

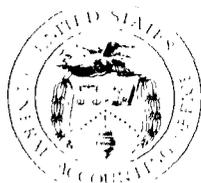
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on
Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives

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FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

AID'S Population Program Evaluations Have Improved, but Problems Remain





United States
General Accounting Office
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National Security and
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The Honorable Dante B. Fascell
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In May 1990, we reported that, among other population assistance program issues, Agency for International Development (AID) evaluations had been "unsystematic, uncoordinated, of uneven quality and have had relatively little influence on project design and management."¹ We were also critical of how evaluation results and other management information were used in the programming and budgeting decision-making process.

In response to your request, we have updated that portion of our May 1990 report concerning population program evaluations and have specifically examined whether AID

- uses uniform indicators for evaluating the performance and impact of its population programs,
- has a system for measuring the impact of country-specific and agencywide population programs relative to population program objectives, and
- uses the results of population assistance program evaluations in making programming and funding decisions.

Results in Brief

AID has improved its population program evaluation process since our 1990 report by establishing an evaluation mandate in AID's Office of Population; making the Center for Development Information and Evaluation the focal point for analysis, monitoring, and evaluation of program performance; expanding its data base to provide more complete information on population assistance; establishing a system to track data such as project type, funding, and location; and launching a new evaluation project and developing a strategy for targeting resources at the most populous countries. However, other evaluation problems remain.

AID uses a combination of various indicators for evaluating its population program, but the indicators are not uniformly used, and each has strengths and inherent weaknesses. The couple-years-protection indicator, for example, is commonly used, in combination with other data, to measure

¹Foreign Assistance: AID's Population Program (GAO/NSIAD-90-112, May 1, 1990).

distribution efficiency or to compare the cost-effectiveness of delivery methods. However, using this indicator requires that nonquantifiable assumptions be made about actual use, failure and wastage rates, and other factors. The total-fertility-rate indicator reflects changes in fertility rates—that is, it measures impact—but is difficult to attribute to a specific program.

AID has established an evaluation agenda designed to determine what long-term results are attributable to AID's programs. Two field studies have been completed, one in Kenya and another in the Philippines, primarily using the two "impact indicators"—contraceptive prevalence and total fertility rate. However, these studies did not quantifiably measure the extent to which AID's population programs accomplished agencywide program objectives.

The AID Administrator has articulated the population program's objectives, but the Directors of AID's Office of Population and Center for Development Information and Evaluation said that these objectives are not "operational" for measuring program impact. They stated that measuring progress against the Administrator's objectives would, for the most part, be technically inappropriate and not feasible. AID does not use impact evaluations to make agencywide programming or funding decisions.

AID Has Improved Its Population Program Evaluations

Recently, AID has begun to shift away from exclusive reliance on project evaluations toward broader countrywide and impact evaluations at the program level.² In fiscal year 1990, AID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation designed a 2-year project to coordinate the assessment of the impact of population assistance in six countries. Evaluations of the programs in Kenya and the Philippines have been completed; however, the evaluations, while addressing maternal and child health to some extent, did not quantifiably measure the extent to which AID's population projects accomplished agencywide program objectives. AID plans to conduct the other four studies in fiscal year 1992, and, according to AID officials, these studies will incorporate lessons learned from the previous two studies.

In July 1990, AID approved a plan for strengthening the Office of Population's evaluation of population programs. As part of this plan, the Office of Population, in coordination with the Center for Development

²AID defines "program performance evaluations" as assessments of how projects, recommended policy reforms, and other assistance have contributed to a particular strategic or program goal.

Information and Evaluation, initiated an evaluation project during fiscal year 1991 aimed at the development and application of improved methodologies for determining the impact of AID population programs.

Other actions AID has taken to improve population program evaluations include

- expanding its Projects Database of centrally funded projects to include all bilateral and regional population projects and their expenditures by country, as well as contraceptive expenditures by country;
- establishing an information system within the Family Planning Service Division for tracking data on project type, funding, location, life of project, and planned and actual couple-years-protection, and number of new acceptors for over 350 subprojects; and
- launching a new strategy, known as the Big Country Strategy, aimed at (1) more proportionally allocating funds and other technical resources to about 20 of the most populous countries, (2) maintaining support in selected less populous countries, (3) conducting demographic and health surveys to determine programmatic impact, and (4) coordinating funding with other donors.

In January 1991, the AID Administrator issued a "comprehensive evaluation agenda," and provided for an expanded role for the Center for Development Information and Evaluation, to include

- reviewing and reporting to the Administrator on program performance throughout the agency;
- developing an annual agenda of proposed evaluation topics on the basis of a rolling multiyear plan;
- planning quarterly evaluation briefings (chaired by the AID Administrator); and
- conducting field assessments and other special studies of program, policy, and operational effectiveness in achieving results according to the annual evaluation agenda.

