

Why Training Has Not Produced the Desired Results – *and what to do about it*

by
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What is the Problem?

The transfer of *knowledge, skills and attitudes*, what is referred to as *training*, has been the largest single type of intervention funded by USAID for many years since the demise of infrastructure projects. Yet the results obtained from significant training investments have been disappointing in recent years in terms of improving organizational performance. This article takes a look at the way USAID-sponsored training has been used **in Africa** and proposes building on these lessons to get better results.

In the early years after many African countries won their independence, long-term training sought to replace expatriate cadres in government, by far the largest employer, with newly-trained nationals. Few observers criticize the validity of these early investments in "capacity building" or the positive impact they had on economic and social development. Short-term overseas training sponsored prior to 1980 was generally connected to sector-specific project-level objectives and did not target organizational management improvements.

The situation today is quite different in all but a few countries across the continent. Academic training funded by USAID has declined significantly for a variety of reasons, among them the shorter span during which SO Teams must demonstrate that the investment is likely to help achieve a stated Intermediate Result. Short-term U.S. and third-country training, in particular in management areas, has continued but at a diminished rate in recent years. In-country training has expanded everywhere partially as a manifestation of the incorrect view that the same results can be obtained by spreading the training to a larger number of people locally.

Despite investments in all of these types of training – short- and long-term, in-country as well as U.S. and Third Country, management-focussed and "technical" (i.e., sector specialized) – not enough organizations that received USAID-funded training made measurable improvements in their performance. The individuals USAID trained may have performed better but the organizations did not change significantly.

The reasons for the low level of return on investment are not obscure. Training has often been "offered" as a solution to USAID's partners with little analysis of the organization's performance goals. A Mission's SO Team members set budgets for training early-on in the cycle of an

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"intervention" and link the outcome to an Intermediate Result. Sometimes an implementing partner includes training in a proposed budget ideally with a link to a specified result. At this early stage, however, neither partner is focussed on the type of training, or in some cases, even the training objective. When the moment finally arrives to "do the training," managers focus on *delivering the input* and anticipating the result. They presume that training is needed since it has already been set aside in the budgets, contracts or agreements.

Because USAID has made laudable strides over the last decade in requiring Training Needs Assessments (TNAs) prior to designing and delivering any training intervention, many assume that this "step" resolves the problem and will lead to obtaining results. Why has the insistence on TNAs not increased a local organization's productivity, quality of output, reliability as a partner or sustainability? After all, Best Practices were faithfully followed, from *collaboration with stakeholders* through *analyzing the training needs to follow-on*?

What Happened?

Highlighted below are some characteristics and habits associated with the way USAID implements training in Africa that explain the low level of return on training investment over the years. The reader is invited to examine the degree to which these points can be applied elsewhere in the developing world.

1. The training wish-list. "Training needs assessments" are often no more than inventories of training designed or proposed by an organization's employees. Typically there is no link to the changes that might lead to improvements in an organization's output. The analysis, if any, focuses on an inventory of needed skills and the capacity of existing staff to be trained.
2. Training as donor-driven. Since training has already been budgeted, managers assume that it should be implemented. They may also conclude that a proper assessment was performed and stakeholder input obtained. These assumptions might be held by USAID SO team members, newly-arrived SO team leaders unaware of the details of previous planning and budgets, or USAID institutional partners pressured to implement activities. Local partners anxious to participate may **jump on the training train** as well and affirm that all the necessary diagnostics have been completed.
3. Training as supply-driven. Many U.S. universities, NGO and for-profit training providers and local institutions have developed over the years considerable capacity to train professionals from developing countries, even in languages other than English. Some institutions have created semi-independent institutes that focus on special sectors (education, natural resources management, micro-enterprise credit, etc.), countries and regions, and languages (e.g., French, Spanish, Arabic). They market their programs, often aggressively. Training types include short-term programs tailored to a particular USAID activity, off-the-shelf courses of various types and various combinations such as customized off-the-shelf workshops responding to the needs of participants in certain countries, regions or sectors. Some U.S.

training is designed for U.S. consumption but open to USAID-funded participants, whereas others target overseas professionals entirely. Occasionally U.S. training includes an in-country organizational analysis and participant assessment, but most training providers limit their involvement to **dispensing the workshop** as publicized in their brochures, emails and websites. Rarely does a U.S.-based training provider visit former participants to conduct follow-up assessments and offer help in applying the fruits of their training at their work place.

4. Training distributed as a benefit. Who would deny that highly-motivated and gifted individuals in developing countries need training and exposure to progress in their fields? Therefore, distributing the opportunities to the most deserving individuals fits neatly into this development paradigm. Following this logic, some experienced USAID officials want to spread the benefits of training to the largest number of individuals. In-country training will take precedence in this system view since it can affect the greatest number of people. Long-term training dissolves in comparison – one can train scores of experienced accountants in financial management and audit techniques to combat fraud for the price of one Masters Degree in Finance. Viewing training as a benefit – either long- or short-term, emphasizes individual needs and worse, fails to link the intervention to USAID's strategic objectives, to results or to organizational performance change. Whether it is USAID, its partners or the recipient institution that apply the **Santa Claus training model**, the result can far-reaching: it can inadvertently foster a high non-return rate of the country's "best and brightest," reduce the likelihood of sustained, targeted and measurable organizational impact, and promote a **dialog of dependency** between donor and recipient, to name but three. All greatly affect the return (however measured) on USAID's investment.

