



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



SITUATION IN NUMBERS

US\$2M

FUNDING RECEIVED



FUNDING SOURCE

5 YEARS

TIMEFRAME

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

3,818

FARMERS BENEFITED THROUGH SHORT TERM VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENTS WORKING WITH 11 HOST ORGANIZATIONS

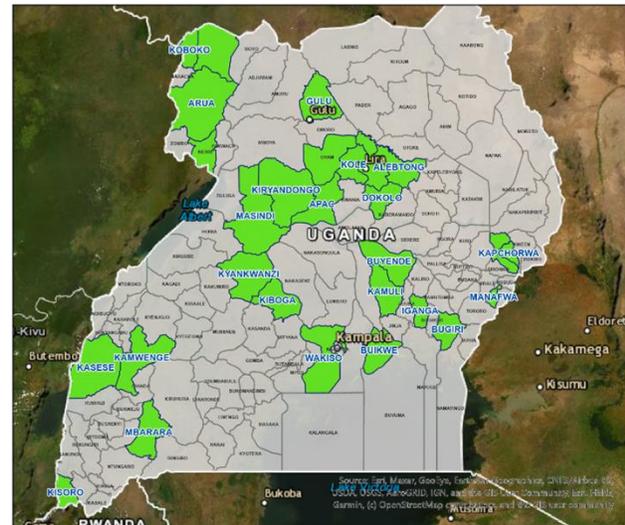
750

FARMERS IN THE AGRICULTURE SYSTEM APPLIED IMPROVED MANAGEMENT PRACTICES OR TECHNOLOGIES WITH F2F SUPPORT



F2F volunteer Joseph Sullivan (in CRS hat) working on an aquaculture project with staff of Kabeiura Farm in Bushenyi District. Photo by Maria Nakayiza/CRS.

Geographic Area of Implementation for the CRS Farmer to Farmer (F2F) Project In Uganda



Legend: ■ Current F2F Districts ■ Not targeted

Farmer to Farmer: COVID-19 Virtual Program Adaptation

LESSONS AND EXPERIENCES FROM UGANDA

BACKGROUND

Farmer to Farmer (F2F) is a five-year (2019-2023), flagship program of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that catalyzes agricultural sector development through volunteer technical assistance targeted at offering short-term agricultural and food sector related consulting opportunities by American volunteers. CRS is one of the implementing partners globally, facilitating volunteer technical assistance in Benin, East Timor, Ethiopia, Nepal, Rwanda, and Uganda. In Uganda, American volunteers offer technical training support to both crop and livestock farmers' cooperatives and associations, private agro-processing companies, savings and credit cooperatives, district local government extension staff, and agriculture education institutions in areas such as animal health management, business plans, strategic planning, farm management, leadership and management, agronomic practices, and food processing.

THE COVID-19 IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE

Early in 2020, Uganda was affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic, and like other countries across the globe the government took bold preventive measures including imposing a ban on international travel and a national lockdown. As a result, on March 16th, CRS and the F2F management team at USAID/Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (BRFS), announced a temporary volunteer travel ban and repatriated all volunteers who were already deployed, halting hands-on technical training assistance starting from March 2020. Mitigation measures such as social distancing further created barriers for in-person trainings and hands-on support. While the country-wide lockdown lifted gradually starting in June, international travel remained a challenge with airport closures and testing requirements restricting entry.

FARMER TO FARMER(F2F) PROGRAM ADAPTATION

In Uganda, while major sectors including education, businesses, and public services were shut down, the agriculture and food related sectors were regarded as essential and remained open. Furthermore, restricted movement kept people in their homes and on their farms, which provided an opportunity to learn and practice new skills. The CRS F2F team saw this as an opportunity for continued technical support to farmers but needed a program adaptation to address the continued travel restrictions. F2F implementers, in consultation with USAID, identified the use of local volunteers paired remotely with American volunteer experts via virtual platforms¹ as a feasible alternative. In August 2020, USAID approved placement of local Ugandan volunteers paired with American volunteers to provide technical support based on needs identified by host organizations. Given the travel restrictions, the local volunteer would now conduct the hands-on support and training for host organizations while the American volunteer supported remotely through virtual engagement. Adapting to a paired remote volunteer approach allowed the program to continue to work towards its goals of economic growth in the agricultural sector and the promotion of cultural exchange.

