



April 2015

USAID FARMER-TO-FARMER PROGRAM

Volunteers Provide Technical Assistance, but Actions Needed to Improve Screening and Monitoring

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-478](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

First authorized in the 1985 Farm Bill, the F2F program leverages U.S. agricultural expertise by sending volunteers on short-term assignments to provide technical assistance to farmers, farm groups, and agribusinesses in developing and middle-income countries. During fiscal years 2009 through 2013, F2F funded about 2,984 volunteer assignments and obligated an average of \$11.5 million annually.

In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress mandated that GAO conduct a review of the F2F program. GAO examined (1) how USAID administers the program, (2) how partners implement volunteer assignments and screen volunteers, and (3) the extent to which USAID uses monitoring and evaluation to manage the program. To address these objectives, GAO reviewed program documents and met with USAID F2F officials and current implementing partners. In addition, we conducted fieldwork in two countries that we selected based on factors, including the number of volunteers assigned.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that USAID (1) ensure F2F partners screen volunteer candidates against terrorist watch lists, (2) develop guidance on the other types of background checks implementing partners should perform, (3) ensure that implementing partners systematically share negative volunteer assessment information, and (4) monitor the extent to which the objectives and activities in the scopes of work are accomplished. USAID concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-15-478](#). For more information, contact Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov.

April 2015

USAID FARMER-TO-FARMER PROGRAM

Volunteers Provide Technical Assistance, but Actions Needed to Improve Screening and Monitoring

What GAO Found

The U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Food Security administers the Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program through implementing partners under 5-year cooperative agreements. USAID provides overall direction, but relies on partners to execute program activities. USAID uses the agreements to establish the partners' objectives, tasks, and responsibilities. Once selected, partners create work plans for USAID's approval that describe potential volunteer assignments, such as providing expertise on grain processing and storage or groundnut production.

Volunteers Provide Expertise on Grain Processing and Groundnut Production in Uganda



Source: GAO. | GAO-15-478

USAID's partners follow consistent practices to implement volunteer assignments, but they have inconsistent practices for screening volunteer candidates against terrorist watch lists. All partners develop a scope of work for each assignment, interview candidates, and assess the volunteer's performance. However, only two partners screen candidates against the terrorist watch lists as expected by USAID. These partners and one other partner screen candidates against other watch lists. In addition, partners do not have a means to systematically report negative volunteer assessments to USAID or each other, even though 41 percent of volunteers in the last program cycle were repeat volunteers. Without conducting required checks and providing information on prior negative assessments, partners risk selecting volunteers who could undermine F2F's goals and reputation.

USAID uses its monitoring and evaluation process to adjust the program, but does not review information on a key aspect of the program's implementation. In response to a program-wide evaluation, USAID revised performance indicators, established a committee that discusses best practices, and increased training for implementing partner staff. However, USAID does not systematically review information on the extent to which volunteers meet the objectives identified in the scopes of work. Reviewing volunteer trip reports against scopes of work could improve USAID's understanding of the volunteers' performance and provide additional insight on implementation progress and whether volunteers are being effectively used.

Contents

Letter	1
Background	3
USAID Administers the F2F Program through Cooperative Agreements	6
Partners Are Generally Consistent in Implementing F2F, but Most Do Not Screen Volunteers against Terrorist Watch Lists and Some Inconsistencies and Information Gaps Exist	8
USAID Used a Program-wide Evaluation to Adjust F2F, but Does Not Obtain Information on a Key Aspect of Program Implementation	13
Conclusions	16
Recommendations for Executive Action	16
Agency Comments	17
Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	18
Appendix II: USAID Missions Independently Administer Related Programs through Farmer-to-Farmer Partners	20
Appendix III: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development	22
Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	25
Figures	
Figure 1: F2F Beneficiaries Touring a Field Where Maize Is Being Cultivated	3
Figure 2: Volunteer Assignments by Country, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013	5

Abbreviations

F2F	Farmer-to-Farmer
LWA	Leader with Associate Award Cooperative Agreement
RFA	request for assistance
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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April 30, 2015

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Conaway
Chairman
The Honorable Collin Peterson
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
House of Representatives

According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, more than 800 million people suffer from chronic undernourishment.¹ As the largest donor of international food assistance, the United States has recently spent about \$2 billion per year to provide food assistance to food-insecure countries. As part of that effort, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has implemented the John Ogonowski and Doug Bereuter Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program since 1985 to provide voluntary technical assistance to farmers, farm groups, and agribusinesses in developing and transitional countries to promote sustainable improvements in food security and agricultural processing, production, and marketing.² USAID provides assistance through 5-year agreements with implementing partners (usually nongovernmental organizations) to provide short-term volunteer technical assignments, typically lasting 2 to 4 weeks. According to USAID, volunteers have completed more than 15,000 assignments in 103 countries since the program's inception.

¹United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World* (Rome, Italy: 2014).

²Authorization of this program is codified at 7 U.S.C. §1737.

In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress mandated that GAO conduct a review of the F2F program.³ In this study, we examine (1) how USAID administers the F2F program, (2) how partners implement volunteer assignments and screen volunteers for the F2F program, and (3) the extent to which USAID uses monitoring and evaluation to manage the F2F program.

