

## **Practitioner Perspectives**

### **How Well Are We Feeding the Future? Data Limitations in Monitoring the Impact of the U.S. Global Food Security Initiative**

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**Abstract:** Food security is a growing global concern. The United Nations reports that at least 768 million people were undernourished in 2020, with the number of food-insecure people rising considerably from 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2010, the whole-of-government U.S. initiative Feed the Future (FTF) has been in place to coordinate U.S. global food security assistance and to monitor how the U.S. is progressing toward FTF's goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, poverty and malnutrition. In August 2021, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported on a review of FTF, in

which we examined how the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and its FTF partner agencies monitor and publicly report FTF's performance, among other topics (GAO, 2021). We found that USAID and its partner agencies have built a complex framework to guide performance monitoring for the initiative. However, we identified several limitations with this framework, including with its overall structure and performance indicators, which affect the ability to assess the initiative's progress. In particular, the framework relies on impact indicators to measure medium- and long-term development outcomes, which does not allow USAID to monitor and report on FTF's actual contributions to those outcomes. This paper provides an overview of FTF's performance monitoring system and explores some of the challenges USAID and its partner agencies face in collecting, using, and reporting impact indicators, including the limitations of relying on these data to demonstrate FTF's contribution toward the initiative's goals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Performance monitoring provides information agencies can use to support decision-making and program improvement to reach goals. GAO has synthesized leading practices for effective performance monitoring from law; Office of Management and Budget (OMB) regulation; prior audit work; surveys of federal managers; academic literature; private sector

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best practices; and expert and stakeholder contributions (Government Performance and Results Modernization Act, 2010; OMB, 2019; GAO, 1996; GAO, 2002; GAO, 2005; GAO, 2009, GAO, 2016; GAO, 2017; GAO, 2018). In particular, OMB's guidance on performance monitoring frameworks includes performance goals to allow for the meaningful monitoring of progress. A performance goal defines a specific, near-term achievable result that helps assess progress to longer-term strategic objectives or overarching goals.

Performance goals include a performance indicator, target, and timeline used to track progress by comparing actual performance against expected results. Agencies can use additional indicators that have a logical connection to the performance goal, such as outcome, output, or input indicators, to monitor progress toward performance goals (see Figure 1). As such, performance goals enable agencies to assess how projects and other efforts within initiatives such as FTF contribute to overall performance and inform progress toward longer-term strategic objectives and goals.

**Figure 1: Performance Goals and Their Role in a Performance Monitoring Framework**



Source: GAO analysis of Office of Management and Budget guidance. | GAO-21-548

### Methodology

For this report, we reviewed FTF documentation describing monitoring efforts and results, including its performance monitoring guidance and annual reports. We evaluated the extent to which FTF identified performance goals and indicators as defined by OMB and GAO leading practices. We assessed FTF's annual reports against leading practices GAO identified on performance reporting (GAO, 1996; GAO, 2002). In addition, we held multiple interviews with USAID and its FTF partner agencies that are responsible for the most funding: the Departments of Agriculture, State, and the Treasury; the Inter-American Foundation; the Millennium Challenge Corporation; the Peace Corps; and the U.S. African Development Foundation. We also interviewed other entities that collect

FTF's monitoring data, such as the World Bank, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and nongovernmental implementing partners, and several food security experts from think tanks. Furthermore, we reviewed a 2016 evaluation of FTF conducted by Dexis Consulting Group (Feed the Future, 2016).

### **Feed the Future and its Performance Monitoring Framework**

FTF, the U.S. government's global food security initiative, aims to improve agricultural practices, strengthen resilience, and increase nutrition through projects, research, policy development, and other efforts. USAID leads this effort in coordination with 11 other U.S. federal departments and agencies. FTF agencies have global food security projects in many countries but have targeted their efforts in select countries for each phase of FTF, Phase 1 in 2010-2016 and Phase 2 in 2017-present. Within each country, the FTF agencies further focus their interventions in specific areas, called zones of influence. To track results across numerous agencies, countries, and projects, USAID and its partner agencies created a complex performance monitoring system, collecting data on over 50 indicators with which they intended to measure FTF's outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

- **Output indicators:** Measure tangible and intended products or consequences of a project, such as the number of people trained.
- **Outcome indicators:** Measure short-term outcomes relevant to projects' activities or results at the zone of

influence level, such as the yield of agricultural commodities.

- **Impact indicators:** Measure medium- to long-term outcomes related to a portfolio of policies and projects that intend to change the development situation of the population in a country or an area within a country, such as the prevalence of poverty.

