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EVALUATION

Performance Evaluation of the Small Project Assistance (SPA) Program, FY13 – FY17

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This publication was produced at the request of the United States Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development. It was prepared independently by General Dynamics Information Technology. Dr. Marta Muco led the evaluation, and the report was prepared by Dr. Karen Aschaffenburg, Elizabeth Botkin, Giovanna Monteverde, Yvette Neisser, Thompson von Agner, Dr. Joseph Wantz and Eugene Wickett. The views expressed in this report reflect those of the GDIT evaluation team.

PHOTO CAPTIONS AND CREDITS

Photo 1: Mural from the Enhancing Community Marine Protection Project, Antique, Philippines. Taken by Giovanna Monteverde.

Photo 2: Computers and desks from the English Learning Center Project, Ngoma, Rwanda. Taken by Elizabeth Botkin.

Photo 3: Students visit the library from the Elementary School Library Project, Pimentel, Peru. Taken by Karen Aschaffenburg.

Photo 4: Former participants of the Second Annual Girls Sous Massa Soccer Camp in training, Sous Massa, Morocco. Taken by Marta Muco.

Photo 5: Fruit tree nursery from the Alinafe Community Gardens Project, Nkhotakota, Malawi. Taken by Joseph Wantz.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SPA PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Peace Corps Small Project Assistance (SPA) Program—a joint initiative of Peace Corps and USAID—has supported more than 25,000 grants for small-scale community-initiated development projects, as well as 1,000 training activities around the world over the past three decades. This performance evaluation is focused on the FY13-FY17 grants portion of the \$18M SPA IV Program (Award Number: AID-PPL-T-12-00002). SPA grant projects are funded by a combination of grant project funding, local community contributions, and, in certain cases, third party contributions. These grant projects typically are implemented collaboratively between a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) and a sponsoring community-based grantee. Three of the main policy requirements are that the grants must:

- Be community-initiated and directed;
- Meet a determined community need; and
- Promote sustainability and capacity building.

SPA activities take place globally, spanning more than 50 developing countries. Sectors range from health to education to agriculture to civic participation. All activities are designed to meet a specific community need and must conform to or fit within the Peace Corps/USAID priorities set in each country and fit under available funding types.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation entailed conducting fieldwork interviews in selected SPA project communities in Malawi, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines and Rwanda. The fieldwork was conducted from January through April 2018. Global administrative data for 2,560 SPA IV grant activities were also analyzed.

Project sites were selected so that the fieldwork sample was as representative as possible of the respective country project portfolio in terms of program year, total funding, geographic representation, and program element, while taking into account travel logistics, security concerns, and even natural disasters.

Overall, GDIT spoke with 664 individuals across 51 fieldwork projects. This included interviews with PCVs, grantees, project participants, beneficiaries, and community leaders. The interviews were then coded and analyzed and, where appropriate, the findings were quantified in order to explore emergent themes. GDIT also assigned projects “sustainability ratings,” which included:

- Project sustained, completed, and expanded (28 percent of fieldwork projects)
- Project completed and sustained by the community (39 percent)
- Project completed, but not ongoing (29 percent)
- Project not completed (4 percent)

These ratings were used throughout the report, in multiple data points, to analyze the factors that promote sustainability.

FINDINGS

The evaluation found that the fieldwork projects were remarkably successful in implementation and positively affecting communities. On average, the fieldwork projects directly engaged 33 participants, increased capacity for 338 beneficiaries, and reached 734 indirect beneficiaries. Benefits ranged from improving access to clean water and latrines, to empowering women and girls through sports and education, to providing resources for disabled people to live healthy lives. The projects resonated with the community years after the grant ended, and have led to increased development activities in communities in each fieldwork country. The global data also show that over 900,000 people worldwide have directly benefitted from SPA IV projects and over 380,000 have participated in project implementation. Community engagement and leadership are pivotal components of sustainability.

The key findings are organized by the research questions developed by Peace Corps and USAID, which served as the basis of the evaluation.

RQ1. *What are the results of community-led efforts associated with SPA grant activities? To what extent are these results likely to be sustained over time?*

Community stakeholders reported that SPA grant activities have had meaningful effects in their communities across the different program elements. The SPA grants have addressed real community needs and provided skills and materials that have allowed the communities to sustain and build upon project momentum after the departure of the PCV.