5. Training to win friends. Many USAID SO team members, training managers at partner institutions and even high-level U.S. Mission officials view training as a "good thing" to offer counterparts and local professionals. For example, they often point to the ease with which they can communicate with a country's U.S.-educated, high-level officials as a demonstration of the "impact" obtained from long-term academic training. (In this view, it appears that the impact is on improving *American capacity* to work effectively in that country!.) In the same vein, adherents to the "winning friends and influencing people" camp cite the unquantifiable benefits of exposing key people to the United States. This view of training **restricts impact to the individual level** and has built-in problems. The question is not whether benefits accrue to those individuals, or indeed to their American counterparts, but whether scarce development funds were best used to achieve sustainable institutional or sectoral improvements. However, to criticize this debatable *justification* for U.S. training (to win friends) is not to diminish the value of the U.S. training option when properly conceived and administered to promote development change. Training at U.S. institutions can pay handsome development benefits that stand the test of any return-on-investment analysis. But when used first and foremost to win friends, it can be a costly development disappointment. Ironically, when solid performance analysis and clear objectives form the basis for the design of a U.S. training program, USAID can achieve both its

desired outcomes: a participant with a deep understanding of the United States *and* critical performance and policy changes introduced that benefit a specific institution or sector. *

6. Training to "build capacity." Does training not "strengthen institutions" and shouldn't we support "critical mass" skill-building, which everyone knows is needed in Africa? The answer to this question is surprisingly "no". Training does not "build institutional capacity" unless the employees received training that was linked to a performance gap, applied their new skills and knowledge, engaged themselves and peers in work place behavior changes, and were supported during the entire process by supervisors and leaders. **The development cemetery is packed with defunct institutions** that received massive amounts of training of all types, all expected to contribute significantly to improvements in particular sectors, such as agricultural research, health systems and education. *The fact that these institutions did not survive does not diminish the importance of training as an option to resolve organizational performance problems. Rather, it forces us to focus on the way we have analyzed organizational constraints, proposed solutions, and planned, designed and managed the interventions.*

7. Training as a quick fix. International development managers are not alone in looking to training for rapid improvements in an organization's output. Performance consultants working with U.S. corporations fight continually to convince decision-makers to invest in up-front analysis (that can, of course, save huge amounts by reducing unneeded training), allow time for adults to learn and apply their new skills and knowledge, and provide for follow-up. Most USAID activity managers (and contracting officers) understand the critical role that can be played by follow-up but are quick to delete it from budgets when under pressure. **Organizational change takes time.** It can be induced by appropriate training linked to analyses of performance gaps and causes and sustained through post-training support. Organizational performance improvements are sustained over time, despite the appearance of some immediate results due to training.

The Solution

Performance Improvement has developed as an industry in North America that goes beyond training to analyze the causes of organizational dysfunction to elicit possible solutions. A comprehensive methodology has emerged through which performance changes can be introduced in an organization that produce measurable results. This methodology is applied throughout North America in corporations, small businesses, college business offices, NGOs and government agencies at every level. It has evolved by building on the understanding of **how adults learn** to how they can apply new knowledge and skills **at the workplace.**

* In the post-September-Eleventh era, the pressure to use training primarily to influence people has increased mount as the U.S. tries to make up for a decade of decline in academic programs. How unfortunate it will be were USAID fail to learn from its rich experience in managing training that it can achieve *both* developmental and "policy" objectives by using training primarily as a performance improvement intervention.

For those working in development who suffer from **change fatigue**, they can rest assured that Performance Improvement is not a new baby requiring yet another dose of new bath water! Some development professionals already implement various aspects of performance improvement, possibly without knowing it. When conducting a cause analysis, many solutions emerge that are common sense. Moreover, when training *is* the preferred solution to increasing performance in a partner institution, USAID is better equipped now to provide effective and results-oriented training than ever before. Finally, many solutions to organizational performance problems are well-known in the United States but for some reason do not spring to mind overseas as possible corrective actions for our development partners. For example, an analysis of poor performance at a partner institution's business office might reveal severe internal communication problems whose primary cause relates to the existing space allocation and desk configuration. Were this assessment to be presented to a U.S. firm, senior managers, possibly working with employees, would most likely propose a new floor plan to enhance communication and work flow. But when similar performance problems are noticed overseas, we minimize their importance and tend to offer what we know how to do (training). Imagine how the local institution might react were an outsider to propose space allocation changes rather than training to resolve a performance obstacle? Can USAID sensitize the institution's leaders to the performance impact of elements unrelated to skills-training – and then offer assistance? How do we deal with what are often the principal performance impediments, such as poor space allocation, bad lighting, confusing paper flow procedures, inadequate fraud controls, poor employee incentive programs, or the lack of an organizational Vision, Mission or Strategic Plan? Such causes of poor organizational performance cannot be readily solved by traditional USAID training solutions.