To address our objectives, we reviewed program documents and information from the previous and current 5-year program cycles (fiscal years 2009 through 2013 and 2014 through 2018, respectively). We also met with officials from USAID's Bureau of Food Security F2F program in Washington, D.C., and with headquarters officials for the implementing partners of the current program cycle, either in Washington, D.C., or via teleconference. To determine how USAID administers the F2F program, we analyzed USAID and implementing partner documents such as requests for assistance, cooperative agreements, and country program descriptions. To determine how partners implement volunteer assignments and screen volunteers, we reviewed documents including USAID guidance on managing international volunteer programs, scopes of work for volunteer assignments, and volunteer trip reports. In addition, we conducted fieldwork in Ghana and Uganda, which included meeting with USAID mission officials, implementing partner field staff, F2F volunteers, and beneficiary host organizations. In selecting these countries for fieldwork, we considered various factors, including the number of volunteers assigned as well as the implementing partner's experience with the program in the previous or current cycle. To determine the extent to which USAID uses monitoring and evaluation to manage the program, we reviewed documents such as semiannual and annual reports. See appendix I for more details on our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2014 to April 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

³See section 3014 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-79, §3014). The periodic reauthorization of federal agricultural and food policy is colloquially referred to as the Farm Bill.

Background

Congress first authorized the F2F program in the 1985 Farm Bill to provide for the transfer of knowledge and expertise of U.S. agricultural producers and businesses to middle-income countries and emerging democracies on a voluntary basis. Most recently, Congress reauthorized the program in the 2014 Farm Bill. Congress has authorized the F2F program to provide a broad range of U.S. agricultural expertise using U.S. volunteers. The 2- to 4-week volunteer assignments are designed, among other things, to improve farm and agribusiness operations and agricultural systems, field crop cultivation, fruit and vegetable growing, livestock operations, marketing, and the strengthening of cooperatives and other farmer organizations (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: F2F Beneficiaries Touring a Field Where Maize Is Being Cultivated



Source: GAO. | GAO-15-478

USAID promotes a secondary goal not specifically noted in the authorizing legislation: to increase the American public's understanding of international development issues and programs and international understanding of the United States and U.S. development programs. The volunteer nature of the program's activities provides the opportunity for people-to-people cultural and technical exchange. USAID and its implementing partners give volunteers guidance about their responsibility for conducting public awareness activities about their experiences to

promote better understanding of international development issues and objectives upon their return home.

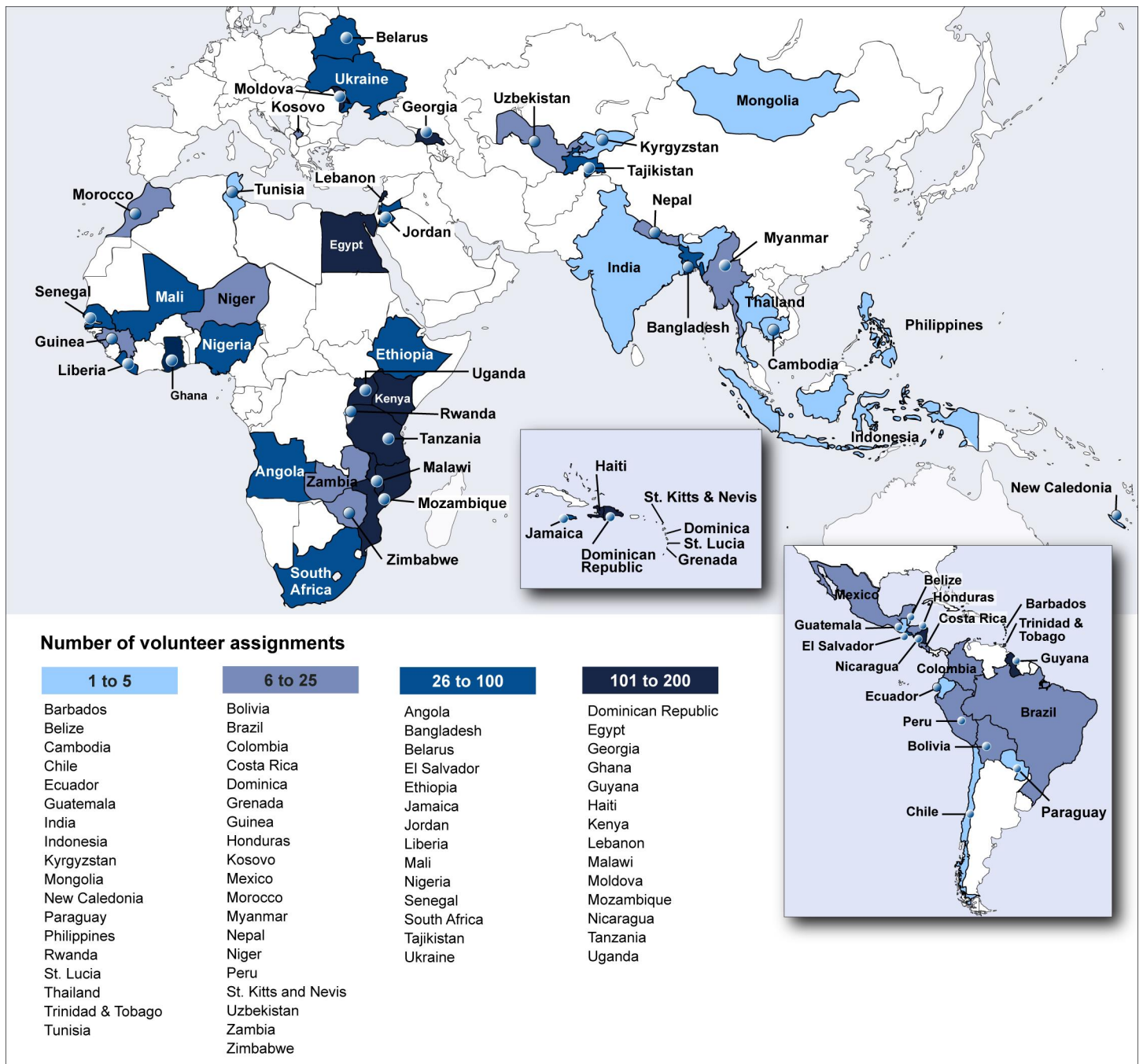
For the program's first 6 years, annual amounts provided to F2F were below \$2 million. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, USAID initiated F2F program activities in the newly independent countries, including conducting a substantial number of volunteer assignments in Russia. The additional funding for these countries significantly increased the size of the F2F program. In the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress required that a minimum of \$10 million be used to carry out the F2F program for each of the fiscal years 2009 through 2013.⁴ Over the fiscal years 2009 through 2013 period, USAID obligated an average of \$11.5 million annually to the F2F program, and the program disbursed a total of \$57.7 million for that program cycle. In the 2014 Farm Bill, Congress increased the minimum annual F2F funding requirement to \$15 million⁵.

