

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION AND PROCESS
CONSULTATION SERVICES TO THE NON-
TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL EXPORT SUPPORT
PROJECT (PROEXAG) IN CENTRAL AMERICA**

Presented to:

**Regional Office for Central American Programs (ROCAP)
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By:

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This executive summary refers to the activities and findings of a collaborative evaluation carried out by Checchi and Company Consulting, Inc. for the Non-Traditional Agricultural Export Support (NTAES) Project # 596-018. This ROCAP project was authorized in December 1985 and became operational in September 1986 through a contract with Chemonics International, a technical services firm that specializes in agricultural development. The project is intended to strengthen private sector capabilities related to production and marketing of agricultural exports from Central America.

A collaborative evaluation may be defined as a structured self-assessment of a project that actively involves the interested parties in refining the issues to be evaluated, in conducting the analysis, and in developing a shared plan of action. The Checchi team was led by a specialist in process consultation who served as evaluation facilitator. The team's objective was to guide ROCAP and the Chemonics staff through a process that asked tough questions and assembled data that could be analyzed and acted upon in a practical way to make the project more successful.

The data based for the evaluation consisted of responses to written questionnaire surveys and follow-up interviews conducted by the Checchi team within the following populations: Agricultural Federation, growers/shippers, USAID bilateral missions, ROCAP, and PROEXAG. The data were analyzed and allowances made for weaknesses in the survey methodology by ROCAP and PROEXAG staff in a two-day evaluation workshop, organized and guided by the Checchi team.

FINDINGS

Overall Performance

Overall, PROEXAG is seen as an excellent resource that federations and growers can't get enough of. PROEXAG is a principal source of practical, high level and timely consulting advice available to growers in the region. The full-time PROEXAG staff, backed up by what is unanimously perceived by growers, Agricultural Federations, and USAID personnel as a team of excellent short-term specialists, has had a highly visible impact on pre-takeoff stage ventures and active agricultural export ventures throughout the region. The survey results show that the new Chief of Party for PROEXAG has, in a very short time, reorganized a problem-ridden and leaderless project into an increasingly well directed and effective one. There is a consensus throughout the region that PROEXAG is headed in the right direction. An important conclusion of the workshop participants was that the PROEXAG Project is well regarded and is meeting perceived assistance needs. (A sample of comments from respondents is attached.)

Two Distinct Levels of Performance in PROEXAG's History

The new Chief of Party arrived just several months prior to the evaluation. The data indicate that a clear turnaround occurred in the project following his arrival. The new COP has in this short time reorganized a problem-ridden and leaderless project into an increasingly well-directed and effective one. Perceptions of difficulties surrounding previous leadership are quickly fading away. It should be mentioned that at about the same time the new COP arrived, ROCAP also welcomed a new Regional Agricultural Development Officer, and a new Regional Evaluation Officer. These new staff have strengthened the ROCAP

side of the equation and contributed to recent project improvements.

Project Strategy Issues

Strategic issues that surfaced in the evaluation were related largely to problems that had emerged during the first 18 months of the project and had been inherited by the current COP, including:

a. Deal-Making versus Federation Strengthening

A.I.D. agricultural projects traditionally have focused on strengthening organizations of agricultural producers (i.e. federations) as development vehicles. However, because PROEXAG places importance on deals as a key to export success in the produce industry, PROEXAG staff often work directly with individual growers and shippers, some of whom may not even be federation members. The new PROEXAG leadership has been building relationships with Federations in such a way that there is now less tendency to see Federation strengthening and deal-making consultations with growers as an either/or dilemma. The Federations appreciate the help that PROEXAG is providing to growers and are increasingly guiding such help so that both Federation strengthening and grower assistance occurs simultaneously. PROEXAG has become more persuasive in stating its case through discussions with the bilateral USAID Missions and ROCAP that the allocation of level of effort between the growers and the Federations must also be decided on a country-by-country basis, as the Federations' needs vary greatly among countries. Thus, it appears that this problem is already being solved.

b. The Use of Channel Captains

Some survey respondents expressed concern about a tendency of PROEXAG to focus its assistance efforts on growers who are already established (i.e. "channel captains") rather than on small or marginal growers. This issue is also being resolved to the extent that ROCAP understands that "channel captains" are better able than less established growers to take the major business risks involved in the development of new export crops and follow-through in the market place. But there is unresolved concern among USAID Mission staff about the guided transfer of technology that will diffuse export success to smaller growers.

c. Crop and Country Jealousy

Within each country there is a tendency on the part of user audiences to think PROEXAG should be spending more time and energy with them. Similarly, crop groups in each country tend to feel that their crop is not receiving the level of attention of other crops. This theme was observed throughout the region.

Shortcomings

The shortcomings noted in the PROEXAG Project by respondent populations across-the-board do not reveal any crippling problems. The few problems noted are manageable ones which are already being addressed by both PROEXAG and ROCAP.

a. Unpredictability of Response

This problem reflects the need for work plans, for time for new leadership to address past problems, and for communication to users of PROEXAG's service limitations. Unpredictability means that at times PROEXAG responds quickly, at other times slowly, and at other times not at all.

b. Lack of Communication Concerning Resource Limitations and Service Capabilities

To overcome this problem, PROEXAG needs to make a realistic appraisal of its ability to respond, and to communicate this to its user audience in unambiguous terms. This problem is already being addressed within PROEXAG.

c. Lack of Work Plans Tailored to User Needs

Federation and USAID Mission representatives interviewed felt that PROEXAG's overall objective had been communicated, but that what was needed was an annual work plan and, later, quarterly work plans by country. Many respondents felt that the distribution of a specific list of services and lead time requirements would set important limits on the expectations of Federations and growers who were overly demanding.