Officials from the Center for Development Information and Evaluation stated that under the evaluation initiative, they are also developing an agencywide Program Performance Information System for Strategic Management. Current plans call for this system to begin routinely collecting uniform performance monitoring information throughout AID in a number of core program areas, including population, in the fall of 1992. AID officials stated that beginning in 1992, the Center plans to periodically

summarize and synthesize performance information from other mission and bureau monitoring, evaluation, audit, and analysis activities and to report annually on program performance.

Performance Indicators Used by AID

AID uses a number of performance indicators to measure the success of its population programs. Couple-years-protection, new users, and active/continuous users are most commonly used to measure program efficiency, whereas contraceptive prevalence and total fertility rate are used to assess program effectiveness.³

While AID officials believe these performance indicators are the best currently available, they recognize that inaccuracies and inconsistencies in their definition and use can lead to misinterpretations when trying to evaluate the results of population projects and make comparative evaluations. For example, the couple-years-protection indicator, commonly used to measure the supply of contraceptives and, along with other data, the efficiency of their distribution within a country is easy to calculate and track. However, it must be adjusted to account for assumptions about the sexual activity of different couples, the effectiveness of different contraceptive methods, wastage, data on behavioral and demographic characteristics of acceptors, and the length and continuity of use for representative samples of acceptors. The advantages and limitations of the performance indicators commonly used by AID are shown in table 1.

³The couple-years-protection is calculated by applying a formula based on the number of contraceptives delivered by a program. It provides a way to quantify and compare the efficiency of protection offered by different contraceptive methods in terms of the total time during which each method conferred protection to a couple.

The new users indicator is used to identify the enrollment of newly recruited clients who are receiving any method of contraception.

Active user indicates a person currently using a contraceptive method. Continuous user is a person who started and is continuing to use a contraceptive method under an organized family planning program without any major interruptions in use.

The contraceptive prevalence indicator is the percentage of women of childbearing age (approximately age 15 to age 49) using contraception.

Total fertility rate is the average number of children that will be born alive to a woman during her childbearing years given her society's child-bearing pattern.

Table 1: Advantages and Limitations of Selected Population Program Performance Indicators

Indicator	Advantages	Limitations
Couple-years protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Measures project output – Allows comparison of different contraceptive methods – Easy to calculate and track 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Based on supply and distribution rather than on actual use – Assumes proper use of contraceptives – Does not reflect user satisfaction – Does not consider failure rates and wastage of contraceptives – Does not consider the extent of sexual activity of different users
New users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Measures continuity of projects and efficiency of family planning service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Difficult to track because clients self-select and may use multiple delivery points – Lack of consistent definition and use by delivery agents
Active/continuous users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Measures continuity and effectiveness of contraceptive method 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Same limitations as new users indicator
Contraceptive prevalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Measures contraceptive acceptance and use – Can reflect contraceptive acceptance over a time span – Evaluates impact and long-term effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Difficult to attribute to a specific program
Total fertility rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reflects extent to which fertility rates change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Difficult to attribute to a specific program – Difficult to obtain accurate and adequate data

Note: AID also uses indicators such as birth rates, high-risks births, infant mortality, and population growth rates to help measure the impact of its population program.

According to AID officials, neither they nor the population community in general have been completely satisfied with the definitions of the performance indicators or how they are used. Consequently, they are reviewing various indicators to develop more reliable and uniform indicators. To address this issue, AID's Office of Population created a task force to identify indicators that more accurately reflect program performance, surveyed individuals involved with the evaluation of population programs, and will address this issue as part of its new evaluation project. The work of the task force has been turned over to the University of North Carolina, which was hired in September 1991 to implement the evaluation project.

Effects of Population Programs Not Measured Against Program Objectives

In November 1990, the AID Administrator stated that

The objectives of A.I.D.'s population program initiated 25 years ago remain in place:

- Encouraging a balance between population growth rates and available natural resources;

-
- Improving the health and survival of mothers and offspring by promoting adequate birth intervals and childbearing during the safest years for women;
 - And safeguarding the rights of individuals to choose the number and spacing of their children.⁴

Although the Administrator clearly articulated AID's population program objectives, the Directors of the Office of Population and the Center for Development Information and Evaluation stated that these are not operational objectives against which population program progress should be measured. Instead, they stated that the Administrator's objectives form the broad rationale for AID's assistance in the population sector and that to measure program progress along these broad dimensions, particularly the first and third of these objectives, would be technically inappropriate and not feasible.

