Cooperation with George Washington University provides USAID LEAF an Early Outcome Assessment

What are the major impacts USAID LEAF has made in Thailand? How can USAID LEAF maximize available resources in its final year to scale and replicate successes? How can USAID LEAF project benefits continue to accrue in the future? These are some of the questions the staff at USAID LEAF had in mind when an opportunity arose through a partnership with the George Washington University (GWU)’s Elliott School of International Affairs to conduct an early outcome assessment of the USAID LEAF project in Thailand.

The collaboration involves contributions from GWU, including the consultants’ time and international travel cost, as well as from USAID LEAF and its local government partner, the Protected Area Regional Office 16, including staff time and domestic logistics expenses. The partnership is win-win because USAID LEAF will have an independent outcome assessment of its activities in Thailand at a minimal price while the GWU’s consultants who are master’s degree candidates will have completed their final capstone project for their study.

After finalizing the agreement, framework and data collection tools, the GWU team reviewed the relevant literature and project documents then phone-interviewed the project staff. Next, the fieldwork to Thailand involved meetings, focus group discussions and interviews with representatives from government, local authorities, private sector, communities and USAID. Gathering the ideas from all stakeholders has enabled a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes and challenges of the project. Moreover, using a case study approach allows the assessment team to ascertain the effects of the various project components of regional knowledge exchange, policy support, capacity building, gender integration and sustainable natural resource management and the influence they have on one another, rather than monitoring them separately as is commonly the case.

By the end of the fieldwork, around 40 interviews and discussions were conducted. With the agreed upon definition of outcome as behavioral change, the team discovered the following highlights that were credited to USAID LEAF’s activities.

- The community members and local authorities developed an awareness that they are living in and have developed a sense of responsibility to care for the Maesa-Kokma UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere (MAB) Reserve.
- They also reflected that the MAB plan, when approved, will be practical because it was based on their own ideas, which they were able to voice through consultative workshops.
- Some stakeholders said USAID LEAF promoted forest restoration rather than simply planting trees without maintenance as other reforestation projects in the past have done.
- Stakeholders from government, private sector and communities expressed their trust in USAID LEAF to facilitate the first Payment for Ecosystem Services model in Thailand.

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