Why are **non-traditional solutions** seldom proposed to a key local organization yet may be recognized as a principal cause for poor performance? Is the SO team member or implementing partner unaware of the myriad causes for performance failures in institutions or work units? Does USAID and its partners have at their disposal resources and the capacity to assist a partner institution with innovative solutions (such as to facilitate the redesign of internal office procedures)? Solutions that emerge from a proper performance gap analysis may not lend themselves to traditional donor programs. For instance, what amount of training will resolve confusion in the business office of a key NGO that is tolerated if not encouraged by the organization's leadership to ensure personal advantages)? Whatever the reasons, USAID's tendency is to overlook critical solutions unless they fit traditional training types.

The principal lesson learned over the years of USAID investment in training is that **training is but one solution** available to organizations and cannot be used to solve all problems. It should not be implemented prior to conducting a proper performance and cause analysis, which does not have to be a complicated or long process. This is not the same as a Training Needs Assessment since it does not begin with the assumption that training can resolve the performance problems identified. Performance Improvement methodology has been refined by **Human Performance Technology (HPT)** practitioners, as they are called in North America, working with organizations such as the **International Society for Performance Improvement** and the

American Society for Training and Development. Dozens of comprehensive and excellent publications have appeared, many sponsored by these two organizations, that describe in detail the approach to take and the tools to use to induce organizational performance improvements at U.S. institutions. This vast experience is now being applied overseas to USAID's development context by a small group of professionals committed to building sustainable organizational capacity.

By and large a Mission's SO Teams, their implementing partners and local training providers are not familiar with Performance Improvement as described above and do not follow closely the impact Human Performance Technology has had on organizational change in North America. The problem becomes more acute where in-country training is favored by USAID Missions and implemented by field office of U.S. organizations and locally-controlled training providers. Worse, for training providers working in French, Portuguese and Spanish, virtually no information on Performance Improvement technology is available even if trainer and facilitators experienced in HPT could be found locally.

Exacerbating the situation is the decline in centrally-organized USAID training and devolution of the responsibility to manage training interventions to SO Teams. Few Missions now have resident expertise in what used to be called "human resources development" (HRD). Despite the size of USAID's investments in training, there are currently no mandated courses in managing the training process (let alone Performance Improvement!) for SO Team members or implementing partners. Performance Improvement as a "solution system" understood by USAID staff to build capacity with partner institutions is a framework largely unknown.

The purpose of this brief exposé is to pinpoint ways USAID has approached and managed training that have led to disappointing results and to introduce Performance Improvement as a helpful tool that builds on the lessons learned working with local partner institutions. Details on the Performance Improvement approach and the steps and tools that can be used with USAID's partner institutions can be obtained from USAID's Human Capacity Development Center or by contacting me at Associates for Global Change. There is also the Performance Improvement Coordinating Group (PICG), a small group of primarily health professionals within USAID and among certain U.S. partner institutions, that promote PI and meet periodically to exchange information.

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Background Information on Andrew Gilboy

Mr. Gilboy is an international development specialist with 35 years of professional experience in the planning, coordination and evaluation of donor assistance to developing countries, in particular in Africa. His work has included sector analyses and donor program reviews in connection with the development of strategic objective frameworks in education, human resource development and private-sector promotion. He has edited and synthesized development policy papers, conducted sector needs assessments, designed and undertaken impact evaluations and performed institutional performance improvement analyses. Mr. Gilboy also designs and conducts workshops on various management topics for development professionals in government and the NGO community and has extensive experience delivering training programs in French in Africa. As Human Resources Development/Private-Sector Officer for USAID in Mauritania, he directed a \$14 million portfolio of education, small business promotion, training and research activities. Mr. Gilboy is fluent in English, French and Wolof, the *lingua franca* of Senegal and Gambia. He has worked throughout North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and in Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Information on Associates for Global Change

- ✓ AGC is a consulting firm established in 1996. It is comprised of three full-time senior development experts and both African and non-African associates with shared values and a commitment to African economic and social development. In January, 2017 AGC became a Small Disadvantaged Business with the arrival of Marvin Muhumuza as President.
- ✓ AGC's purpose is to help Africa grow and compete more effectively in the global economy in order to promote the well-being of Africa's people. AGC accomplishes this, in part, by providing efficient and cost effective ways for African and non-African consultants to work together more closely and build long-term relationships and synergies.
- ✓ AGC only works on projects that are environmentally sound, developmentally sustainable, help alleviate poverty, build civil society and are fully inclusive of women.
- ✓ AGC's clients include USAID Missions and Contractors, UNDP, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, NGOs and several multinational corporations working in Africa.

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