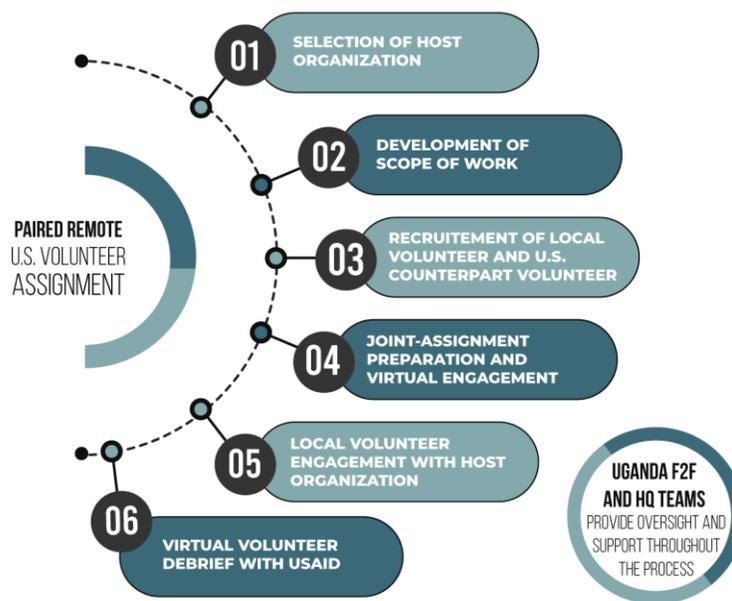


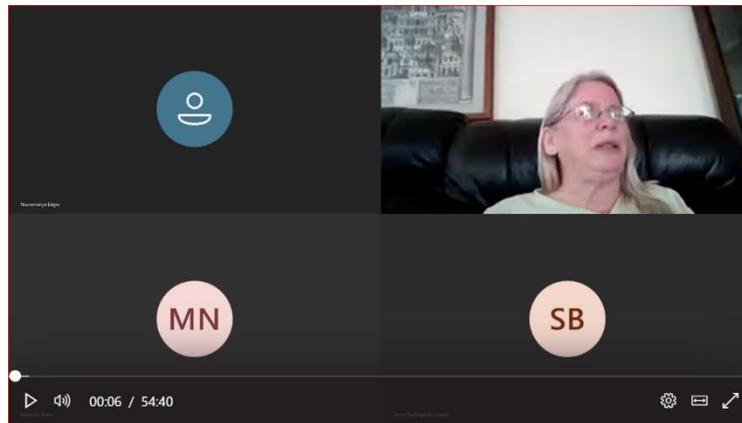
FIGURE 1: PAIRED REMOTE VOLUNTEER PROCESS

Similar to its normal procedures, the F2F team begins the paired remote volunteer process by selecting a host organization for the volunteer assignment through local networking and referrals. For the program adaptation, in addition to the normal criteria², ability and willingness to engage virtually was considered. Once the host organization is selected, the Uganda F2F team works closely with the organization to define the assignment and technical capacities of the volunteers, which is detailed in a Scope of Work (SOW). SOWs are then shared with local networks to recruit qualified Ugandan volunteers while simultaneously recruiting their American counterparts. Once the volunteers are selected and paired, the Uganda F2F team kicks off the assignment with a virtual introduction, including details on roles & responsibilities and support. From there, the volunteer pair works together virtually to develop the training content and approach, simultaneously allowing for contextualized learning and cross-cultural exchange. Local volunteers then travel to the host organization, strictly adhering to national COVID-19 mitigation measures, to carry out the assignment. Throughout the assignment, the volunteer pair engages virtually to debrief on progress, address challenges, and adapt trainings in real time. The Uganda F2F team monitors progress and provides support to the volunteer pair as needed.

¹ Skype, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc.

² Alignment with F2F Country Strategy, ability to cascade learning, gender sensitivity, local registration, etc.

Upon completion of the assignment, the volunteer pair has a virtual debrief with the F2F and USAID team. While before, this engagement happened in person, limiting participants to those present in Kampala, the virtual adaptation has allowed the inclusion of global F2F HQ team members, and representatives from the host organization further enhancing learning and reflection to inform the next assignment.



American volunteer Katherine Cassidy on a MS Teams assignment debrief meeting with USAID (Photo extracted from meeting recording)

CHALLENGES

As with any new approach, the team experienced some challenges while implementing the paired remote volunteer approach including:

- **IT issues:** Poor internet connectivity and low IT skills sometimes disrupted the process for the volunteer pair, delaying timely information sharing and problem solving. To address this issue, the F2F team worked with different internet providers to adjust the network used by the local volunteer, increasing connectivity. In areas where internet dongles were ineffective, the team provided money for the local volunteer to access data on their phone. The F2F team also provided support on using the technical platforms or relaying key updates when connection was disrupted. Tutorials/orientations were provided to local volunteers and host organizations on the use of communication technologies as needed and, in some cases, computers were provided to volunteers.
- **COVID-19 Mitigation Measures:** Mitigation measures prevented larger group gatherings which affected the training model normally used. To address these issues, the local volunteer and F2F team adapted the training approach to work with smaller groups in multiple training sessions.

