April 2015

USAID FARMER-TO-FARMER PROGRAM

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

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.

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.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**