

FARMER-TO-FARMER VOLUNTEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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Introduction

The volunteer technical assistance program called **Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F)** is the realization of American President Barack Obama's **Feed the Future (FTF)** initiative, which stems from the 2009 G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, where global leaders committed to "act with the scale and urgency needed to achieve sustainable global food security¹." The initiative is a whole-of-government effort that joins resources and expertise from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. departments of Agriculture, Commerce, State and Treasury, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the U.S. African Development Foundation, the Peace Corps, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. This is the first time that the U.S. government has effectively connected all U.S. government efforts targeted at global hunger and food security and underpinned resources with rigorous systems to track performance.

The FTF initiative worked with partner countries, development partners, and other stakeholders to sustainably tackle the root causes of global poverty and hunger. Through sustainable and strategic investments in agriculture and nutrition, FTF will support enabling countries to improve the availability, access, and utilization of food for their citizens; and *change the future* by increasing incomes for millions of the developing world's most vulnerable people and reducing the number of stunted and underweight children by millions.

The F2F volunteer technical assistance program is an agricultural extension and technology transfer program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to facilitate the exchange of experiences of U.S. experts (producers, agribusiness entrepreneurs, academics, university professors, etc.) and producers and entrepreneurs in developing countries. The ultimate objective of the program is to boost economic growth.

The program is dedicated to the memory of John Ogonowski, who died in one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack.

¹ <http://feedthefuture.gov/resource/laquila-joint-statement-global-food-security>

The Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program received its initial funding in 1985 in Mali and later renewed for a five-year period (2009-2013). It is currently being implemented in some 30 countries around the world. Development agencies such as ACIDI/VOCA, Winrock International, CNFA, Partners of America, Weidemann Associates, Florida A & M University, and FAVACA are spearheading the F2F program concept around the world.

Background and Context

The F2F provides opportunities for U.S. experts who are willing to volunteer time and energy to build the capacities of the beneficiaries through technical assistance in targeted areas in developing countries. The F2F volunteers are consultants or experts who work in targeted agricultural value chains. The volunteers include experienced producers (farmers), specialists in business and cooperative development, university professors and scholars.

The F2F volunteer technical assistance program was created in part to address the issue of massive infusions of financial and material resources in development with little achievement and the neglect of human resource development, which remains the foundation for any development purposes. The U.S. government, following its international development policy, therefore, invited U.S. citizens with proven skills to share experiences and build solid relationships with the beneficiaries in developing countries so as to boost economic growth in these countries through the FTF concept.

Implementation of the F2F Program in Mali

In Mali, the F2F program is managed by a consortium of four entities: Winrock International, ACIDI/VOCA, Land O'Lakes and Lincoln University. However, it is implemented by Winrock International, NGOs for smallholders, private enterprises, government agencies and civil society, and beneficiaries working in targeted agricultural subsectors in staple foods (millet, sorghum, rice, maize, and potato) production, horticulture (market gardening and arboriculture), livestock (cattle, sheep, and goats), poultry and aquaculture. A technical team of four people -- the

country director, livestock officer, horticulture officer, and training coordinator, assisted by an accountant, a secretary, and drivers – supports the F2F program. The programs do not have any staff members based in the field; hence, a close working relationship is built with partners and beneficiaries to ensure the sustainability of interventions.

Identification of Producers' Needs

Winrock field technical staff members apply the participatory diagnosis approach to identify the needs of the beneficiaries. In Mali F2F is active particularly in the regions of Sikasso, Mopti, Timbuktu, and Ségou and focuses on interventions in the agricultural sector in line with the strategic goal and objectives of the USAID Feed the Future program, such as accelerating economic growth.

The participatory diagnosis approach identifies the needs of the beneficiaries through the following steps:

- Mapping of partners, actors, potential host (government, agricultural research and extension services, NGOs, private entrepreneurs, farmer organizations) and identification of constraints to be addressed through technical assistance.
- Establishment of contact with host(s) and partner(s).
- Conduct of participative diagnosis using a task checklist.
- Analysis of the outcome of the diagnosis by a Winrock technical team to decide on relevance and/or adequacy of technical assistance to address the issues raised.
- Development of the scope of work (SOW) in collaboration with all the stakeholders.

Scope of Work and Selection of Volunteers

The scope of work identifies the training needs of producers and is prepared by the Winrock technical team together with partners and future beneficiaries. It is a document that gives detailed information to potential volunteers so they may understand the nature and extent of the problems and the skills required for resolution. Volunteers spend few weeks in host countries, so SOWs must be clear and focused.

The SOWs contain, among others, the following information:

- Identity of the host(s) (government structures, NGOs, private enterprises, producer organizations, projects, programs, etc.).
- Contact persons.
- Selected commodity chain and F2F project focus area.
- Assessment of current practices, production tools, degree of production and productivity, marketing system.
- Background information on beneficiaries.
- Identity of partner(s) working with the same beneficiaries before and during the provision of technical assistance in the selected value chain.
- Best possible time for the technical assistance.