We cannot say whether the AID Administrator's specifically stated population program objectives should be considered operational in the sense that evaluations should measure progress against them or whether more measurable objectives, such as lowering fertility rates and reducing population growth rates, as suggested in our May 1990 report, should be the stated operational objectives. However, we found that most of AID's evaluations of its population programs have primarily focused on determining whether required actions on specific projects had been taken. Evaluations were not designed to measure the results or impact of the specific projects against overall program goals in a given country or agencywide population program objectives.

Also, most evaluations were not designed to compare the effectiveness of different projects. For example, evaluations conducted in Bangladesh and Ecuador identified actions completed under the project being evaluated and changes in the demand for contraceptives, in the family planning services provided, or in both; however, they did not attempt to determine the impact of all AID population assistance efforts in the country relative to country-specific and overall population program objectives.

AID has conducted a few evaluations that have gone beyond the project level using the following methodologies: (1) synthesis of findings and lessons learned from evaluations of a number of population projects,

⁴AID Administrator, "Remarks to the Seventh Meeting of Cooperating Agencies," Washington, D.C., November 29, 1990.

(2) country-specific impact evaluations,⁵ and (3) survey data on fertility and family planning behavior. These evaluations did not analyze the extent to which programs achieved overall agency objectives, but, for example,

- sought to determine the impact and strengths and weaknesses of a community-based contraceptive distribution program in a specific area of a country,
- reviewed the progress of private sector organizations in achieving project goals and objectives and provided prescriptive advice on improving the remaining 2 years of a bilateral project, and
- aimed to document the accomplishments and problems of an international social marketing program.

Evaluations Are Not Linked to AID's Programming and Budgeting Process

The results of AID's population assistance evaluations are not systematically linked to agencywide programming and funding decisions.⁶ Instead, they are used by middle management in developing new projects or amending ongoing projects. AID officials stated that there was no office responsible for coordinating, on an agencywide basis, the planning and scheduling of the different population evaluations conducted during a year so that quantitative and qualitative data could routinely be analyzed for use by senior management.

AID's programming and funding process does not involve analyses of whether and to what extent the agency's population programs have achieved agencywide objectives. AID's senior management's decisions are based on 5-year country development strategy statements, submitted by bureaus, missions, and offices, that outline political, economic, and social development conditions. The strategy statements also identify AID's mission, office, or bureau objectives, as well as the sectors and problems to be addressed within specified annual funding levels. The programming decisions result in identification of project proposals.

Each year missions and offices prepare annual action plans that link the 5-year strategy statements and operational programs. The action plans also link the strategies with specific projects while focusing management attention on issues affecting the effectiveness in achieving the strategy statements' goals. In addition, the bureaus, missions, and offices prepare

⁵Impact evaluations, as defined by AID, focus on the achievement of the project's goal or ultimate long-term results.

⁶According to AID officials, this condition is not unique to AID's population program, but because of AID's decentralized management structure, is also true of AID programs in most sectors.

annual budget submissions that present the financial aspects of the proposed programs for the fiscal year. These budget submissions are intended to be carried out in line with the approved strategy statements. The budget submissions serve as the links between the strategy statements, the action plans, and the specific mixes of projects and non-project assistance to be implemented; however, they do not analyze the extent to which AID's past or ongoing population programs have achieved agencywide program objectives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We believe the actions taken by AID to strengthen its system for evaluating and monitoring program performance will increase the value of evaluation in AID. However, key issues regarding the consistency and use of evaluation results remain. It is difficult for AID or others to evaluate the progress and success of AID's population assistance program because of the lack of agreement within the agency about the operational objectives of the program; therefore, evaluations are less meaningful and useful in assisting senior management in making agencywide programming and funding decisions.

We recommend that the AID Administrator (1) clarify whether the three population program objectives he articulated in November are intended to be operational and measurable program objectives and, if not, clearly articulate the program's operational objectives so that program results, impacts, and accomplishments can be measured against them and (2) use the results of such evaluations in making agencywide programming and budgeting decisions.

Scope and Methodology

To assess AID's methods for evaluating its population programs, we interviewed AID officials and reviewed (1) project evaluation reports, (2) monitoring data and project status reports, and (3) other pertinent records in Washington, D.C. We also interviewed an AID consultant at Dual Associates/Population Technical Division, Rosslyn, Virginia. To ascertain the advantages and limitations of performance indicators, we analyzed AID task force reports and interviewed AID officials and officials of several private voluntary organizations involved in population assistance and family planning.

We visited Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico to review the approaches and indicators used in evaluating population programs. We selected these countries because they (1) were designated by officials of the Office of

Population's Family Planning Services Division as either high- or medium-priority countries for AID population program funding, (2) represented different levels of contraceptive prevalence, (3) varied in their need for population assistance, and (4) were located in a region where some of the strongest efforts at evaluating efficiency and effectiveness have been made. In addition, AID officials believed the programs in these countries reflected many of the varied circumstances, conditions, and challenges experienced in programs and evaluations of other AID-supported countries. In these countries, we interviewed officials and reviewed records at AID missions and the office of the AID representative in Mexico. We also interviewed officials of various private voluntary organizations and host-country agencies.

