

Generations of Quiet Progress

**The Development Impact of U.S. Long-term University
Training on Africa from 1963 to 2003**

Executive Summary

*An evidence-based impact assessment of the value obtained
from major investments in graduate education for
3,219 African professionals by USAID and its partners
in the ATLAS and AFGRAD programs*

A report for:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How many opportunities exist to assess development impact in Africa from a single program that covered 45 countries and lasted for 40 years? Established at the moment of independence for many African nations, the USAID-funded AFGRAD Program (African Graduate Fellowship Program [1963-1990]), and its successor ATLAS Program (Advanced Training for Leadership and Skills¹ [1991-2003]), came to a close last April, having traversed many well-known development challenges and obstacles. Through these four decades, the ATLAS/AFGRAD regional program, managed by the Africa-America Institute (AAI), trained over 3,200 African professionals for PhD and MA degrees at U.S. universities in fields critical to their country's growth.

What development impact on African institutions resulted from investing \$182 million to bring highly-qualified African professionals to the United States for graduate training? Were USAID's development goals well served? To answer these and other questions, the USAID Africa Bureau's Sustainable Development Office commissioned a study in October, 2003 to find out whether development impact occurred from the longest-running and largest long-term graduate training programs for Africa: ATLAS and AFGRAD. This was in response to several issues:

- the impending end of the program and a need to derive lessons learned from future planning; and second, questions being raised by U.S. universities, scientists and researchers, African institutions, and U.S. diplomats as to why USAID, the lead foreign-assistance agency, was not investing in replenishing the stock of U.S. educated leaders in Africa.
- interest in sustainable and significant changes introduced by participants sponsored through these two well-known programs that received U.S. Government funding of some \$182 million over 40 years; and, if so, what can be discovered about that impact? Was the impact at the individual level, or was the impact felt at the institutional, community, sectoral, national, regional or international levels?
- an assessment of whether USAID's overall development objectives were well-served by such large investments.
- questions of differences in terms of participant effectiveness in bringing about positive changes linked to their U.S. academic programs by variables of gender, language, and education level.

The results and observations discussed in the report were developed from evidence-based findings, which draw from both quantitative and qualitative information. A quantitative, statistically-based survey of 203 participants representing an estimated 1,921 participants, or 60 percent of the actual universe of 3,219 graduates, drives the report, supplemented by hundreds of

¹ formerly the *African Training for Leadership and Advanced Skills* project

examples from participants themselves that *ground* their affirmations of significant impact. The assessment team's visits to seven of the largest "sending countries" led to site discoveries of examples where the U.S. training made the critical difference in an institution, sector or community. Even an Internet search turned up remarkable "hits" where the achievements of former participants were influencing change far beyond their country's borders.

FINDINGS

The range of findings of the assessment are highlighted here and discussed in greater detail in Section I—Findings.

Finding 1: USAID's multi-million dollar investment in long-term training for over 40 years produced significant and sustained changes that furthered African development in measurable ways.

The results from all information-gathering methods used show that participants introduced many changes that made a measurable difference beyond their own lives. Over 95 percent reported making changes at their institutions and cited specific, plausible examples to verify their affirmation. Change at the institutional level of this magnitude is unusual in human resources and training programs and testifies to the extraordinary impact the ATLAS/AFGRAD programs had in Africa.

Finding 2: Long-term degree training at U.S. institutions was critical in creating the necessary foundations for significant impact to occur.

Alumni credited the "non-technical" changes they traced to their U.S. education, such as changed attitudes towards work or improved research techniques, as key to the changes they were able to introduce. These types of KSAs (Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes) cannot be acquired in non-degree, short-term training programs due to insufficient time to adapt to and become immersed in the U.S. *learning environment*, assimilate changed behavior, and allow self-confidence to flower.

Finding 3: Participants reported that changes in institutional performance were attributable to U.S. training and gave concrete examples as justification.

The ATLAS/AFGRAD participants returned from U.S. training and applied their knowledge and skills directly in ways that had measurable impact on African institutions. There is plausible linkage between the results identified and the training obtained. Participant open-end responses on surveys, as well as in hand-written personal impact statements, consistently linked the U.S. experience with the participant's ability to induce change (see Volume III, Annex C, *Examples of Change in Institutional Output*). Since it is not possible to eliminate all influences with the exception of U.S. training on a participant's life *post academia*, the assessment team utilized triangulating questions, examined written statements, and interviewed supervisors, as well as those not trained. While prevailing economic and political conditions, leadership at the

institutions, and the availability of resources are often cited as factors affecting impact, without the initial long-term academic program, it is unlikely that impact would have occurred.

Finding 4: Running against prevailing views, participants cited critical thinking and research skills rather than improved technical and scientific knowledge more frequently as critical to achieving impact.

The conventional wisdom holds that were technical skills transferred effectively and sufficiently to institutions, impact would result. This view is grounded in the concept that African institutions lack technical know-how and resources that prevent their intervention in sectors to spur growth. So deep-set is this notion in both the U.S. and African organizational culture that it drives most training dollars into *technical upgrading* rather than into *performance improvement*.

Finding 5: Changes in attitudes towards work consistently appeared as major benefits.

Many participants developed a changed perception and strong commitment for their work during their graduate studies and credit this aspect as key to their ability to implement change (impact). Like improved research techniques and critical thinking changed work attitudes are those "soft" by-products from technical training that are underappreciated for their contribution to impact. The research shows that factors related to organizational culture rather than scientific knowledge or professional expertise play a far more significant role in determining impact than has been previously recognized.