- Forty-nine of the 51 fieldwork communities successfully implemented their projects.
- Thirty-four communities (67 percent) sustained the projects.
- Of those 34, 14 communities continued to expand the project to include other activities or initiatives.

RQ2. *How and to what extent have SPA grant activities contributed toward catalyzing communities to identify, access, and mobilize local resources to meet their needs?*

SPA grant projects and activities have helped catalyze communities to take control of their development needs. Not only have communities been able to sustain the projects begun under the SPA grants (34 or 67 percent of the communities), their experiences have allowed them to both initiate new development activities and identify new resources and local groups to contribute to these efforts.

- Thirteen communities initiated 20 *new* development activities.
- Seventeen of these 20 activities have been community-led, with the other three primarily led by outside groups or government agencies.
- Ten communities reported identifying new local (internal) resources or groups to support further development.

RQ3. *What are the features of SPA grant activities that did and did not result in sustained local capacity to pursue community-led development?*

Project sustainability has deep roots in community involvement. It is the relationship between the PCV and the community, as well as the strength of community leadership, which appears to contribute to sustainable outcomes. High community engagement in planning, implementing, and contributing resources to the SPA project was observed to be a

key factor in those projects being locally owned and their benefits sustained by the communities.

- Twenty-nine of 51 fieldwork projects were community-led, with 24 (80 percent) resulting in further development efforts, defined as either sustaining the existing activities/project or expanding the project to include new activities and initiatives.
- There was no statistically significant evidence to suggest that project sustainability is primarily driven by specific requirements of the PC Small Grants Framework (funding level, duration, community contribution).
- It is the synergy between the Peace Corps small grants requirements, project goals, community needs, and the PCV's ability to identify a strong partner and catalyze community buy-in that makes projects sustainable over time.

RQ4. *What opportunities do stakeholders see to continue making progress on community development after SPA grant activities have ended, and what factors might prevent them from doing so?*

Stakeholders highlighted changes in their communities and themselves as a result of the SPA projects. Project involvement in various capacities (as leaders, participants, or beneficiaries) fostered self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. In addition, the projects helped communities feel united around a common purpose. These positive effects are independent of current project status – that is, whether or not the project has been become sustainable.

- For fifty-nine percent of the fieldwork projects (30 of the 51), participants and beneficiaries said the project brought people together.
- For fifty-three percent (27 of the 51), participants and beneficiaries said they were empowered by their involvement.
- Forty-five percent (23 of the 51) were specifically designed to benefit women, youth, and children. Women who participated in the SPA projects have gained skills that helped them improve the well-being of their families and enabled them to take on more active roles in their communities.

RQ5. *What motivates stakeholders to engage, or not to engage, in community-led development efforts, and how can programs designed to catalyze community-led development best approach those motivations?*

SPA project stakeholders are motivated to engage in community-led development efforts in multiple ways, though the source of the idea is not the driving force in motivating community engagement. Attendance at Project Design and Management (PDM) trainings, conducted by the Peace Corps, and the use of a variety of engagement methods to encourage community buy-in, appear to be key factors in driving project sustainability.

- Project sustainability is independent of the individual or entity that originally generated the idea: 21 of 30 (70 percent) projects identified by the PCV were sustained, while four of seven (58 percent) projects identified by a local organization were sustained.
- More than half of projects used two or more tactics to encourage community buy-in.
- In every country studied, a sustainability gap exists between projects where implementers received PDM training and projects where implementers did not receive that training. Of 28 projects where implementers received PDM training, 21

were sustained (75 percent); of 23 projects where implementers did not receive PDM training, 13 were sustained (58 percent)

- Only 16 of the 31 projects (52 percent) with no connections to government or NGOs were sustained, in contrast with 18 of the 20 projects (90 percent) that did have these connections.

RQ6. *Across SPA grant activities, what have been the common challenges to communities organizing for mutual benefit, and how can programs designed to catalyze community-led development help communities to address these challenges?*

While 49 of the 51 fieldwork projects were successfully completed, the projects faced some common challenges during the planning and implementation phases. These challenges inspired communities and the PCV to devise innovative and creative solutions.