During the fiscal years 2009 through 2013 F2F program cycle, implementing partners under eight cooperative agreements and one contract made 2,984 volunteer assignments, most to 28 core countries (see fig. 2). Cooperative agreements with each partner typically include work in 2 to 5 core countries where the majority of volunteer assignments will occur. Beginning with the 2009 through 2013 F2F program cycle, USAID missions also began making separate Associate Awards to F2F partners to implement related programs (see app. II for more information on these awards). In addition, the cooperative agreements allowed for "flexible" volunteer assignments outside the core countries. F2F currently limits these flexible assignments to approximately 15 percent of the volunteer assignments for a given partner.

⁴See Pub. L. No. 110-246, §3024.

⁵See Pub. L. No. 113-79, §3014(a).

Figure 2: Volunteer Assignments by Country, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013



Source: U.S. Agency for International Development program indicator data; Map Resources (map). | GAO-15-478

USAID is implementing the fiscal years 2014 through 2018 F2F program through a total of nine cooperative agreements. In fiscal year 2014, the program had 296 volunteer assignments in 32 countries.

USAID Administers the F2F Program through Cooperative Agreements

USAID's Bureau for Food Security administers the F2F program using a funding mechanism known as a Leader with Associate Award Cooperative Agreement. These agreements are global in nature, with core countries identified within defined geographical regions. USAID awards these agreements to implementing partners, typically U.S. nongovernmental organizations, universities, private volunteer organizations, or contractors, for a 5-year funding cycle.⁶ USAID uses the agreements to establish objectives, tasks, and responsibilities for the implementing partners. In this way, USAID provides program-wide direction and administration for F2F while relying on implementing partners to manage on-the-ground operations and execution of program activities. In the current program cycle, USAID awarded nine cooperative agreements to seven implementing partners. USAID awarded one of these cooperative agreements to a nongovernmental organization for a F2F Special Program Support project. That partner provides program-wide technical support services for the volunteer programs and finances specialized F2F volunteer projects to bring in smaller implementing organizations, test new approaches, and identify new sources of volunteers. Implementing partners are expected to collaborate with the Special Program Support project when appropriate. F2F has two USAID headquarters staff to handle the daily operations and oversight of the program and the implementing partners.

At the beginning of each 5-year cycle, USAID uses a solicitation process and corresponding request for assistance (RFA) to provide a description of the program's needs and how USAID will evaluate the applicants. In response, implementing partners describe the key components of their proposals, such as the intended country and regional focus, recruitment strategy, and agricultural sector focus. USAID specifies in the RFAs the

⁶There have been 14 implementing partners since the program began. Current implementing partners are ACDI/VOCA, CNFA, Land O'Lakes, Partners of the Americas, Winrock International, Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance, and Catholic Relief Services. Previous implementing partners include Weidemann Associates, Inc.; Florida A&M University; National Cooperative Business Association; the National Farmers Union; Opportunities Industrialization Centers International; the Peace Corps; Tri-Valley Growers; and Virginia State University.

areas in which USAID will have “substantial involvement” in implementation decisions, such as approval of implementing partners’ annual work plans, key personnel, and the monitoring and evaluation plan. In the most recent RFA, USAID determined the countries that were eligible within prescribed geographic regions. USAID also used the RFA to build in a minimum level of geographical overlap and coordination with U.S. foreign assistance programs. This was accomplished most notably with the U.S. global hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future, by directing partners to include at least two Feed the Future focus countries within each region. After the competitive award process is completed, USAID continues to inform and approve partners’ annual work plans, which detail specific activities and objectives for each country in which the partner operates.

USAID provides further guidance to its implementing partners through a manual, *Managing International Volunteer Programs: A Farmer-to-Farmer Program Manual*. USAID led the development of this manual in conjunction with implementing partners to collect lessons learned and best practices based on 20 years of F2F program experience and published the manual in 2005. According to the manual, its purpose is to serve as a reference for partners managing international volunteer programs, specifically F2F. It describes best practices on program management, volunteer assignment development and implementation, and public outreach. According to USAID, the F2F program provides this manual to all of its implementing partners. According to USAID officials, the Special Program Support project will assist USAID and the current implementing partners to update the manual later in this program cycle.

