



Assessment of a Peer Mentoring Program to Build Capacity for Course Development and Delivery

Dr. Steven J. Burian, University of Utah

Dr. Steve Burian is a Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of Utah. He served as the first co-Director of Sustainability Curriculum Development, and is currently the Project Director of the USAID-funded U.S.-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water, the Associate Director of the Global Change and Sustainability Center, and the Founding Director of the Water Center – all at the University of Utah. His research group has contributed new approaches for designing and operating resilient and smart urban water infrastructure. This research has received more than \$15 million in funding and produced more than 75 peer-reviewed publications. Dr. Burian's enthusiasm for student learning has led to teaching awards and service assignments as assistant mentor and mentor at the American Society of Civil Engineers ExCEED Teaching Workshop. He has also developed a variety of teaching and curriculum development workshops, including the Wasatch Experience Sustainability Teaching Workshop at the University of Utah. Steve has participated in the ASEE Annual Conference every year since 2007, co-authoring 14 papers and presenting 12. At the 2011 conference his paper was awarded the Glen L. Martin ASEE Civil Engineering Division Best Paper Award. Steve is a registered professional engineer in Utah.

Dr. Mercedes Ward, University of Utah

Prof. Sajjad Ahmad, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Dr. Ahmad is a Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Construction at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). His teaching and research interests are in the area of sustainable planning and management of water resources, water-energy nexus, and stormwater management. He is particularly interested in using systems approach to address water sustainability issues.

David Lawrence Stevenson

Prof. Tariq Banuri, University of Utah

Professor Tariq Banuri, Department of Economics, University of Utah, holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University. He started his career as a member of the erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), and served in a number of positions, including as the Director, UN Division for Sustainable Development, founder and first Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad, Director, Asia Centre of the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), and Executive Director of the Global Change Impact Studies Centre (GCISC). He has served as Coordinating Lead Author on the Nobel Prize winning Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), member of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (AGECC), member of the UN Committee on Development Policy (CDP), member of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Council, member of the Central Board of Governors of the State Bank of Pakistan, and member/secretary of the Presidential Committee on Higher Education. In 2002 he was awarded the Sitara-i-Imtiaz (SI) for his services to research and education.

Prof. Muhammad Aslam Chaudhry, University of Utah

Research Professor, Economics Department, University of USA, and Deputy Project Director, US-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water, Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro, Pakistan.

Dr. Rasool Bux Mahar P.E., Mehran University, Jamshoro

He is working as Professor in U.S.-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro, and working as a Deputy Director (Academic and Research) and also as an Editor of Mehran University Research Journal of Engineering & Technology. He did Ph.D. from Tsinghua University Beijing, China and Post Doctorate from the University of Utah, USA,



has more than 20 years teaching and research experience. Published more than 50 research papers in the International reputed Journals and presented more than 30 papers in National and International conferences and symposiums. He has been retained as a Co-director/ HoD of Environmental Engineering Department, in the Institute of Environmental Engineering & Management; Mehran University. He worked as a Project Coordinator/P.I in various research projects funded by various donors, i.e. HEC, DFID, British Council, UNEP, UNDP, and US-PCASW.

Prof. Jeffrey D. Ullman, Stanford University

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Abstract

Building capacity in higher education in developing countries is critical for meeting many of the country development objectives. There have been numerous approaches to improve the abilities of professors to prepare and deliver courses. Structured independent learning using published resources (e.g., books, online), workshops, seminars, and mentoring are among the most common. This paper describes a peer mentoring program to build the capacity of water resources and environmental engineering professors in Pakistan. The program is delivered using an online learning management system, Canvas. The peer mentoring is conducted through weekly interactions via video conferencing with additional learning facilitated through Canvas. Structured instruments guide mentor review and feedback on the creation of syllabi, lesson plans, learning activities, assessments, and teaching. The program has been delivered each semester since Fall 2015. This paper will present an assessment of the impact of the program on course development and delivery. Mentor and instructor assessments and reflections from 2.5 years of the program are analyzed to identify effective program elements and areas for improvement. Ideas were compiled and used to design a transition of the program to a semi-autonomous course-development and delivery-mentoring platform that will be available online.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as the framework for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 17 SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) introduced by the UN in 2000, and they seek to illustrate the universal approach needed to eradicate poverty and heal the planet¹. Significant progress was made on the MDGs, but the SDGs seek to go further to address the root causes of poverty and the universal need for development that works for all people². The SDG agenda recognizes that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and addresses a range of social needs including water, education, health, etc.