- Number of potential participants (men and women).
- Type of skill and desired volunteer (men, women, language, experience in Africa, active producer, and other preferences).

The SOWs are sent to Winrock International Headquarters in the United States to activate the recruitment process for selection of the best candidates. When a SOW is posted on a public website, the application process begins and a Winrock technical team starts receiving CVs of potential volunteers for the assignment. The CVs are shared with the partner(s) and host(s) to ensure the full participation of all stakeholders in the volunteer selection process. When they have made their selection, a letter of approval is sent to the Winrock headquarters (HQ).

An acceptance letter is then sent to the consultant or volunteer selected. In this way, Winrock International facilitates the establishment of interpersonal contacts (phone and Internet communication) between Winrock field staff members, partner(s) and host(s). Winrock International HQ is responsible for the volunteer mobilization, and the Winrock technical team in Mali plays the role of facilitator, organizer, and moderator during the implementation of the assignment.

Training

The duration of a volunteer assignment is normally two to three weeks. An average of seven to 10 days of field work is dedicated to training (demonstration) host(s) and partner(s). Because of the relatively short period of an assignment, training starts immediately upon arrival of volunteers. Volunteers are often met at the airport and driven to the hotel by the field staff. The next morning, a briefing session is organized to introduce the volunteer to the accelerated economic growth (AEG) team at the USAID Mali mission.

The F2F training system follows these essential steps:

- **Day 1:** Introduction of the volunteer to partner(s) and host(s); overview on SOW to confirm the problems raised and organization of training sessions: location, days, hours, and participants; and field or case visits, if appropriate.
- **Following one to 12 days:** Practical training sessions carried out with facilitation from Winrock field staff members or delegated persons.
- **Last day of training:** Presentation and validation of recommendations made by the volunteer to solve the problem identified in the SOW.
- **Two following days:** End of assignment (EOA) report with relevant recommendations for the host, and departure to the United States.

At the end each training, an end-of-trip report that includes recommendations by the volunteer is prepared and translated into the local language (if needed) and sent to the host(s) and partner(s) in a special letter.

A participatory monitoring and evaluation is conducted six months to one year after the assignment to assess the degree of adoption of volunteer recommendations and the need for future technical support.

Some volunteers are able to do repeat visits. For example, from April 10 to May 2, 2011, volunteer Joe Sullivan trained a cooperative of fish farmers in Bougouni in the **construction of clay fish ponds**. From October 6 to 23, 2011, he was back to assist the same cooperative with training on **fish pond management**. The cooperative members are now more competent and are providing services in fish pond construction and management. The demands from other fish farmers for fish pond construction are growing as a result of the construction of clay fish ponds in Bougouni, Morila, and Samanko following the intervention.

Challenges and How They Are Addressed

Identifying the host, conducting a good diagnosis of the problem to be solved, and developing a good training system are crucial to the success of F2F technical assistance in the short term. By working closely with the host and other relevant actors positive impacts are achieved although the field technical team assisting in the program is small (program manager and three specialists in horticulture and staple foods, livestock, training and outreach)).

However, the F2F faces some challenges. A major one is lack of participation by farmers mostly in rural areas if they are not well organized and lack funding.

The F2F program values cost sharing among stakeholders during the implementation of the assignment. A common expectation among beneficiaries is that meals are provided and per diem is paid. The F2F program is moving away from that practice and instead expects beneficiaries to contribute a venue for training, cover participation-related fees, provide educational materials, inputs for demonstration, etc.). Efforts are being made to clarify the responsibilities of hosts and partners in the selection criteria and at the beginning of the process so as to avoid any misunderstanding during the implementation of the program. While it is not easy to change the expectations on receiving per diem, those who are now participating in the training do so because they are keen on learning on not because they are hoping for payment.

Achievements

The F2F volunteers have made meaningful impacts on the lives of beneficiaries. Many success stories have been achieved by the program in various areas: milk processing technologies in Ouelessebougou and Kassela, artificial insemination of goats with the Association of Authorized Veterinarians in Mali, improvement in the sale of animal feed

with by Grands Moulins du Mali, and poultry operation with the Société Doucouré et Frères.

The cost-sharing system of the F2F program, which became a bottleneck for implementation at the beginning of the program in 2009, is gradually becoming a thing of the past now, thanks to the impacts achieved in the field. The impacts have manifested in interest and willingness of the host(s) to take charge of their own economic progress.

Lessons Learned That Could Be Applied Elsewhere

The experiences gained by the field technical team, the achievements in the field, and important lessons learned in the implementation of the F2F program could be applied in other extension /training systems. These lessons include:

- Close collaboration among all stakeholders at various stages of the program can ensure effectiveness and sustainability.
- Careful execution of the basic diagnostics to identify the problem to be resolved is a prerequisite for selection of the right volunteer to correct problems and to offer long-lasting solutions
- The contribution of material and financial resources by beneficiaries is a manifestation of their real interest in the training.
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation allow better assessment of the contribution of the program on which the future interventions will be built.

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