As requested, we did not obtain official agency comments. However, AID program officials reviewed a draft of this report, and we have included their comments where appropriate. We conducted our review from September 1990 to September 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

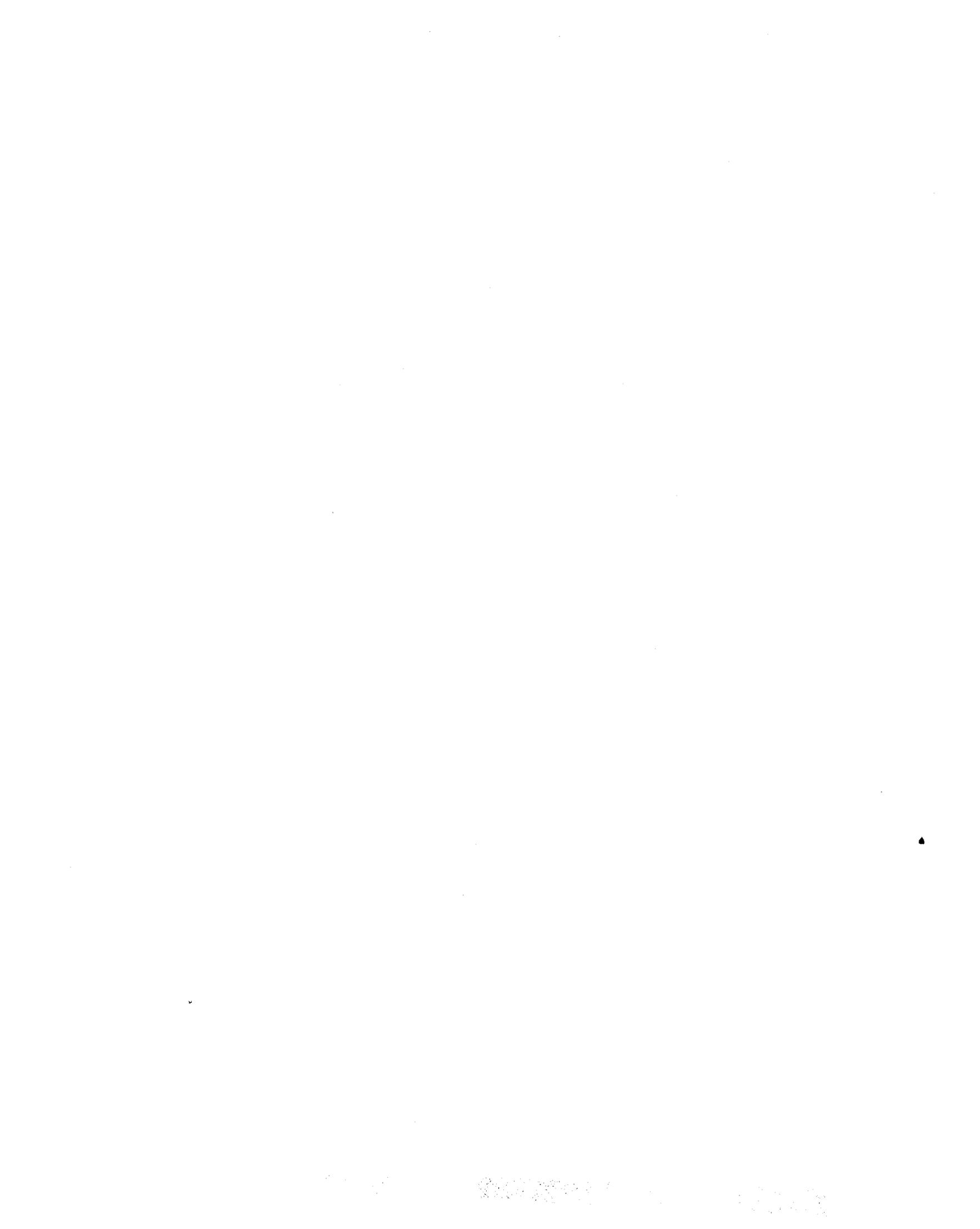
We are sending copies of this report to the Administrator of the Agency for International Development and other interested congressional committees. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me on (202) 275-5790 if you or your staff have any questions on this report. Major contributors to this report were Ronald A. Kushner, Assistant Director; MaeWanda Michael-Jackson, Evaluator-in-Charge; and Paurvi Bhatt, Evaluator.

Sincerely yours,



Harold J. Johnson
Director, Foreign Economic
Assistance Issues



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