Finding 6: No difference in impact was observed between PhD and Masters graduates.

Another striking finding is that although the differences in cost are sizeable between the two degree programs, no significant difference *in impact* was reported by PhD and Masters graduates. These quantitative results suggest that USAID's higher investment in doctoral programs might not have yielded a higher return based on impact.

Finding 7: Improved management was a frequently-cited training benefit even though it received minimal attention during training.

Many participants took short courses in USAID-funded mandated short management seminars during holiday or summer periods which provided them with basic management tools to facilitate application of their KSAs in their home institutions. When queried about the skills acquired during U.S. long-term training, participants only rarely mentioned "management." When asked what KSAs they applied at the work place, management skills took a prominent place.

Finding 8: Participants from the Education sector reported consistently higher impact and less difficulty applying their acquired knowledge and skills in their institutions than other sectors.

Data indicated that Education sector participants found it far easier than those in other sectors in applying their KSAs in the work place. Anecdotal information gleaned from site visits, in particular interviews at universities, suggested that the emphasis placed by the program on building capacity at African universities created a concentration of returned participants at key institutions. It is possible that this factor, more than any characteristic about education as a field of study, accounted for a more supportive organizational environment for application of KSAs.

Finding 9: Participants with degrees in Financial fields, or those with MBAs, recorded lower impact than those in Agriculture, Health and Education.

Although their numbers were low, participants in the financial sector and those with MBA degrees registered lower levels of impact than the three academic fields that predominate in both ATLAS and AFGRAD—agriculture, education, and health. While the significance is diminished overall by the relatively small proportion of graduates in these two fields, compared to the larger fields, it is a surprising finding that bears further inquiry beyond scope of this assessment.

Finding 10: Although women reported more difficulty applying their knowledge and skills at the work place than men, they reported impressive anecdotal examples of impact where they were able to apply their skills and knowledge.

In surveys, female participants reported fewer achievements than their male counterparts—primarily because of more difficulty applying their newly-acquired knowledge and skills at the work place. Anecdotal data, however, show that women found ways to overcome these impediments to excel in ways unimaginable before training, citing mainly "increased self-confidence."

Finding 11: No correlation could be found regarding impact and the frequency with which participants returned to their original workplace.

While participants reporting impact often worked in different institutions or even worked out of their country for periods, nearly half (49.4%) did return to work at the same institution where they were employed prior to their program in the United States. This appears to be an impressively high number, given the ups and downs of many African institutions over the years and the political instability that thwarted the return of many participants (to Ethiopia, Uganda, Ghana, Liberia) for years. The percentage includes recent returnees as well as retired alumni.

Finding 12: Participants returned to their home countries after their U.S. training when conditions permitted. There is no significant evidence that long-term U.S. training under these sponsored programs contributed to any brain drain of African human resources.

It was not in the scope of this review to verify AAI's claim that an average of between 85 and 90 percent of participants from all programs over the years returned to their country—an impressively high rate of participant return for any long-term U.S. training program. The issue of rates of return is more complex than is generally thought and requires careful definition of terms

used (such as "return"). The fact that the two programs stretched over such a long period makes the rate of return far more credible as a measure of return (not a measure of impact) since it flattens out the fluctuating security and economic conditions of African countries over decades. It is also true that a participant who resides overseas *at the time of this assessment* in no way implies lack of impact or even that the person did not return to the home country sometime after training. The assessment team encountered little criticism of the return rate from targeted institutions

Finding 13: ATLAS/AFGRAD participants surveyed were well-advanced in their careers, making significant contributions to development.

Participants were selected for ATLAS/AFGRAD generally after some work experience, in collaboration with their employing institution, and were often mature professionals prior to starting a graduate education in the United States. These considerations often promote closer linkages between the academic program the participant undertakes and the development needs of the sending institution or country. Examples of these significant contributions are cited in Volume III, Annex C.

OBSERVATIONS

In the course of examining the impact from the ATLAS/AFGRAD programs, the assessment team findings deflate many of the myths that typically taint long-term training initiatives for overseas students as a valuable development tool. For instance, widespread perceptions hold that U.S. Government-funded long-term training goes to children of the well-off African elite, participants do not return home, scarce training funds would be better spent on more trainees in-country, and brain-drain is worsened. Although the study was not designed to address these myths, it indirectly counters them by uncovering significant contributions made by participants across the spectrum of fields affecting economic growth in Africa.

- First, the program brought *employees* of key institutions who had work experience to the U.S., not elite, hand-picked students or "best and brightest" undergraduates.
- Second, roughly 90 percent of the participants returned home, when conditions allowed – it was uncommon for a participant to be unemployed.
- Third, the *cost per impact* derived from USAID's investment may well be lower for high-performing, impact-producing participants trained at U.S. universities than for those trained in-country when compared accurately.
- Fourth, *brain drain* was contained—not worsened—by the major contributions participants made in their home-country institutions and sectors that multiplied opportunities, improved the learning environment and raised hopes for young, upcoming professionals.

A significant volume of quantitative and qualitative data was collected during the course of the assessment, only a part of which could be exploited for this study. This valuable information is

available in electronic and hand-written form and merits further analysis to increase understanding about impact derived from long-term graduate education.

That African development has been halting and somewhat disappointing should not diminish the significant accomplishments of the participants and the program. A more pertinent question might be what impact could have occurred had the relatively *small* cost of the long-term programs (some \$4.5 million a year) been multiplied tenfold, or a hundred-fold?