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U.S. AGENCY FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

March 3, 1994

MEMORANDUM

TO: See Distribution

FROM: Larry Abel, G/EG/EID *L. Abel*

SUBJECT: Review of Mid-Term In-Depth Evaluation of the SARSA II
(936-5452) Project

Find enclosed a copy of last Fall's Mid-Term Evaluation of the SARSA II (Systems Approach to Regional Income and Sustainable Resource Assistance) Project, plus copies of the brief comment letters from the Cooperator (Clark University) and 2 Sub-contractors (Institute for Dev't Anthropology and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University).

Dr. Billie DeWalt, Team Leader for the Evaluation and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, will make a presentation of the Evaluation and its findings to A.I.D. Personnel in Room 3524, N.S. from 10:00 to about 11:30 a.m. on Friday, March 25. Your presence would be appreciated.

If you have comments on the Evaluation (or the letters from the Cooperators) that you would like to submit prior to the review, please send them to me by E-mail, fax or memo in Room 608 SA-18. Our G/EG/EID fax number is 875-4949. If possible, please also let me know in advance if you (or someone else from your office) will be able to attend the review meeting. Thanks, and hope to see you there.

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December 8, 1993

Mr. Larry Abel
R&D/EID/RAD
USAID
Sa-18 Room 608
Washington, D.C. 20523-1814

Dear Larry,

I am writing to respond to the SARSA, Mid-Term Evaluation report.

On the one hand, I applaud the considerable and conscientious effort expended by the evaluation team. They took the time and effort to probe the complex mechanisms of SARSA, especially in trying to understand the complications arising from a research program involving three institutions, and including a multifaceted federal agency. Further, the report identifies difficult problems and failures of the cooperative agreement, especially in highlighting the continuing inability of the three institutions to successfully collaborate on both field activities as well as conceptual issues. We are not unaware of this deficiency, we have made considerable efforts to try to solve the problem. We hope that the next year, our final year of SARSA II, which is to be devoted to "synthesis" work, will achieve some degree of success.

Having noted the utility of the evaluation report, I must express my dissatisfaction with its content.

The major point is that the evaluation team failed to grasp the substance and structure of the cooperative agreement and its subsequent activities. The team erred because its overriding perspective was to view SARSA from the point of view of academics, and particularly from the stance of "what we would do if we managed SARSA." This is clearly and emphatically seen on page 16 when they state:

"we have recognized six ways in which the regional analysis concept is commonly employed in the literature:"

Again, on page 38:

"SARSA II has not used the regional idea to bring these different meanings into a coherent framework."

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The evaluation team ~~used~~ this academic, conceptual notion to frame their major criticisms of SARSA's considerable substantive efforts over the past years.

They missed the point! SARSA's objectives and goals were to participate in the functions of a development agency. We saw our role as providing applied research which would serve the policy objectives of USAID missions and bureaus. We did not see our immediate, short-term role as advancing the state of knowledge. Quite simply, USAID in all its components was not interested in regional or spatial perspectives. They were interested in our abilities to help them with current, pressing planning and policy issues. SARSA responded to its client's demands. We discerned where the opportunities existed, and we offered our help. We sacrificed academic goals. To have done otherwise would have meant total failure. We were told, at the inception of SARSA, that "our success is measured by the add-ons we generate; this would tell how well we served USAID's allocation of considerable resources".

SARSA took on a variety of activities. These reflected not only our response to USAID but also to its changing demands. For example, SARSA II did not continue with its rural-urban dynamics activities because USAID did not want these. We were active in GIS because that's what the agency wanted, and especially because they wanted training. Further, the agency now wants to use GIS in analyses, monitoring, and evaluation, and they wanted the University of Arizona because of its considerable expertise in remote sensing and because of ARTS/FARA's familiarity with U.A. We generously supported gender issues from core funds because we were asked to. We respond; we don't dictate; we wait patiently and proceed slowly to achieve broader goals at some later time.