FTF agencies collect data on these indicators with the intent to inform progress across the initiative's three strategic objectives—improving agricultural practices, strengthening resilience, and increasing nutrition—and on its overarching goal—sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. Indicators also inform FTF's lower-level intermediate results and crosscutting intermediate results that support at least one of the strategic objectives.

USAID and its partner agencies have also developed thorough data reliability checks to strengthen the accuracy of FTF's data across projects, zones of influence, and countries. Implementing partners told us that these reviews helped their data collection on FTF indicators, and officials from USAID and its partner agencies told us that they were confident in the overall quality of FTF's data for their project management purposes. However, despite the intentions of this performance monitoring framework, FTF agencies face several challenges in collecting, using, and reporting impact indicators, which limit the extent to which these data are able to assess progress toward the initiative's goals.

### **Finding 1: Delayed collection of FTF's impact indicators limits reliability**

The apex of FTF's performance monitoring framework is its overarching goal: sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. USAID measures progress toward this goal using two impact indicators on poverty and child stunting (a measure of chronic undernutrition) across FTF zones of influence.

However, USAID's data on poverty and child stunting are limited by how frequently the data are available in FTF zones of influence, gathered through household surveys.

#### **Phase 1 Surveys.**

- USAID conducted *baseline* zone of influence surveys for Phase 1 in 2012-2013,
- *interim* surveys in 2015, and in a few instances used data from a national survey conducted in a recent year.
- Although USAID planned to conduct *final* surveys for Phase 1 of FTF three years following the interim surveys, USAID delayed the final surveys to attempt to align with Phase 2 baseline surveys, given the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 in 2017.

**Phase 2 Surveys.** Because USAID delayed the Phase 1 final and Phase 2 baseline surveys, it continued to use partial Phase 1 data throughout Phase 2, which ended in September 2021. USAID has conducted or is in the process of conducting final surveys for Phase 1 of FTF and baseline surveys for Phase 2, some of which USAID delayed further due

to security concerns in-country or the COVID-19 pandemic. As of March 2022, USAID was still in the process of conducting Phase 2 baseline surveys, with three of at least 20 planned reports completed.

USAID uses poverty and child stunting data from these surveys to set targets for FTF's goal-level impact indicators. FTF's original targets were to reduce poverty and child stunting across FTF's zones of influence by 20 percent by 2017, which USAID and its partner agencies extended to 2019 because of delays in Phase 1 final survey data. In 2019, USAID and its partner agencies used changes between the Phase 1 baseline and interim data to revise and extend these Phase 1 targets to an average reduction in poverty by 26 percent and of child stunting by 35 percent by 2021.

Because of limited data availability, USAID estimates changes in poverty and child stunting in FTF zones of influence by assuming constant rates of change in the periods before and after USAID collected data. For example, FTF's public reports from 2018 to 2020 state that poverty and child stunting dropped by an average of 23 percent and 32 percent, respectively, from 2010 to 2017 in FTF's zones of influence. To calculate these changes, USAID used poverty and child stunting data largely from 2012 to 2015, and used rates of change from this period to project changes to the 2010-2017 period.

Estimates that assume constant rates of change for multiple years have the potential to be inaccurate. This approach does not take into account factors that could affect poverty and child stunting levels from year to year; recent examples could include the 2020 locust

outbreak in East Africa, COVID-19, or the expansion of social safety net programs.

### **Finding 2: FTF's performance monitoring data does not show FTF's impact**

In addition to the data collection delays, we found that percentage changes in poverty and stunting in FTF zones of influence do not provide information about FTF's impact. At the time of our review, USAID categorized FTF's impact indicators as performance data, but USAID's ability to link the contributions of FTF to reductions in poverty and stunting is limited for several reasons. These include insufficient data on FTF project coverage and the inability to account for the related efforts of other organizations and external factors. In particular,

- **FTF coverage.** USAID lacks sufficient or robust enough data on the coverage of FTF projects within countries' zones of influence. USAID officials told us that when they tried to determine this level of coverage in the past, they found that either FTF projects did not have sufficient coverage to affect zone of influence-level changes, or they did not have data on which households participated in FTF projects. USAID plans to attempt to capture household participation in future zone of influence surveys. However, USAID would still need to ensure sufficient coverage of FTF projects in order to link projects to zone of influence changes.
- **Other efforts.** Other donors, governments, and local organizations

are involved in efforts to address poverty and malnutrition in areas where FTF works. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between the influence of FTF projects and that of others' efforts.

- **External factors.** Many external factors outside the scope of FTF's projects can influence poverty and stunting in a region or country, such as gender inequality, drought, and civil unrest.

