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Case Study: The High Cost of Early Program Termination

LEARNING FROM THE CLOSURE OF CRS' FEED THE FUTURE PROJECT IN SIERRA LEONE

BACKGROUND

Sierra Leone ranked 184 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index in 2018. In 2015, half of Sierra Leonians were found to be food insecure, and nearly half of children under five experienced some form of malnutrition.[1]

In Tonkolili, one of the districts hardest hit by Ebola, malnutrition among children between the ages of 6 – 59 months was 41%, as compared to 31% nationally.[2] The Ebola outbreak exacerbated Sierra Leone's food insecurity, disrupting 47% of national agricultural activities and resulted in a 30% decline in production.[3] After Ebola was stamped out, the Government of Sierra Leone launched an ambitious recovery plan, with the US among the largest donors.[4]

FEED THE FUTURE EAIN

In October 2016, CRS was awarded the Feed the Future Sierra Leone Entrepreneurial Agriculture for Improved Nutrition activity (EAIN), funded by USAID for five years at $16.9 million. Through technical training to improve farming practices, increased access to quality inputs, strengthened market linkages and group organization, and raising awareness of dietary diversity, the activity aimed to increase crop production, to reduce poverty and malnutrition, and to improve food and nutrition security. These activities aligned well with the priorities of the country's Agenda for Change and the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy.

US GOVERNMENT BUDGET UNCERTAINTIES AND STRATEGY SHIFTS

In August 2017, after 10 months of implementation, CRS received a Termination of Award Notice. The reason cited was anticipated drastic budget reductions, not performance-related concerns. The Administration's request for Sierra Leone for FY18 was a mere $400,000, compared to the FY17 actual

[1] 2018 Global Nutrition Report, Sierra Leone Country Profile notes on page 1 that 51.3% of the under 5 population has no wasting, stunting, nor overweight challenges.
[2] SLNNS, p29.
[3] FAO and Government of Sierra Leone. This is in the CRS proposal – can we verify it/cite the original source?
[4] www.state.gov

funding of $18.9 million. FY18 appropriations were not finalized until nearly six months into the fiscal year and the Mission sought ways to operate within potentially significant budget constraints.

Congress rejected these cuts, authorizing more than $1 billion for activities related to the Global Food Security Act – the successor to Feed the Future - in FYs 17-19. Simultaneous to the budget process, the Administration began to revamp and refocus the Feed the Future strategy, eliminating countries from the focus and aligned countries, including Sierra Leone.

IMPACTS OF PROJECT CLOSURE

BROKEN VALUE CHAINS, BROKEN PROMISES

The project termination impacted community trust among each other and with community leaders, implementing partners and others.

- Broken Trust: Farmers had invested much of their time preparing land for cultivation, preparing inland swamps, participating in training, learning about new techniques, meeting with input dealers; and many felt duped when the project was suddenly closed.
- Lost faith: In addition to the financial stimulus intended by the program, the Development and Planning Officer of the Tonkolili District Council, Ibrahim Allen Sowa, emphasized that the activity brought people together: "The impact of Ebola was very, very great here. We have so many widows to Ebola. We have those who have recovered from Ebola. The only way you can help them is to engage them in community activities, so they feel that they belong."[5] In some ways, "[i]t was as if the communities were re-traumatized after Ebola,"[6] explains CRS' Acting Deputy Chief of Party Wellington Dzvene. *Village chiefs lost trust in the government, members lost faith in their community organizations, and women, who were meant to be empowered, lost face and standing.*

The project could not maintain newly established linkages between farmers to the market. The program stopped before beneficiaries could realize gains. Therefore, even for those farmers who could maintain their improved agricultural products, their access to markets and other supply chain actors were not fully developed so that they could not sell their products. Similarly, the project was meant to provide beneficiaries with access to capital to maintain the activities after the project had finished, which had not come to fruition. Some


Photo by Elle Gardner

of the initial activities such as raising chickens and more intensive agricultural activities could not be continued due to a lack of access to capital. A network of agro-dealers and other private sector actors was being expanded and connected to the farmers, which was cut short. While one of the main agro-dealers plans to continue this effort, a lack of capital and understanding of how to use the inputs continue to be major barriers to maintain the initial benefits of the project.

The project closure also cut short the links between large private sector buyers, Fresh Salone and WARC. Trust is an important and often elusive component of the relationship between private sector buyers and farmers, due to the high risk to the private sector to identify unknown suppliers.[7] NGOs such as CRS and ACDI/VOCA often help facilitate that trust. The project brought together farmers and the private sector, with the goal of attaining commercial viability. The project closure meant that Fresh Salone could not maintain the outreach to enough farmers to make it worthwhile to continue doing business in remote areas.[8] Similarly, West Africa Rice Company (WARC) could no longer justify investments in things like storage and processing facilities after the project closure, due to the lack of scale.[9] For the most part, the two private sector partners could not maintain their activities in Tonkolili without the project activities that were facilitated by CRS.