As further illustration of the evaluation team's failure to comprehend the mission of SARSA, at several places Clark is admonished for not strengthening the Department of Geography to contribute to international development issues. This is not the purpose of a cooperative agreement. On the other hand, Clark is a small school -- approximately 125 faculty -- with only a handful active in applied research on Third World development issues. The geography faculty are not interested in field work. SARSA used Eastman and Rocheleau, and we tried at an early date to involve the remaining two geography faculty who might contribute. They declined.

The context of the evaluation report is subjective. It establishes a premise -- what they think SARSA should be doing -- then they proceed to marshal a critical argument describing SARSA's academic failures. I had hoped for a more realistic context which starts with the premises of:

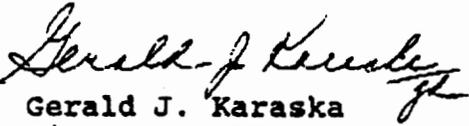
- (1) What are SARSA's constraints, particularly the financial parameters?

- (2) How did SARSA and USAID structure the cooperative agreement?
- (3) What was the mission of SARSA as mandated by USAID (and its changing demands)?
- (4) How did SARSA respond?

The result of the evaluation team's context has profound impact upon the future of SARSA. Specifically, I refer to page 9, item 5 ("The existing institutional structure has not worked ... Cooperative Agreements like this one seem much more compatible with the research mission of universities (especially land grants than with consulting firms..."). This statement, originating from the subjectivity of the team's context is a blatant affront not only to the character of internationally acclaimed institutions like Clark and IDA but to the considerable efforts of their respected scholars. It is precisely because both Clark and IDA are small that we have the flexibility and the ability to respond quickly to a variety of our clients demands, and with highly qualified people.

There are numerous places in the evaluation report where additional points of interpretation reflect the team's subjectivity, further emphasizing the team's failure to fully comprehend SARSA's scope of work. If there is an opportunity for discussion with the team, and if my defense is recognized, then these can be presented.

Respectfully,


Gerald J. Karaska
Director, SARSA

GJK:gd

FAX NO: 703-875-4949

December 2, 1993

FAXED
12-2-93

MEMORANDUM

TO: Larry Abel, SARSA Project Manager, G/EG/EID

FROM: S.K. De Datta, Director, Office of International Research and Development
and Associate Dean, International Agriculture

SUBJECT: Mid-Term SARSA II Project Report

The following are comments from Virginia Tech on the Mid-Term Evaluation of the SARSA II Project.

What is missing from what is an otherwise good assessment of SARSA II is the direct discussion of structural problems resulting from how the project was constituted. There is a discussion of the outputs of each of the three cooperating institutions which were recipients of SARSA II funds, but no assessment of USAID's effectiveness in organizing and coordinating what was an unusual experiment with a multi-institution cooperative agreement.

The history of how SARSA II was constituted (recounted to the evaluation team when they visited Virginia Tech) was not incorporated into the report, and there is no indication that the evaluators attempted to obtain the perspectives on that question from each of the participants--including AID personnel who had a hand in the initiation of SARSA II. There are two reasons why such a line of inquiry would have been useful: 1) it would provide guidelines to AID in developing future cooperative agreements (particularly in terms of what not to do), and 2) frankly, without discussing the structural problems, the report makes Virginia Tech look pretty inept--which in fact is not true (see particularly the third full paragraph on page 51).

The bare outlines of that history, as it is understood by those involved at Virginia Tech, is as follows:

Personnel in USAID sought to enhance the quality of SARSA's work by adding Virginia Tech to the cooperating institutions. Apparently, Virginia Tech was included--and tentatively given the lion's share of the budget--in order to "catch up" in terms of developing institutional capacity to work with AID Missions--without full consultation with the other

two partners. When IDA understood what was happening, they got their Congressman, who held an important committee position related to foreign assistance, involved. The political pressure was successful and the budget was divided equally among the three partners. The factor which is relevant to the evaluation is not what was an equitable distribution of the funds of SARSA, but rather the fact that the way in which bringing Virginia Tech into the agreement was handled poisoned the relationships among the partners--first between IDA and Virginia Tech, and, later in the project, between Virginia Tech and Clark.

