance and benefits of current and recently completed TAGs;
- For each selected project assess whether the TAG's findings and recommendations were able to influence the key decisions undertaken in correcting designs or changing project activities. Assess the usefulness of any such decisions noting whether technical, economic, financial, gender, social or environmental effects were particularly influenced;
- Identify and assess any unintended outcomes of TAGs;
- Assess whether TAGs increased the likely sustainability and development outcomes (and, if possible, development impact) of projects;
- Assess whether TAGs helped improve recipient officials' knowledge, attitude, and perception of projects in terms of

consideration of different approaches to achieving project objectives;

- ④ Identify the key conclusions about TAGs for incorporation into the design and implementation of future activities. The conclusions should define the role of TAGs;
- ④ Undertake responsibility for the preparation of the drafts and final report; and
- ④ Carry out any other tasks for successful completion of the assessment as requested by the Task Manager.

Appendix 2

Membership of the Advisory Committee

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Mr Geoffrey Miller | Director, Advisory Services Group and subsequently Director, Pacific Regional Section; |
| Mr Andrew Alwast | Director, Pacific Regional Team and subsequently, Director, Rural Development Group; |
| Mr Geir Martinsen | Senior Officer, Contracts Services Group, Team 2; |
| Ms Cathy Bennett | Country Program Manager, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma Section; |
| Mr Ray Marsden | Country Program Manager, Policy and Management Reform Section, Pacific; |
| Mr Mark Collins | Country Program Manager, Vietnam Section; |
| Mr Gary Ellem | Program Manager, Education and Justice Section, PNG; and |
| Mr James Sweeting | Program Manager, Philippines Section. |

Appendix 3

List of Persons Interviewed

| Name | Position |
|-----------------|--|
| Borham Ahmed | Second Secretary, AHC Port Moresby (AusAID) |
| Morris Alaluku | Deputy Secretary, Technical, Department of Lands, PNG |
| Andrew Alwast | Director, Rural Development Group (AusAID) |
| Jim Andrews | A/Assistant Commissioner of Police, RPNGC |
| Judith Ashcroft | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| John Bailey | Director, Performance Information and Assessment Section, (AusAID) |
| Angus Barnes | Second Secretary, AHC Port Moresby |
| David Barber | Advisor, (AusAID) |
| Cathy Bennett | Country Program Manager, CLTB Section (AusAID) |
| Judy Betts | Director, Policy, Competitive Tendering and Contracting Unit, (Department of Finance and Administration) |
| Abbey Bloom | TAG Member |
| Sun Boreth | Project Development Officer, Australian Embassy, Cambodia |
| Nuon Bophal | Police Counterpart, CJAP, Cambodia |
| Penny Bond | Program Officer Indonesia Section, formerly AHC Port Moresby, and Program Officer, PNG (AusAID) |
| John Bonot | Chief Superintendent, RPNGC |

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Peter Boulden | Quality Manager, My Thuan Bridge Project (Maunsell) |
| Debbie Bowman | Second Secretary, AHC Port Moresby |
| Robert Bradley | Australian Team Leader, CJAP, Cambodia (SAGRIC) |
| Doug Byers | Advisor, CJAP, Cambodia (SAGRIC) |
| Nikki Burns | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| John Caldwell | Health and Rural Development Sector Section, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Ken Cameron | Quality Assurance TAG, My Thuan Bridge Project |
| Rosemary Cassidy | Librarian, (AusAID) |
| Robin Chalker | Project Manager, RPNGC Development Project |
| Ric Chisholm | Former Advisor, (AusAID), TAG Leader, CAEP |
| Mark Collins | Country Program Manager, Vietnam Section(AusAID) |
| Bill Costello | First Secretary, Australian Embassy, Cambodia (AusAID) |
| Y Dan | Courts Counterpart, CJAP, Cambodia |
| Fleur Davies | Second Secretary, AHC Port Moresby |
| Heather Dornoch | Program Manager, Cambodia, CLTB Section (AusAID) |
| Tim Eldridge | Program Officer, Philippines Section (AusAID) |
| Gary Ellem | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Greg Ellis | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Peter English | Director, National Mapping Board, PNG |
| Aloysius Eviasa | Chief Superintendent, RPNGC |
| David Freyne | Australian Team Leader, ACLMP, PNG (Coffey) |
| Jean Gordon | TAG member, RPNGCDP |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Sue Gordon | Country Program Manager, CLTB Section (AusAID) |
| Ids Groenhout | Project Director, Lae City Roads Project, PNG (SMEC) |
| Kevin Gubag | Development Officer, AHC Port Moresby |
| Harold Gray | Advisor, CAAEP, Cambodia (OPCV) |
| Richard Harman | Counsellor, Australian Embassy, Hanoi (AusAID) |
| Wayne Haslam | Project Director, Digital Mapping Project, PNG (Coffey) |
| John Heath | Project Director, CAAEP (OPCV) |
| Dan Heldon | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Lilla Hendry | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Rob Hoare | TAG Member, China Mine Waste Management Project |
| Allan James | Advisor, Lae City Council (SMEC) |
| David Jellie | PD, PTMG, PNG Roads Project (OPCV) |
| Peter Johnston | Country Program Manager, China/Central Asia Section (AusAID) |
| Takon Jones | Development Officer, AHC Port Moresby (AusAID) |
| Jiro Kandoiya | Development Officer, AHC Port Moresby (AusAID) |
| Bill Kelly | Supervising Engineer, My Thuan Bridge Project (Maunsell) |
| Bill Kidston | TAG member, CJAP, Project Director PNG Corrections Project |
| Robert Korus | Deputy Commissioner of Police, RPNGC |
| Violeta Kuenne | Second Secretary, AHC Port Moresby |
| Joseph Kupo | Assistant Commissioner of Police, RPNGC |
| John Laurie | Police Advisor, CJAP, Cambodia (SAGRIC) |
| Wal Lawrence | Audit Section, (AusAID) |