Implementing partners identify agriculture sectors to focus on, such as horticulture, staple foods, and aquaculture, for individual countries with USAID input. According to USAID, partners consult with the F2F program office and the relevant missions to get their input, review, and approval on F2F activities before the partners begin activities in that country. USAID also said that partners consult with local stakeholders, F2F guidance, and other USAID program documents, such as Feed the Future’s sector analyses to develop these program activities and subsequent volunteer assignments. As the partners implement the program, they continue to work with the missions. However, each mission’s level of involvement can vary, depending on its portfolio of activities and interest.

Partners Are Generally Consistent in Implementing F2F, but Most Do Not Screen Volunteers against Terrorist Watch Lists and Some Inconsistencies and Information Gaps Exist

Implementing partners in the current F2F program cycle generally follow consistent practices for designing volunteer assignments, recruiting volunteers, and managing volunteer assignments. All partners work with hosts to develop a scope of work for each assignment, interview candidates, and assess the volunteers' performance. However, they have inconsistent practices for screening volunteer candidates against terrorist watch lists and do not have a means to systematically report negative assessments of volunteers to USAID or each other.

Partners Generally Follow Consistent Practices to Design Volunteer Assignments, Recruit Volunteers, and Manage Volunteer Assignments

We found that the implementing partners that send volunteers follow consistent practices to design volunteer assignments, recruit volunteers, and manage volunteer assignments, which are outlined in USAID's F2F program manual.

- **Designing volunteer assignments:** Implementing partners' field staff identify host organizations (hosts) to potentially receive technical assistance through a variety of means, including networking with local government officials, consulting with the USAID mission, and visiting agricultural cooperatives and farming groups. To select hosts, field staff conduct in-depth interviews with potential hosts and assess them against predetermined criteria, such as the potential host's ability to contribute resources to a volunteer assignment. Afterwards, field staff work with each selected host to assess its needs and identify how a volunteer might be able to provide assistance. They then work with the host to develop a scope of work for a single assignment that identifies the issue to be addressed, the assignment's objectives, the host's contributions, and the conditions under which the volunteer will be living and working. If a host would benefit from more than one assignment, field staff work with the host to develop a strategic plan for the multiple assignments.
- **Recruiting for volunteer assignments:** To solicit volunteers for assignments, each implementing partner conducts networking activities and posts information about its volunteer assignments on its respective website. Each of the partners employs web-based application forms to collect information about volunteer candidates

and manage the information in its database. Field staff send scopes of work to the implementing partner recruiters in the United States as early as 3 months before the start of a volunteer assignment. Recruiters search their databases for candidates based on skills and narrow down candidates based on their dates of availability. They then interview candidates to assess whether their technical expertise matches the assignment's needs and whether the candidates can adapt to the environment and culture. As part of the interview process, partners contact professional references for all candidates who are new to their program. Recruiters present finalist information to field staff who discuss the candidates with the hosts, and the host then select the volunteer.

- **Managing volunteer assignments:** Before the volunteer's arrival, the field staff, the host, and the volunteer make any adjustments needed to the scope of work and establish an assignment schedule. Field staff provide the volunteer with an in-country orientation, introduce the volunteer to the host, and monitor the volunteer through regular communication during the 2- to 4-week assignment. Upon completion of the assignment, the partners require the volunteer to provide recommendations to the host organization, debrief field staff, and complete a summary trip report. In addition, each implementing partner requires its field staff and hosts to assess the volunteer's performance and indicate whether they would recommend the volunteer for another assignment.

Most Partners Do Not Screen against Terrorist Watch Lists and Follow Inconsistent Practices for Conducting Other Background Checks on Volunteer Candidates

We found that only two of the six partners screen volunteers against terrorist watch lists specified in a standard provision of their cooperative agreements and that the partners follow inconsistent practices for conducting other background checks on F2F volunteer candidates. This standard provision of the cooperative agreements prohibits implementing partners from engaging in transactions with, or providing resources or support to, individuals associated with terrorism, including those individuals or entities that appear on the Department of the Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List⁷ and the United

⁷The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control publishes a list of individuals and companies owned or controlled by, or acting for or on behalf of, targeted countries. It also lists individuals, groups, and entities, such as terrorists and narcotics traffickers designated under programs that are not country-specific. Such individuals and companies are called Specially Designated Nationals; their assets are blocked and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from dealing with them.

Nations Security designation list.⁸ USAID officials stated that this provision applies to volunteers and they expect implementing partners to screen volunteers against these lists.⁹ However, USAID's F2F program manual states only that implementing partners generally check "several references."

We found that two of the six partners screen volunteers against the two watch lists noted in the standard provision, in addition to screening against several other lists and checking professional references. We also found that a third partner conducts another form of background check on all volunteer candidates, in addition to contacting professional references. Specifically, that partner checks to see if candidates' names are in the U.S. government's System for Award Management, a free consolidated database of firms and individuals that are ineligible to receive contracts (or similar types of mechanisms) from the U.S. government. If the volunteer candidate has worked with the partner before, two of these three partners said they do not always screen the candidate again; the third partner said it rescreens the candidate if over a year has passed since his or her last assignment. All three of these implementing partners use software or web-based programs to screen candidates against the various watch lists, a process they stated takes a minute or less to complete.

According to these three partners, they screen candidates against watch lists because they believe they are required to do by U.S. government regulations and that doing so is critical to their reputations as organizations. The three partners also said that this type of background check is important to reduce the risk of a volunteer engaging in criminal or any other activities that would cause the program to be seen negatively. Specifically, these partners said the volunteer's character and conduct could affect the volunteer's ability to achieve the objectives of his or her assignment, an outcome that could undermine the program's goals, hurt

⁸Pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolutions 1267 and 1989, the Security Council maintains a list of individuals and entities associated with al Qaeda.