In spite of all the problems, SARSA has contributed through Virginia Tech to strengthening AID programs. The most notable contribution has been to the gender component of the SANREM CRSP, which has been strengthened substantially from the collaboration between Clark University and Virginia Tech in ECOGEN. In a smaller way, the collaboration of all three SARSA institutions in the Mali IPM effort will contribute to the IPM CRSP for which Virginia Tech is the lead institution. Mali was chosen as one of the primary sites for the IPM CRSP. The capacity-building at Virginia Tech in the areas of IPM and gender analysis and participatory approaches which has resulted from ECOGEN and other programs at Virginia Tech will also play a prominent role in the IPM CRSP.

Methodology development for economic analysis of soil erosion control carried out by the Agricultural and Applied Economics Department at Virginia Tech with the SARSA II special project funding opened up new opportunities in quantifying an important issue of natural resource management.

In summary, there is enough blame to go around for the failure of SARSA II as a collaborative effort. The central problems were structural: bringing in a new player when the funds which were to be divided had actually shrunk from SARSA I, failure to make the process of choosing SARSA II institutions open and competitive, and the absence of leadership--at AID and within SARSA--willing and able to dedicate substantial effort to strengthening the collaboration among the three SARSA institutions once they were chosen.

Virginia Tech does not agree that our funding be limited to ECOGEN. Instead we shall be a full partner in all major future projects through face to face discussions. We believe that Virginia Tech has a lot to contribute to social sciences research.

In conclusion, USAID Project Manager should take direct charge in future discussions on project development and participation. This will ensure equitable participation and resource allocations. We strongly support the recommendation that SARSA III be made competitive.

Thank you for sharing the report with us.

Kind regards.

SKD:mnb

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TO: Larry Abel, AID
FROM: Peter Little, IDA *PL*
DATE: 1 December 1993
SUBJECT: SARSA Evaluation

I have shared the draft evaluation report with my colleagues, and we are pleased with what the report had to say about the work of IDA under SARSA. This is an extremely thorough and well-written evaluation that reflects a very careful reading of our research outputs. The only major concern of ours is that:

--the statement on p. 61, para. 3 (see also p. 9, para. 5) about the "Cooperative Agreements like this one seem much more compatible with the research mission of universities (especially land grants)...." seems inconsistent with the findings of the evaluation. Since the evaluation heavily criticizes VPI (the land grant university participant in SARSA) while it strongly praises the work of IDA--which is a non-profit research and education institute and not a university--how does the team reach the conclusion that a follow-on to SARSA would be compatible with the research mission of a land grant university. Would it be possible to delete the recommendation; or to modify the statement to say that the CA is compatible with "the mission of research institutes and universities" and delete any reference to land grants or consulting firms? As the original statement is written, a reader might construe that since IDA is not a university the team is referring to it as a "consulting firm" (which we are not), and precluding IDA's participation in a SARSA follow-on activity. Nothing whatsoever in the text of the evaluation appears to support that conclusion.

Minor comments are:

--on p.1, the evaluation states that "the 1978-1984 Area Development project was implemented first by the University of Wisconsin and then was changed to Clark University." On p. 11 that statement is repeated, correctly adding "with a sub-contract to IDA."

--p. 15, first para. It is Binghamton University (or State University of New York at Binghamton) not "University of Binghamton".

--p.30: Might want to note that gender-focused research in Bolivia is currently in progress under SARSA II. This work explicitly looks at gender within a political ecology framework, as the report seems to call for later (e.g., p. 38).

We appreciate having the opportunity to respond to the evaluation and we hope that our comments prove useful.