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Bernice Lee | First Secretary, Australian Embassy, Hanoi (AusAID) |
| Peter Lowe | Team Leader, PTMG, PNG Roads Project (OPCV) |
| Joel Luma | Deputy director, Office of Works, PNG |
| Heather MacDonald | Health Advisor, AusAID |
| Geir Martinsen | Contracts Officer, CSG (AusAID) |
| Bernice Masterson | TAG, CJAP, Cambodia, TAG RPNGCDC, PNG |
| Ray Miles | Project Director, My Thuan Bridge (Maunsell) |
| Geoffrey Miller | Director, Pacific Regional Section, previously Director, ASG (AusAID) |
| Hieng Na | Prisons Counterpart, CJAP, Cambodia |
| Tony O'Dowd | First Secretary, AHC Port Moresby (AusAID) |
| Annmaree O'Keefe | Minister-Counsellor, AHC Port Moresby (AusAID) |
| Paul O'Neill | First Secretary, AHC Port Moresby |
| Mosely Pukut | Project Director, Roads Project, Office of Works, PNG |
| Kevin Raue | Deputy Project Manager, RPNGC Development Project |
| Chun Sareth | Undersecretary of State, MAFF, Cambodia |
| Shaanti Sekhon | Program Officer, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Peter Shea | SAGRIC, Adelaide, Project Director, CJAP Cambodia |
| Louise Simpson | ACIL, Melbourne, TAG Member, Central Visayas Water Supply Project |
| Peter Smith | First Secretary, Australian Consulate, HCMC, formerly Country Program Officer, My Thuan Bridge Project (AusAID) |
| Prum Sokha | Director-General, Ministry of Interior, Cambodia (CJAP) |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Sreng Sreang | Project Coordinator, CJAP, Cambodia |
| Marjorie Sullivan | Formerly: TAG Member, Digital Mapping Project, PNG Currently: Advisor (AusAID) |
| James Sweeting | Program Officer, Philippines Section, (AusAID) |
| Mark Thomson | Country Program Manager, PNG Branch (AusAID) |
| Rob Tranter | Country Program Manager, Pacific Bilateral Section (AusAID) |
| Leigh Trevallian | Health Advisor (AusAID) |
| Ian Tuck | ACIL, Project Director, RPNGC Development Project |
| Sing Var | Director, Dept of Techniques Economic & Extension, MAFF, Cambodia |
| Bob Wall | Activity Management System Section (AusAID) |
| Jim Wan | A/Assistant Commissioner, RPNGC and TAG member |
| Norm Welsh | Acting Australian Team Leader, CAAEP (OPCV) |
| Denis West | Incoming Australian Team Leader, CAAEP (OPCV) |
| John Westcott | First Secretary, AHC, Port Moresby |
| Andrew Whillas | Advisor (AusAID) |
| Maria Winford | Director, Audit Section (AusAID) |
| Stephen Woodall | Police Advisor, CJAP, Cambodia (SAGRIC) |
| Chhieng Yanara | Deputy Secretary, CDC, Cambodia |