⁹USAID's Automated Directive System Chapter 303.3.8 and related guidance requires recipients to certify that it "will take all reasonable steps to ensure that it does not and will not knowingly provide material support or resources to any individual or entity" associated with terrorism. In March 2015, USAID informed us that it expects implementing partners to screen volunteers against the Treasury Department and United Nations terrorist watch lists.

relationships with host organizations, and undermine the program's reputation.

The remaining three implementing partners do not screen candidates against watch lists. They said they believed that USAID does not require them to do so. They also noted that they believed that professional reference checks and Internet research provide them with enough insight into a candidate's character and conduct.

Various forms of background checks are important because they provide recruiters with additional information that the candidate may not have reported, or is not publicly available, and because these checks are a means to verify information that the candidate provided. As a result, partners that do not run the background checks may risk fielding volunteers who could harm the program's reputation and goals.

Implementing Partners Lack Systematic Information about Repeat Volunteer Candidates

We found that implementing partners do not have a systematic means of reporting or obtaining information from assessments of repeat volunteer candidates. As a result, partners can be unaware of assessments indicating that another partner would not recommend the volunteer for another assignment. For the fiscal years 2009 through 2013 program cycle, USAID reported that 41 percent of the volunteers were repeat volunteers. According to GAO's *Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*, internal and external information should be obtained and provided to management as a part of reporting on operational performance relative to established objectives.¹⁰ Specifically, information critical to achieving the agency's objectives, including information relative to critical success factors, should be identified and regularly reported to management and be used to inform future decisions such as selecting volunteers.

While USAID's F2F program manual encourages implementing partners to share information and contacts for volunteer recruitment, the manual could discourage implementing partners from reporting negative volunteer performance assessments to each other or to USAID. Specifically, with regards to volunteer program evaluation, the manual states:

¹⁰GAO, *Internal Control Standards: Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*, [GAO-01-1008G](#) (Washington, D.C.: August 2001).

“Due to the fact that volunteers by nature offer their specialized services free of charge, a publicized negative performance evaluation has the potential to be a public relations disaster, damaging future recruitment efforts and perhaps work with hosts. Thus, evaluations of individual volunteers are not performed or reported systematically. Problems are generally identified in regular performance monitoring and management processes, and kept internal to the implementing organization.”¹¹

As mentioned earlier in this report, all six partners assess the volunteer’s performance upon completion of the assignment and consult with host organizations as part of the assessment. Four of the six use a rating scale to assess a volunteer’s performance, including rating factors such as technical ability, quality of deliverables, and cultural sensitivity. All of the partners indicated that they kept information internally in their electronic databases on whether they would field the volunteer on another assignment. The partners also said that they contact other implementing partners for references on candidates who were previous volunteers. However, the partners said they do not systematically report this information to USAID or each other, and only share the results of assessments only when specifically requested.

Without systematic collection and sharing of information, USAID cannot know whether the volunteers received negative assessments on their performance. Given that the volunteers provide the program’s primary input—technical assistance—ensuring the quality of the volunteer’s performance is critical to the success of the program’s goals and reputation. In addition, partners risk fielding volunteers who received negative assessments on assignments with other implementers, which could undermine the program’s goals and reputation. For example, in one instance, a partner told us that it removed a volunteer because of conduct issues and determined not to field that volunteer on another assignment. However, another partner selected that volunteer for an assignment that started shortly after the first assignment. During the second assignment, that partner also had to recall the volunteer because of similar conduct issues.

¹¹USAID, *Managing International Volunteer Programs: A Farmer-to-Farmer Program Manual*, Mar. 9, 2005).

USAID Used a Program-wide Evaluation to Adjust F2F, but Does Not Obtain Information on a Key Aspect of Program Implementation

USAID used a program-wide evaluation to adjust the program and conducts ongoing monitoring and evaluation, but USAID does not obtain information on a key aspect of the program's implementation. After a 2012 program-wide evaluation, USAID revised program indicators, established a committee to discuss best practices, and increased training for implementing partner staff. USAID uses semiannual and annual formal reports and other means to conduct ongoing monitoring and evaluation activities. However, USAID is not collecting information on the extent to which volunteers are successfully completing the specific tasks and objectives that are assigned to them in scopes of work.

USAID Used a Program-wide Evaluation to Adjust F2F

Since 2003, USAID has conducted three program-wide evaluations of F2F. USAID's most recent evaluation, in May 2012, found inefficiencies in the program's data collection and reporting processes. Among other things, the evaluation recommended that USAID revise the list of required program indicators and reduce those less relevant for program management. In response, USAID revised the F2F standard program indicators and their definitions with extensive input from implementing partners and other stakeholders. USAID uses these indicators to track progress and report on changes along the cause-and-effect theory of the program's development plan—leading from inputs and activities to outputs, outcomes, and impacts. According to USAID, another important use of the indicators and reporting is to maintain the implementing partners' focus on achieving results. The revised indicators are intended to standardize F2F program reporting. Nevertheless, a challenge for USAID in developing effective F2F monitoring and evaluation indicators is the variety of volunteer assignments. While the F2F program's primary input for all volunteer assignments is always short-term technical assistance, the type of the technical assistance and the outputs expected can vary significantly among assignments. For example, volunteer assignments range from developing a business plan for an agriculture cooperative to training farmers on practices for soybean cultivation.