[5] Ibrahim Allen Sowa, Tonkolili District Council, interview, January 16, 2019.
[6] Wellington Dzvene, Catholic Relief Services, January 16, 2019.
[7] Yayah Mansaray, formerly with ACDI/VOCA, interview January 14, 2019.
[8] Jonathan Rosenfeld, MD, Fresh Salone, interview, January 14, 2019.
[9] Emiliano Mroue, West Africa Rice Company, interview, January 14, 2019.

A VACUUM IN MALNUTRITION PROGRAMMING

The existence of Feed the Future in Tonkolili precluded other activities to combat malnutrition from taking place in the district. For example, because of the size of the Feed the Future investment, UNICEF had diverted funds elsewhere. When the project closed, no major intervention had yet to fill the vacuum.[10] The closure also broke momentum and investments previously made in creating Mother Support Groups (MSG) through the District's Peripheral Health Units (PHUs).

The loss of non-profit partners and funding for nutrition also significantly reduced the activities of the Ministry of Health. Ideally, the Ministry nutritionists would visit each PHU twice a month to mentor and provide training.[11] But owing to the remoteness of many villages and lack of funding, they only visit the field when partners go.

In a district where 41% of children between 6-59 months are underweight and as many as 34.8% of children are stunted[12], such gaps can trigger severe consequences. Stunting leads to cognitive impairments such as delayed motor development, impaired brain function and poor school performance. At least two mother support group representatives assert that malnutrition is now rising in their communities[13] owing to the lack of the acute malnutrition food supplement Plumpy'nut, which previously had been provided by UNICEF.

SECOND-ORDER EFFECTS: DESTRUCTION OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE, LOSS OF CAPACITY, LOSS OF CREDIBILITY, AND WASTED TAXPAYER MONEY

Feed the Future, intended to be a $16.9 million stimulus to the district of Tonkolili over five years, left a gaping hole in the district's funding and strategy around agriculture and nutrition. The reality is that many countries depend on foreign assistance to fund their baseline essential activities and are not additive in nature. The loss of USG funding hollowed out the District's Agricultural strategy for half of its 3-year plan, and made it impossible for the district to meet its targets.[14]

The cancellation of the activity precipitated the departure of nearly all consortium partners, resulting in the loss of key partnerships and program infrastructure. Only 18 months after the project closure did Helen Keller International plan to scale up its own nutrition interventions in the district. However, and significantly, ACDI/VOCA closed shop in Sierra Leone, leaving behind 10 years of partnership at the ministry and district level governments across Sierra Leone. Through its USAID-funded SNAP program, ACDI/VOCA had worked with local community-based agricultural organizations such as the Menna Women's Group to reach more than 7,000 farmers throughout Tonkolili. These are the communities with which it would have linked to market and other actors in the supply chain. The severance of these long-standing partnerships sets development back years.

Implementing partners lost credibility and reputation sets back development efforts. CRS' Country Representative, Paul Emes, said that the termination, "affected our reputation and standing with the Government of Sierra Leone very significantly."[15] CRS did its utmost to mitigate the impacts of the cut, seeking additional funding from USAID, paying severance to employees, and securing more than $80,000 in private funds to ensure the sustainability of the demonstration farms. Yet broken trust between partners and other stakeholders will take time to rebuild.


Photo by Elie Gardner

[10] After a gap of more than 18 months, Helen Keller International has begun to scale up an Infant and Young Child Nutrition project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which will include Tonkolili.
[11] Fatima Koroma, Tonkolili Ministry of Health and Sanitation, interview, January 16, 2019.
[12] Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017: Survey Findings Report, Freetown, Sierra Leone: Statistics, Sierra Leone, p200-201.
[13] CRS cannot verify whether malnutrition has increased in Tonkolili since 2017.
[14] Paul Emes, CRS Country Representative, interview, November 13, 2018.
[15] Paul Emes, CRS Country Representative, interview, November 13, 2018.

Taxpayer dollars were ultimately wasted. CRS had invested more than $300,000 in equipment and materials, purchased up-front in bulk to realize cost-savings. Many of these were simply given to farmers at the end of the activity. While these assets will hopefully be well-utilized over time, other costs are completely lost, including severance payments, and foregone employment by local staff.

CONCLUSION

The early termination of a nearly $17 million, five-year integrated development program cost beneficiaries and all stakeholders significantly: gaping holes were left in programming; pledges to vulnerable women, children, and farmers were abandoned; relationships were damaged; and taxpayer dollars wasted. This decision, made in Washington under pressure for objectives unrelated to development, has long-term implications for the food security, economy, and nutrition of the 30,000 beneficiaries it intended to help. While many of nearly 3,000 beneficiaries that the activity did reach benefitted through trainings, increased knowledge, and economic gains; more was lost, particularly trust in local leaders and/or international NGOs. It is difficult to say how many children's lives have been made worse off by the gap in programming to combat malnutrition.

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For the affiliated paper "Roadblock on the Journey to Self-Reliance: Budget Cuts, Budget Uncertainty, and Bureaucratic Delays", see https://www.crs.org/get-involved/advocate/public-policy

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