

# Helping the World Grow

Horticulture industry members who participate in the Farmer-to-Farmer program transform families and communities in developing countries.

by DAVID KUACK

Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance (VEGA) has a network of more than 100,000 highly skilled volunteers that partner with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to spur economic growth in developing countries.

VEGA, which has been operating since 2004 and is based in Washington, D.C., is a consortium that brings together 29 member non-governmental organizations. These organizations include Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture, Land O'Lakes International Development and Winrock International, as well as organizations affiliated with educational institutions such as Arizona State University and Purdue University.

"VEGA's membership is made up of a range of different types of organizations, but all of them come together through VEGA to focus on economic growth as a real driver for international development," said Angela Canterbury, managing director of communications and advocacy at VEGA. "The concept behind the type of person-to-person diplomacy, peer-to-peer training that we do through VEGA is to teach individuals, families and business people the skills they need to improve their own livelihoods. It transforms families and it transforms communities. We think the partnership we have with the U.S. government in delivering really effective foreign assistance is unique in a lot of



Farmer-to-Farmer volunteers work with people in developing countries to help them improve productivity, access new markets, build local capacity, prevent climate change and conserve natural resources. ● Farmer-to-Farmer volunteers trained small holder farmers in Jamaica to grow organically, how to receive organic certification and how to get their products to market.

ways. We add value through American ingenuity, skills and the generosity of volunteerism, which very much puts forward the best of American values in these partnerships.

"VEGA partnerships have generated economic growth in 46 countries through 58 different programs. The alliance has saved at least \$31 million taxpayer dollars through volunteer time alone. VEGA is good value for the U.S. government and the U.S. taxpayers and it really delivers results."

## BENEFITS FOR VOLUNTEERS, COUNTRIES

All of the VEGA programs are conducted outside of the United States in the developing world.

"We have something we call 'Volunteer Impact 360,'" Angela said. "Even though these programs take place in other countries, volunteers come back with skills that benefit their careers and communities. These volunteers bring back stories of relationships that they made, and inspire neighbors and colleagues to also volunteer. Sometimes it leads to more trade and business opportunities for people here and abroad. ►

"Most of the assignments are short term—generally less than a year. The average assignment is three to four weeks. VEGA volunteers are embedded into full scale development programs. However, it often is the case that relationships that are made go far beyond the assignment."

Feed the Future is the U.S. government's global hunger and food security initiative and has programs in several countries. Feed the Future is an Obama Administration initiative that was put into law in 2016 by Congress through a bill called the Global Food Security Act.

"Feed the Future comes with a lot of lessons learned and best practices for how to implement really effective foreign assistance," Angela said. "Part of that is measuring success and measuring impact of technical assistance. Some of these programs also utilize the peer-to-peer training that is core to VEGA."

Angela said the programs VEGA is involved with are focused on economic growth, ranging from agriculture, financial services, local capacity building, supporting small- and medium-size businesses, youth employment and women's empowerment.

"There is a whole range of different types of economic growth programming and food security is a large part of our programming," she said. "Food security is the baseline. Creating food security is the first critical step to building economic growth around the globe. Everyone needs to eat. The people who we work with in other countries need the skills we've cultivated over centuries, but also face unpredictable circumstances delivered by Mother Nature, just like farmers in the United States."

## FARMER-TO-FARMER PROGRAM PARTNERSHIPS

VEGA manages the Farmer-to-Farmer Special Program Support Project (SPSP), a component of the worldwide Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program, which promotes sustainable economic growth, food security and agricultural development worldwide. F2F was initially authorized by Congress in the 1985 Farm Bill. It was designated as the John Ogonowski and Doug Bereuter Farmer-to-Farmer Program in honor of one of the program's pilots killed in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and former Congressman Bereuter, who initially sponsored the program.

"Typically, every five years, Congress reauthorizes this program through the U.S. Farm Bill," said Angela. "Reauthorization is coming up again in 2018. Over the course of 30 years, the program has mobilized more than 16,700 volunteers and sup-



## VOLUNTEERING FOR F2F PROJECTS

People interested in volunteering for F2F projects should fill out a volunteer interest form at [farmer-to-farmer.org](http://farmer-to-farmer.org). You can also call (202) 223-7012 or email [f2f@vegaalliance.org](mailto:f2f@vegaalliance.org).



One of the Farmer-to-Farmer projects helped Jamaican farmers to develop a natural farmers market to serve as an outlet for organic products. ● Measurable results from Farmer-to-Farmer programs include increased crop yields and bringing new crops to market.

ported nearly 12,000 organizations in 112 developing countries, assisting more than 1.2 million people with peer-to-peer technical assistance.”

American F2F volunteer experts work with people in developing countries who seek to improve productivity, access new markets, build local capacity, prevent climate change and conserve natural resources.

### **MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH F2F PROJECTS**

F2F program director Laura Alexander said VEGA and the organizations involved with the F2F program are always looking for new recruits.

“VEGA and the other implementing organizations look for volunteers with specific skills and experience based on the projects, the targets and the impact that is desired,” she said. “There is a very wide range of expertise that is sought. Knowledge about horticulture, production, the supply chain, engineering, marketing, business skills—there is a whole range of expertise that is needed to operate an agri-business.

“The volunteer exchange is really important and results in very special individual experiences. There are measurable results from these programs, such as increased yields and bringing new crops to market. There is an additional value in the relationships created between volunteers and the organizations they support.”

Laura said one of the projects funded by SPSP is establishing an organic farming program in Jamaica.

“There has been a lot of demand from the tourist industry, visitors to the country, as well as Jamaicans, for organic agricultural products,” she said. “This project has trained small holder farmers to grow organically. Volunteers worked with the farmers on how to receive organic certification and how to get their products to market.

“They created a natural farmers market called Ujima to serve as an outlet for organic products. Producers started a bi-weekly market with eight vendors three years ago. Since then, the market has expanded to 27 vendors with more looking to participate. They have plans to expand

to a weekly market because of the demand. They are also considering moving to a larger location. Volunteer technical assistance helped make this project a success. A lot of agricultural experts volunteered to teach organic farming practices, but they also had marketing experts who advised them on starting the farmers market.”

Another F2F SPSP project involves sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) issues in Ghana.

“Their horticultural products are in very high demand especially in Europe,” said Laura. “But because of SPS issues, an export ban was placed on certain agricultural products. The F2F project works directly with small holder farmers to improve their agricultural practices to reduce SPS issues. The project is also working extensively with the government of Ghana to implement a traceability system to build confidence in export certification systems.” 

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