The 2012 evaluation also recommended that USAID increase support to train implementing partner staff on the appropriate use of the indicators so they can better track indicator data and impacts across the program. In response, USAID formed a working committee, led by F2F's two program staff and made up of implementing partners, to (1) discuss issues with data collection and data quality and (2) develop and disseminate best monitoring and evaluation practices. Additionally, USAID held a workshop in early 2014 for all F2F implementing partners (including headquarters

and field staff) and provided opportunities for training and discussion sessions on all aspects of F2F implementation. Monitoring and evaluation procedures, indicators, issues, and best practices were a particular focus. In addition, F2F Implementing Partners' Meetings are held each year and, according to USAID, include additional opportunities to cover program topics, including monitoring and evaluation issues. According to implementing partners, the training and workshops helped field staff better understand how to use the indicators consistently. USAID officials told us that the training and workshops also stressed the importance of thoroughly and accurately collecting initial, or baseline, data on host organizations.

USAID Conducts Ongoing Performance Monitoring and Evaluation but Does Not Obtain Information on a Key Aspect of Program Implementation

The F2F office conducts ongoing performance monitoring and evaluation formally through semiannual and annual reports and informally, through ongoing communication with implementing partners. USAID tracks implementation pace, progress, and performance through the following indicators that implementing partners report on in semiannual and annual reports:

- inputs, such as the number of volunteer assignments, number of volunteer scopes of work, and number of days of volunteer service;
- outputs, such as the number of persons trained, number of host organizations assisted, and number of volunteer recommendations;
- outcomes, such as the number of volunteer recommendations adopted and value of resources leveraged by volunteers in the United States; and
- impacts, such as the value of annual gross sales and value of rural and agricultural lending and the area under improved environmental and natural resource management.

USAID aggregates this information for its program-wide analyses. The goal of these monitoring and evaluation processes is to provide F2F management information it can use to guide program design and better target agricultural sectors, thereby increasing the program's effectiveness.

We found that USAID does not systematically obtain information on a key aspect of the program's implementation. Specifically, USAID does not review information on the extent to which volunteers meet the objectives

identified in the scopes of work. According to GAO's *Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*, information should be obtained and provided to management as a part of reporting on operational performance relative to established objectives.

Key to achieving F2F's goals is the program's primary input—the technical assistance a volunteer provides while on assignment. F2F guidance states that the scopes of work should translate program plans into specific tasks for volunteers. The guidance also states clearly that written scopes of work make it easier for the partner to recruit and guide volunteers and assess the success of the volunteer assignment. According to USAID officials and implementing partner staff, detailed and focused scopes of work are part of the essential foundation for successful volunteer assignments, and implementing partners give much time and consideration to their development. These scopes of work include the set of objectives and activities that the volunteer is to accomplish while on assignment. According to the six implementing partners, achievement of an assignment's objectives, as described under the scope of work, contributes to the program's desired outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

All implementing partners require their volunteers to prepare trip reports that summarize the extent to which they achieved the specified objectives and completed activities listed in the scope of work. According to implementing partners, the reasons for not achieving an objective or completing an activity may vary and can be attributed to circumstances outside of the implementing partner staff or volunteer's control. While conducting our fieldwork, we found an instance in which a volunteer's objectives were not achieved. Specifically, in that case, the volunteer was unable to oversee the installation of a machine—an objective listed in the scope of work—because required parts needed for its assembly were not delivered by a third-party contractor to the host organization. However, the volunteer productively used his time to improve the output of a grain-processing machine. According to the implementing partners, volunteer trip reports and debriefings are to include information on the extent to which activities and objectives were accomplished. However, we found that none of the partners track the frequency of assignments when the activities in scopes of work are changed or whether the volunteers were unable to accomplish them during an assignment. While USAID obtains some statements of work and volunteer trip reports, it does not review the extent to which volunteers are able to accomplish the objectives specified in their assignments. Reviewing selected trip reports against scopes of work for this information throughout the program cycle could improve USAID's understanding of the performance of its primary input—the

volunteer technical assistance. This information could provide additional insight on the extent to which volunteers achieve established objectives and therefore whether volunteers are being effectively used.

Conclusions

The success of the F2F program largely depends on implementing partners that work with hosts to develop appropriate scopes of work and then find volunteers with the technical expertise and skill sets to complete them. Although recruitment efforts focus largely on the volunteer's skill set and experience, partners are inconsistently screening volunteer candidates to verify information about them. Specifically, four partners do not conduct any screening against terrorist watch lists as expected by USAID. Assessment information on repeat volunteers—especially information on negative assessments—could provide important insights into the volunteer's ability to execute another F2F assignment. By implementing a consistent process to screen volunteers and by systematically sharing negative volunteer assessments, USAID and its partners could enhance their ability to ensure that volunteers execute their scopes of work without undermining the program's goals and reputation.

USAID took important steps to improve its ability to monitor program performance and evaluate program impact after the most recent evaluation, in 2012. However, USAID is not reviewing information on a key aspect of the program's performance—the extent to which the specified objectives and activities in scopes of work are accomplished. Achievement of an assignment's objectives, as described under the scope of work, contributes to the program's desired outputs, outcomes, and impacts. With this information, USAID could enhance its ability to make better, evidenced-based management decisions.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To enhance USAID's oversight of the program, we recommend that the Administrator of USAID take the following four actions:

- ensure F2F implementing partners screen volunteer candidates against terrorist watch lists, as described in their cooperative agreements and USAID guidance;
- develop guidance for the implementing partners on the types of background checks they should perform as they screen volunteer candidates;

-
- update the F2F program manual to ensure that implementing partners systematically share negative volunteer assessment information with USAID and each other; and
 - further develop its monitoring process to review the extent to which volunteers accomplish objectives and activities specified in the scopes of work.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report for comment to USAID.