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*Without ties to FTF projects and methods for controlling for external factors, these impact indicators do not demonstrate FTF's contributions to its goals. Instead, these data show policymakers' trends in poverty and child stunting, which are important context for FTF but do not speak to the impact of the initiative itself.*

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Instead of relying on impact indicators to communicate initiative progress, FTF would benefit from having lower-level performance goals directly tied to indicators more within FTF's direct control, such as outcome or output indicators. However, USAID and its partner agencies have not set any such performance goals for FTF.

USAID and its partner agencies instead have set intermediate results for FTF, but these are not performance goals because they are not measurable or quantifiable. For example, one of FTF's intermediate results reads, "strengthened inclusive food and agriculture systems that are productive and profitable." A related performance goal would demonstrate what progress toward that statement would look like, such as a certain percentage of

women, youth, and other marginalized groups supported in agriculture across the initiative within a specified time period. In addition, USAID and its partner agencies would need to explain how this performance goal is expected to influence the strategic objective that it supports—inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led economic growth—and therefore FTF’s overarching goal—sustainably reduce global poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.

Having performance goals would increase the use of FTF’s output and outcome data by establishing a linkage between actual performance data and FTF’s higher-level strategic objectives and overarching goal. As they stand, FTF’s performance monitoring efforts are too reliant on impact indicators and factors outside of FTF’s control to show FTF’s progress.

### **Finding 3: FTF’s reporting contains misleading statements on impact indicators**

Even though FTF’s impact indicators do not demonstrate FTF’s actual impact, FTF’s annual public reports contain unsupported statements claiming that FTF directly contributed to changes in poverty and stunting. For example, the 2018-2020 public reports state that poverty decreased by an estimated 23 percent and stunting decreased by an estimated 32 from 2010 to 2017 across FTF zones of influence. These statements are accompanied by language such as “FTF is making an impact” or “FTF has helped an estimated 23.4 million more people rise above the poverty line.” These statements are misleading to readers because, as previously discussed,

changes in impact indicators like poverty and stunting cannot be attributed to FTF projects. Moreover, these data might not be accurate, because, also as noted earlier, USAID calculates them by estimating projected trends. In part, USAID has continued to report poverty and stunting impact indicators to meet demands from external audiences. USAID officials told us that there is pressure to report on progress toward FTF’s overarching goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. However, by including unsupported statements tying FTF’s impact to decreases in poverty and stunting, these public reports do not provide external audiences accurate information on progress made due to FTF efforts.

### **GAO Recommendations to Improve FTF’s Performance Monitoring**

Successful monitoring of this initiative is vitally important to understand and learn from FTF’s progress, but FTF’s performance monitoring is limited by its use and reporting of impact indicators, including poverty and child stunting. In our August 2021 report, we made several recommendations to USAID to improve FTF’s performance monitoring and reporting, two of which specifically address challenges of impact indicators in performance monitoring. These included (1) establishing quantifiable and measurable performance goals, and (2) reporting the limitations of FTF’s impact indicators.

By setting performance goals at levels closer to FTF’s projects, USAID and its partner agencies could more clearly define what the initiative is trying to achieve and be better



equipped to analyze how FTF projects contribute to the initiative's progress. By reporting the limitations of FTF's impact indicators, including removing unsupported statements on FTF's contributions to reductions in poverty and stunting, USAID would no longer be misleading readers to believe that such reductions were due to the initiative's efforts.

USAID generally agreed with our recommendations and has taken steps to address them. In October 2021, USAID and its partner agencies released an updated Global Food Security Strategy to guide FTF's efforts for 2022-2026 (Feed the Future, 2021). This strategy touches on multiple ways in which FTF plans to address our recommendations. In particular, FTF agencies discussed monitoring progress through a combination of performance and tracking indicators, where tracking indicators would measure outcomes that would align with FTF's goals but would not be within FTF's direct control. Specifically, FTF agencies plan to track changes in goal- and strategic objective-level outcome and impact indicators, like poverty and child stunting, but will not use these indicators for performance monitoring or set targets for them. Instead, the FTF agencies will set performance targets for indicators at lower levels of FTF's performance monitoring framework. For example, in November 2021, USAID established two performance goals for FTF in the State-USAID Joint Strategic Plan (Department of State & USAID, 2022). USAID plans to set additional performance goals to reflect average population-based outcomes achieved across the zones of influence in the FTF target countries. Such

indicators and targets could be good candidates for performance goals, as they measure outcomes, are better linked to FTF projects, and support changes in FTF's higher-level strategic objectives and overarching goal. As a development initiative, FTF is not alone in the challenge of having high-level goals far removed from its direct control. However, by addressing our recommendations, USAID and its FTF partner agencies will be better positioned to understand FTF's progress and more meaningfully monitor and report FTF's contributions toward its strategic objectives and overarching goal of sustainably reducing global hunger, malnutrition, and poverty.

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