- The most common challenges encountered during SPA grant activities, as reported during fieldwork interviews, are budget issues (29 percent), lack of community engagement (49 percent), environmental issues (18 percent), and lack of material resources (18 percent).
- The most important lessons learned for catalyzing community development activities such as SPA projects, according to interviewed stakeholders, are: (1) obtain support from community leaders and other key community stakeholders early on; (2) plan the project scope and timeline carefully to ensure the project can feasibly be completed within the projected time frame; and (3) include training of community members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the evaluation, Peace Corps and USAID, in collaboration with GDIT, developed four main recommendations to ensure community engagement, leadership, and a focus on project sustainability are at the forefront of all SPA grant activities in the future.

Application Documents and Review Process: Refocus the application around community leadership and stakeholder engagement to promote project sustainability.

- **Training.** PCVs and grantees should receive training prior to beginning project design on the importance of community participation for long-term sustainability. They should also receive instruction on how to identify community resources, partners, and strategies to encourage buy-in.
- **Application Form.** The Peace Corps should revisit the SPA application form to encourage PCVs to strategically plan for project sustainability, not just project completion.
- **Review.** The Peace Corps should pay increased attention during the application review process to ensure the PCV has partnered with the appropriate community leaders, developed strategic partnerships, planned for community buy in, identified local resources and designed a project that can be sustained by the community.
- **Verification.** Prior to award, the Peace Corps grants coordinator should verify the community commitment and project understanding by asking for a local language project summary, speaking with the community grantee by phone, submitting a mini-application or requiring a letter of support by the community project leader and/or local leader.

Project Design and Implementation: Restructure project design process to better incorporate community input, needs and strengths.

- **Tools.** Make use of existing tools (such as Peace Corps' Participatory Analysis for Community Action) to help identify and prioritize community needs that could be addressed by a SPA grant.
- **Training Content.** PDM and Small Grants training should include topics such as establishing and cultivating community relationships early, incorporating knowledge and skill transfer between project participants, beneficiaries and their communities (multiplier effect), and involving community members in project planning (ideas, resources, activities, buy-in) and sustainability.
- **Training Structure.** PDM trainings should not be limited to a single counterpart. Having multiple community stakeholders attend will build greater capacity for the community and will ensure that multiple perspectives and ideas are incorporated into initial planning. It also will contribute to project continuity in implementation.
- **Community Involvement.** PCVs should encourage community ownership, empower local leadership, and promote community agency.

Sustainability: Provide communities with the tools to identify, create, and mobilize new resources and stakeholders to sustain and expand community-led development activities.

- **Community Resources.** Community-led activities should consider, and be designed around, locally available resources to facilitate project expansion. The availability of financial resources to maintain, sustain, and expand project objectives should also be of great concern. If communities do not have access to sufficient financial resources, initial development activities should be intentionally designed to help identify, create, and mobilize new resources.
- **Community-based Committees.** Where possible, activities should incorporate community-based committees that can take the lead on developing follow-on activities and guide the community through any expansion and scaling up processes.

Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning: Continue to invest in monitoring SPA projects during project implementation, and use that learning to promote best practices.

- **Field Visits.** Peace Corps should continue to encourage Posts to conduct periodic field visits to small grants field-level projects, using existing SPA funds where possible.
- **Measures of Success.** Peace Corps should reconsider measures of project success and sustainability, especially as it relates to completion report data. Current completion reports ask PCVs to assess total numbers of beneficiaries and project participants, but it may be more useful to assess the percentage of the intended population that benefitted from a project.
- **Sustainability Assessments.** Future evaluations of field-level programs—whether conducted by a field office or a headquarters office—should include visits to local leaders, partner organizations and stakeholder communities to fully assess sustainability, in terms of community relations, availability of resources and the ability to mobilize those resources, community empowerment and motivation to take action, and existing project status. This requires the provision of adequate staff time and other resources.
- **Future Evaluations.** Follow-up evaluations should consider assessing the extent to which project leadership affects sustainability. Additionally, it may be worthwhile for Peace Corps to test whether having multiple community members attend PDM training (as opposed to only the grantee) makes a difference for sustainability.