In its written comments, reproduced in appendix III, USAID concurred with our recommendations. USAID expressed appreciation for F2F volunteers, noting that they give generously of their time and expertise. USAID also outlined the steps it plans to take in response to each recommendation, noting that the changes should strengthen the management of F2F.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Administrator of USAID, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions regarding this report, please contact me at (202) 512-9601 or MelitoT@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Thomas Melito, Director
International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

For this report, we examined (1) how the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) administers the John Ogonowski and Doug Bereuter Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program, (2) how partners implement volunteer assignments and screen volunteers for the F2F program, and (3) the extent to which USAID uses monitoring and evaluation to manage the F2F program. To address our objectives, we reviewed program documents and information from the previous and current program cycles covering fiscal years 2009 through 2013 and 2014 through 2018, respectively.

To determine how USAID administers the F2F program, we analyzed USAID and implementing partner documents such as requests for applications, cooperative agreements, and country program descriptions. We also reviewed USAID's F2F program manual.¹ In addition, we reviewed USAID data on the number of volunteer assignments. Our analysis of these data found some inconsistencies, but we found the data sufficiently reliable to generally enumerate the number of volunteer assignments by country. We divided those countries into four roughly even groups. We met with officials from USAID's Bureau of Food Security F2F program in Washington, D.C., to understand their role in administering the program. We also met with the headquarters officials for implementing partners of the current program cycle, either in Washington, D.C., or via teleconference.

To determine how partners implement volunteer assignments and screen volunteers, we reviewed USAID guidance on managing international volunteer programs, host organization selection criteria, volunteer assignment scopes of work, volunteer trip reports, and volunteer assessments. We also reviewed GAO's *Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*,² the standards provisions of the cooperative agreements between USAID and its implementing partners, and USAID's Automated Directive System. We also met with the headquarters officials for the current implementing partners that send volunteers on assignment, either in Washington, D.C., or via teleconference and compared their practices for implementing volunteer assignments and for screening volunteers. In

¹USAID, *Managing International Volunteer Programs: A Farmer-to-Farmer Program Manual*, (Mar. 9, 2005).

²GAO, *Internal Control Standards: Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*, [GAO-01-1008G](#) (Washington, D.C.: August 2001).

addition, we conducted fieldwork in Ghana and Uganda, meeting with USAID mission officials, implementing partner field staff, F2F volunteers, and beneficiary host organizations. In selecting countries for fieldwork, we considered various factors, including the number of volunteers assigned, the implementing partner's experience with the program and whether Associate Award activities occurred in either the previous or current cycle.

To determine the extent to which USAID uses monitoring and evaluation to manage the program, we reviewed documents such as the implementing partner's semiannual and annual reports, USAID's 2012 midterm evaluation of the program, and USAID's list of performance indicators and their definitions. We also reviewed GAO's *Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*. In addition, we met with officials from USAID's Bureau of Food Security F2F program in Washington, D.C., and with an implementing partner while conducting fieldwork to understand how the program's monitoring and evaluation process has changed and the indicators on which the implementing partners currently report.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2014 to April 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: USAID Missions Independently Administer Related Programs through Farmer-to-Farmer Partners

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) missions can leverage the Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program by making separate awards to F2F partners to implement agricultural programs. According to USAID guidance, a mission can make one or more of these awards, known as Associate Awards, to the recipient of an already existing Leader with Associate Award Cooperative Agreement (LWA) without going through an additional competitive proposal process.¹ Therefore, missions, in consultation with implementing partners and the F2F office, can design and propose programs to implement under the Associate Award mechanism. Mission staff independently administer the Associate Award program and are responsible for financial oversight, monitoring and evaluation, and all other reporting requirements. Nevertheless, according to USAID officials, Associate Award programs are required to report the number of volunteers used in their programs to the F2F office to ensure that volunteers are incorporated into Associate Award programming.

According to USAID guidance, F2F Associate Awards must be in alignment with the original program's purpose and goals. Associate Awards may provide for (1) additional volunteer services in a F2F country or another country, (2) complementary support for F2F projects (i.e., grants, training, equipment and facilities, or other inputs) that can improve F2F program outreach and impact, or (3) volunteer services and complementary support for agricultural projects addressing a specific F2F development objective. Although F2F limits its activities to the provision of volunteer technical assistance, Associate Award programs use other funding sources and may implement other types of development activities in addition to volunteer assistance. LWAs and Associate Awards are considered separate obligating mechanisms; thus, funds from one award cannot be transferred to another.

According to USAID officials, the Associate Award process is relatively fast and streamlined because it does not require any further competition. Mission officials noted that Associate Awards are an attractive option when considering funding mechanisms available for agriculture-related programs. During the fiscal years 2009 through 2013 cycle, USAID awarded 15 Associate Awards to three implementing partners, totaling

¹Other USAID offices can fund Associate Awards; however, the missions have funded all but one of the Associate Awards to date. In 2010, USAID's former Bureau of Economic Growth, Agriculture, and Trade funded an Associate Award to expand F2F volunteer activities.

**Appendix II: USAID Missions Independently
Administer Related Programs through Farmer-
to-Farmer Partners**

\$125 million. For example, a \$32 million Associate Award was granted to an agriculture-related program in Ghana. In the current cycle, USAID has awarded 2 Associate Awards, 1 in Burma for \$27 million and another in Ethiopia for approximately \$3 million.