RESULTS

A good measure of the success achieved through this collaborative evaluation process is the improvement that has already been made in the PROEXAG Project. The participants at the two-day evaluation workshop were sufficiently informed by the data to take immediate action on seven specific problems and plan for many more. In addition to these observable results, a substantial amount of teambuilding was experienced both within the ROCAP and PROEXAG staffs and between their respective organizations. There is no question that this collaborative evaluation process achieved results in excess of expectations. The seven actions agreed upon were as follows:

1. The purpose statement for the project remains valid, though it was necessary and useful to agree on clarifications of the terms used.

2. The Chemonics-PROEXAG model of deal-making as the main mode of project intervention needs to be clarified and communicated to the project's client community or growers, export federations, and USAID's. This will help to adjust client expectations to fit the project's limited resources.
3. Project progress indicators will be reduced in number, and formulated to show outputs or effects of the project, rather than inputs and activities.
4. Planning of work will be focused on tasks by crop or by function (such as post-harvest), incorporating all activities and cost elements, including training. The plans will be shared with producers' associations or Federations.
5. PROEXAG will continue to develop a pool of short-term experts to be made available to export federations and USAID's; and will over time deliver this consultant data base to the Federations.
6. Federation assistance will focus on (a) market information, (b) technical information on priority crops, (c) identifying marketing agents, and (d) ad hoc advice, including recommendations on fees charged for services to members.
7. The policy on communications by PROEXAG with parties promoting agricultural exports in the region was clarified so as to allow PROEXAG greater freedom to communicate directly and without prior approval. Reporting relationships and requirements within the PROEXAG team and from the team to ROCAP were also clarified.

Attachment

A SAMPLING OF COMMENTS FROM RESPONDENTS

All populations rated their overall satisfaction with the PROEXAG Project in the positive range. The depth and sincerity of this satisfaction is shown through interview comments, of which the following are illustrative:

"I started in French stringbeans even before Ricardo Frohmader gave me seeds for experiments while demand in the U.S. was growing really fast. They helped me find brokers with whom I now do business. The seeds that Ricardo gave me, eight varieties, resulted in two that are very good for me. The market has reacted to these two. I might have found out about these; but who knows when, or, if at all."

"I trust PROEXAG and call them for help. I have the good luck of having their professional help and friendship. If there are other consultants who give advice as good as their advice has been for me, then I don't know them."

"They helped me find new brokers and they push new products that have markets. PROEXAG complements the Federation; if PROEXAG didn't exist it would have to be invented."

"PROEXAG has done better than A.I.D. directly. They did it perfectly in asparagus. A.I.D. could not have made that project efficient, the way PROEXAG does."

"This help could not have been better. It would have taken years to get where we are now with the overland shipment of melons without PROEXAG's help linking us to receivers."

"Dr. Mondonedo visited my farm and we started varietal trials on 1/6 manzana in blueberries and strawberries. The results were excellent and I will plant 6 manzanas (ten and a half acres) now on a commercial export level. Sure I heard of these crops, but maybe I wouldn't have done it without the PROEXAG staff. Or maybe it would have taken years instead of four months."

Help with selection of crop variety was reported to be very useful. "If you don't have the right variety the project is dead. We think we have selected the right ones with their help." In the case of seedless watermelons, "I think this will develop projects, maybe even an industry, this is true of asparagus too." "The trips were very useful. RF

introduced us to Sunworld, he was a good bridge. As a result we will plant 40 acres of seedless; without RF we would not be doing this."

"I feel comfortable with the project, it's a well designed vehicle and a hell of a good complement to our activities. What we can't get from our people we get from them. They wanted a seminar on asparagus and PROEXAG was the only one who could it. Mondonedo and RF put it on. It was good."

"PROEXAG has opened a new gate, a new opportunity we are all excited about."

"I have to be sincere; they have been very helpful to me and even gave me their home phone numbers."

"I don't know if there is anyone else qualified to give us PROEXAG's level of training."

"RF has brought in people where I had a problem with a cooperative. He even called brokers to have them call me. I have no gripes, quite the contrary."

"What I see from RF is a solid flow of good information. I get a quick response and good answers especially in melons."

"I trust PROEXAG and call them; they help. I have the good luck of having their professional help and friendship. If there are other consultants who give advice as good as their advice has been for me, then I don't know them."

"They have done quite a lot. P. Michel stays in touch with me and sends down important information on transportation. She has convinced some steamship companies to come down here and she is always informing me on what's going on."

"I got a call from J.L., he said he had a few free days and sent Bruce. Bruce discovered there was no back up for the hard disk. While he was solving that problem, it turned out by coincidence that we were conducting interviews for the computer position at FEPROEXAAH. HE just fit in. Following that, Bruce was here to follow up on the hard disk solution. We had a serious roof leak and Bruce knew exactly what to do with a wet computer. He was here and he knew how to dry it out."

"The stuff Bruce has been doing is real good, not just with FEPROEXAAH, he is one of the best examples of where particular expertise is matched with what is needed."

"These people are very practical; not full of theory, they get down to the farmer level. We don't have such luck with university professors and other consultants; they talk too scientifically."

One USAID Private Sector Officer said of the PROEXAG staff, "They are the best talent money can buy."