



EVALUATION: SMALL GRANTS WITH A LONG REACH



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In October 2018, USAID and Peace Corps celebrated the 35th anniversary of their joint Small Project Assistance (SPA) Program. SPA grants are dedicated to fostering locally led development in communities worldwide. The two U.S. government agencies also celebrated important findings from the **2018 performance evaluation of SPA**, which highlight the sustainability of activities funded under the grants portion of the \$18 million SPA IV program (FY13-FY17; AID-PPL-T-12-00002).

THE EVALUATION

Through this evaluation, USAID and Peace Corps sought to understand what contribution SPA IV small grants make to fostering sustained community-led collective actions beyond the immediate scope of grant activities. The partners also wanted to identify common actions and approaches across all types of SPA grant activities that led to or did not lead to effective, ongoing, collective action towards development goals.

Fieldwork was conducted by General Dynamics Information Technology in five countries, covering 51 communities where SPA IV grants were implemented. The evaluation team held interviews and discussions with key stakeholders and analyzed global SPA IV data to answer six questions co-designed by USAID and Peace Corps.

The evaluation findings are being used to inform the Peace Corps Small Grants policy, procedures, training, and resources; the USAID Local Works and Cooperative Development Programs; and broader learning about locally led development.

WHAT SPA ACHIEVED

Observations from the fieldwork demonstrate that locally led activities tend to produce change that is sustained over time. The evaluation found that, regardless of varying levels of community contribution, leadership, and budget, SPA IV projects created significant and lasting change for the communities. One of the keys to creating sustained change was Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) working closely with community members in rural and urban areas to identify needs, mobilize community resources, and to co-design and co-implement activities.

FACTS AND FIGURES:

SPA impacts and accomplishments in its 35 years of working with communities include:

- 50+ countries
- Average grant size: \$2,000
- Global average community contribution: 38% of total costs
- 25,000+ grants for small-scale community-initiated development projects
- 930,000 people directly benefited from SPA IV projects and more than 380,000 have participated in project implementation
- Wide range of development sectors from health to education to agriculture and civic participation
- 1,000 training activities



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SPA projects were found to be “**remarkably successful**” in producing positive impacts on communities. The changes in communities ranged from improved 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. Respondents noted **changes in their communities and in themselves** as a result of the SPA projects. Women participants gained skills that enabled them to improve the well-being of their families and to take on more active roles in their communities. The evaluation report notes that projects not only remained important to the community years after the grant ended but also **led to new or expanded development activities** in communities in each country.

Sixty-seven percent of projects exhibited **sustainability** by continuing beyond the initial grant. Of these, 41 percent **expanded** to include new activities or initiatives; multiple projects resulted in further community-based development work. Globally, 45 percent of activities were specifically designed to **benefit women, youth, and children**.

These numbers illustrate that when community members and PCVs work together to identify and mobilize the community around its own needs, aspirations, desired outcomes, and local resources, **even a small USG investment can create lasting change**.

LESSONS FOR LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

The evaluation highlighted several key strategies of successful SPA grants that other development activities can use to advance locally led, sustainable community development:

- Engage early and invest in **cultivating strong relationships** among volunteers, grantees, local leaders, and the communities they serve;
- Leverage **existing networks and relationships** within and among communities;
- Create opportunities for communities to identify their **own needs**, articulate their own **desired outcomes**, and contribute their own **local resources**;
- Strengthen **ownership and buy-in** by supporting communities to exercise leadership and make key decisions about activity planning and implementation;
- Design community-led activities around **locally available resources** to maintain, sustain, and expand project objectives;
- Invite local grantees to attend project design and management **trainings** together with PCVs or, for USAID, with implementing partner staff;
- Jointly plan project scopes and timelines that are **realistic and feasible** for the community;

- Involve national and local **host-country government to harness their support** through funding, approvals, material and human resources, and other forms of assistance where feasible and appropriate to the context;
- Identify **measures of success** that look beyond outputs (i.e. number of people trained) to understand the activity’s effectiveness in context;
- Align grant requirements, project goals, community needs and priorities, volunteer or staff skills, and investment of time to build effective relationships with strong local partners to **catalyze community buy-in**.

GOING FORWARD: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the evaluation, Peace Corps and USAID collaborated with evaluators to develop four overarching recommendations. SPA grant activities and other programs can apply these recommendations to strengthen community-level, locally led development through community engagement, leadership, and a focus on project sustainability.

- 1. Application Documents and Review Process:** Refocus applications for SPA grant funding around community leadership and stakeholder engagement to promote project sustainability.
- 2. Project Design and Implementation:** Restructure the project design process to better incorporate community input, needs, and strengths.
- 3. Sustainability:** Provide communities with the tools to identify, create, and mobilize new resources and stakeholders to sustain and expand community-led development activities.
- 4. Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning:** Continue to invest in monitoring SPA projects during project implementation with a renewed focus on factors that promote sustainability — and use that learning to promote good practices.

LEARN MORE

Visit <https://www.usaid.gov/partnership-opportunities/ngo/small-project-assistance-program> and <https://www.peacecorps.gov/about/global-initiatives/small-project-assistance-program/>.

To view the full performance evaluation, visit https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TCW4.pdf.