Appendix III: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development



APR 20 2015

Thomas Melito
Director
International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Melito:

I am pleased to provide USAID's formal response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report entitled, *"USAID FARMER – TO – FARMER PROGRAM Volunteers Provide Technical Assistance, but Actions Needed to Improve Screening and Monitoring"* (GAO-15-478).

This letter, together with the enclosed USAID comments, is provided for incorporation as an appendix to the final report.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report and for the courtesies extended by your staff in the conduct of this audit review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Angelique M. Crumbly".

Angelique M. Crumbly
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management
U.S. Agency for International Development

Enclosure: a/s

- 2 -

USAID COMMENTS ON GAO DRAFT REPORT

No. GAO-15-478

USAID greatly appreciates and is proud of the committed and well-qualified Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) volunteers, who contribute their time and resources to providing quality technical assistance services to smallholders, farmers, farmer organizations, agribusinesses, and other agricultural sector hosts in developing and transitional countries. The services provided by volunteers are based in practical experience, dedication, and a view to meeting needs of the host organization and are of a quality that would be difficult to access through any other means. As the GAO report correctly notes, monitoring the volunteer program activities across multiple countries, types of host organizations, agricultural sectors, and country policy objectives is difficult, but systems developed over the years provide a sound base for doing so.

While the majority of the GAO comments relate to selection of volunteers and oversight of their work, we believe it important to note that the quality of volunteers and their work is exceptionally high, as reflected by implementing partner reporting systems, interactions and anecdotal reporting on host, volunteer, and partner success stories, interactions with volunteers and hosts by USAID Mission and Washington-based staff, regular external evaluations and internal reviews, and continuing strong demand for volunteer services. Volunteers are consistently flexible and generous with their time, go out of their way to secure significant resources for their hosts, and make their depth of expertise and technical assistance available both during and long after their assignments. This is especially noteworthy, as volunteers make their resources available completely free of charge. The generosity of the American people through F2F is truly exceptional.

F2F volunteers have truly taken the program's secondary goal to heart, acting as ambassadors of American culture and generosity overseas, and representing U.S. international development work at home to their friends, neighbors and colleagues. Over thousands of F2F volunteer assignments, there have been very few instances of negative volunteer performance, despite the fact that volunteers often serve in very challenging environments. We know of only three assignments that were terminated early for performance issues over the past 10 years.

To consistently identify and recruit such high quality volunteers, F2F implementers go through a rigorous selection and screening process, relying on referrals from former volunteers, university contacts, and industry professionals to identify individuals with the right skills, experience, disposition, and flexibility for volunteer work in what are often remote and challenging environments. Volunteers are screened before selection by experienced U.S.-based recruiters, field staff with technical and local expertise, and by the hosts who will receive their services. This process ensures that the right volunteer is matched with the right assignment, consistently.

Uncertainty is a given in most developing country contexts, and by emphasizing flexibility in the selection of individual volunteers and in formation of scopes of work and planned activities, F2F implementers are able to manage for results in a variety of circumstances. Implementers, hosts, and volunteers understand that scopes of work are subject to change given circumstances on the ground when the volunteer arrives, and given the volunteer's acknowledged greater depth of expertise in assessing the technical problem at hand and designing a solution. This commitment

- 3 -

to flexibility among all stakeholders in the program, the ability to focus on doing what is needed rather than rigidly adhering to a draft plan, is one of F2F's key components of success.

USAID concurs with the GAO recommendations for strengthening management of the F2F Program. As noted above, we do not believe that the issues identified have materially affected the implementation and positive developmental impacts of the program, but the following proposed changes should serve to strengthen the program overall.

Recommendation 1: Regarding Screening of Volunteers for Ties to Terrorism

USAID Response: USAID will issue a memorandum to all implementing partners reiterating expectations of adherence to Cooperative Agreement provisions for screening potential volunteers for ties to terrorism, incorporating the contents of such provision into an update of the F2F volunteer manual, and requesting written certification in all annual reports that such volunteer screening is being implemented by F2F Program implementers.

Recommendation 2: Regarding Background Checks for Volunteers

USAID Response: USAID will develop a standard of good practice for systematic volunteer background checks, issue a memo to all implementing partners recommending adoption of such best practices, and incorporate description of such practices into an update to the F2F volunteer manual.

Recommendation 3: Regarding Sharing Volunteer Assessment Information

USAID Response: USAID will strengthen the existing systems for sharing of information on poor volunteer performance by: requesting implementing partners to immediately share any very negative volunteer experiences with USAID, issuing a memo to all implementing partners on information sharing relating to volunteer performance, updating the F2F volunteer manual on this matter, and retaining this topic for discussion in annual implementing partner meetings.

Recommendation 4: Regarding Volunteer Scopes of Work

USAID Response: USAID will strengthen the existing system for monitoring the extent to which volunteers accomplish objectives and activities in their scopes of work (SOW) by expanding spot check reviews of SOWs and volunteer trip reports.

USAID appreciates the GAO Team's efforts to fully understand the complexities and implementation systems for the F2F Program and to provide recommendations for strengthening the program.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Thomas Melito, (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Valérie L. Nowak (Assistant Director), Brian Tremblay (Analyst-in-Charge), Tina Cheng, Lynn Cothorn, Martin De Alteriis, Mark Dowling, and Sushmita Srikanth made key contributions to this report.

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