KEY SUCCESSES

Although there were initial hesitations around how the virtual approach would work, the volunteer pairs had regular and open communication that ensured timely decision making, technical collaboration, and a high sense of satisfaction from both the volunteers and host organizations. The American volunteers acknowledged the value of the local volunteer's understanding of the context and the local volunteers appreciated the technical guidance and learning.

It worked very well because Tom (local volunteer) is a very knowledgeable and accomplished accountant and was able to work very closely with the folks at New Kakinga Millers. The way we managed it was that after Tom had completed the day's work with the millers it was evening for him and morning for me, so we had about an hour conversation. I would be happy to do a similar assignment in the future and I felt it went very well. -Bob, American Volunteer

Some key successes include:

- The virtual adaptation enabled the continuation of program activities. **F2F Uganda completed 16 volunteer assignments (contributing 29% CRS' global total numbers and 20% above Uganda target) that benefited a total of 1,969 project participants (contributing 64% CRS's global total beneficiary number and 47% above Uganda target)** helping them to improve their household income and meet their basic needs including health, food and save for education of their children. This was mainly through technical assistance in savings and credit management, animal nutrition, record keeping, leadership and management, processing software configuration in support of rural financial institutions, agro-processing companies, and farmer cooperatives. **The adaptation, therefore, not only enabled Uganda program implementation to continue during COVID-19 but also exceeded the volunteer target of 70 to 94 and exceeding total program participant target of 1,470 by 499.**
- **The virtual adaptation enabled \$52,500 in cost savings that offered opportunities to reach more hosts organizations.** The reduction in travel costs created significant cost savings for the program. There was also no additional cost for introducing the local volunteer since the team was able to re-allocate the per diem set aside for American volunteers to the local volunteers.
- **Virtual engagement permitted flexibility in the duration of the assignment.** It allowed flexibility to increase volunteer contact time with host organizations from 14 days to 21 days, which permitted the team to train more groups.



Local F2F volunteer Brian Kibirige with Kabeihura Farm Director on a dairy nutrition paired remote assignment (Photo credit: Maria Nakayiza/CRS)

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **The virtual program adaptation increased cross-cultural engagement and created the potential for long-term technical collaboration.** One of the F2F program's goals is to enable cultural exchange and increase the American people's understanding of USAID's work overseas. The virtual adaptation contributed to the achievement of this goal despite the barriers from COVID-19. The virtual collaboration sessions between the local and American volunteer enhanced cross-cultural exchange by providing a platform for two technical experts to share their unique skills and capacities. Building a virtual relationship also enabled the potential for future technical collaboration. The process resulted in mutual coaching and mentorship that could continue beyond the life of the assignment. The mentorship and sharing of experiences promoted the spirit of volunteerism and built on F2F's 'people to people' approach to the benefit of farming communities in Uganda.
2. **Utilizing the paired remote volunteer approach increased the quality of the technical advice.** Introducing a local volunteer to the process added significant value by increasing the contextualization of the technical advice for host organizations. In addition, it enhanced the technical support for host organizations by providing diverse perspectives and expertise. The local volunteers and American counterparts benefitted from each other's expertise and knowledge, resulting in increased capacity for the pair and the highest quality technical support for the host organization. They were able to cross-fertilize their experiences and ideas to maximize benefits to host organizations.

3. Introducing a local volunteer to the process contributes to the sustainability of the program. In the spirit of subsidiarity, introducing a local volunteer allowed the team to build on the local capacities of Uganda. The process simultaneously built the capacity of local volunteers and introduced the host organizations to local support that could continue beyond the life of the program, contributing to the program's overall goal of economic growth in the agriculture sector.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

F2F program has found an alternative way to implement the program amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda. Despite COVID-19, host organizations have noted increased production and the creation of new business opportunities demonstrating virtual technical assistance as a viable support option that contributes to the achievement of F2F program goals. While the airport in Uganda has reopened and travel has commenced, testing requirements and continued COVID-19 risks require the team to reduce in-person American volunteer support. Considering the added value of using local volunteer expertise, it is an opportunity for F2F to continue using paired volunteer process even when American volunteers resume travel for the program. As travel restrictions begin to ease due to vaccination, FY22 will operate at 75% international volunteers and maintain 25% local volunteers. Maintaining local volunteers offers cost-saving as well as sustainability after the program ends. In addition, the addition of virtual engagement can continue to increase the length of the assignment without increasing costs. Even when travel resumes, a virtual debrief that permits more stakeholders to participate after each assignment adds value to program learning. As countries continue to experience challenges with the barriers created by COVID-19, the experience in Uganda highlights ways that partners can continue program activities and even improve the implementation where physical presence is not possible.