SDG 4 is focused on education, seeking to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. Target 4.3, equal access to technical/vocational and higher education, is specifically tied to higher education with the target being “By 2030, access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.” Higher education is also interconnected to other SDGs related to poverty (SDG1), health and well-being (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5), decent work and economic growth (SDG8), responsible consumption and production (SDG12), climate change (SDG13), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG16). Indeed a case can be made that higher education plays a significant role in each of the SDGs, providing the basis for an advanced workforce and the informed society necessary to implement the activities necessary to achieve the targets of the SDGs.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has long supported programs to build capacity in higher education in Pakistan in the areas of energy, water, and food security. Recently, the

Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) program was launched by USAID and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) to strengthen a culture of applied research in Pakistan. The CAS program set up three centers: (1) Agriculture/Food Security at University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, in partnership with University of California, Davis, (2) Water at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology (MUET), in partnership with University of Utah, and (3) Energy at National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, and University of Engineering and Technology, Peshawar, in partnership with Arizona State University.

Similar to many places in the U.S., Pakistan faces a multi-faceted water crisis taking the form of scarcity, floods, degraded quality, public health risk, salinity and water logging of agricultural lands, and conflict. These challenges are intensifying as population grows, economies transition, populations migrate, and climate changes. The U.S.-Pakistan Center for Advanced Studies in Water (USPCAS-W) was established to help achieve water security in Pakistan. USPCAS-W promotes integrated, equitable, sustainable, and efficient use of water in Pakistan and other countries and transfers the knowledge gained back to problems in the United States. USPCAS-W is headquartered at MUET and is being developed with the technical assistance of the University of Utah (U). The U has established a project management unit at MUET and works in collaboration to deliver capacity building activities with numerous supporting organizations including Colorado State University (CSU), City College of New York (CCNY), University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), UNESCO Institute for Higher Education, and others.

USPCAS-W's goal is to work synergistically with collaborators and partners to enhance the capacity of Pakistan's higher education institutions in curriculum development, applied research, innovation and commercialization, business growth, stakeholder engagement, and workforce development in regards to water resource planning, use, and management. A related goal is to operationalize such cross cutting objectives as gender equality, network development, fundraising, outreach, and policy impact. The USPCAS-W Program is being implemented through five components: (1) Governance, (2) Curriculum Reform, (3) Applied Research, (4) Training, and (5) Sustainability. More details of USPCAS-W are available at <http://water.utah.edu/uspcasw> and <http://water.mueta.edu.pk/>.

The USPCAS-W Curriculum component is anchored by the creation of four new graduate degree programs in areas of great need in Pakistan: (1) Hydraulics, Irrigation, and Drainage; (2) Integrated Water Resources Management; (3) Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Sciences; and (4) Environmental Engineering. The programs started in 2015 have graduated more than 30 students and currently have more than 125 enrolled in MS and PhD tracks.

To accelerate the creation of these four graduate degree programs and delivery of dozens of new courses, mostly by early career faculty, an approach was needed to ensure efficiency and assure quality. This prompted the design of the USPCAS-W Course Mentoring Program (CMP).

The goal of this paper is to present the assessment of the CMP and stimulate ideas for making the process more efficient, effective, sustainable, and transferable. The next section describes the CMP approach and key activities. The third and fourth sections describe the methods and results, respectively, to assess the quality and impact of the CMP. The paper concludes with a summary synthesizing the assessment and outlining a path forward for the USPCAS-W CMP and making the resources available to the higher education and development community.

Course Mentoring Program

The goal of the USPCAS-W CMP is to develop and deliver instruction at MUET that is consistent with expectations at the leading institutions of higher education around the world. To enable USPCAS-W to achieve this goal, instructors at MUET are assigned mentors at the U, CSU, CCNY, UNLV, and other institutions to review learning materials and delivery of the courses comprising the USPCAS-W curriculum. The CMP is designed to be an efficient system with accountability for verifying course development and delivery quality.

The USPCAS-W curriculum was created in 2015, and the first students enrolled for the Fall 2015 semester. In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, the CMP was delivered using Box, a file sharing service, to coordinate exchange and review of learning materials. Since the majority of courses in the program were being developed from scratch, extensive file sharing and revision was necessary. Mentors were originally assigned based on the ability to provide technical content oversight. The mentor-mentee teams were guided by a brief document and templates through a process of reviewing learning materials, providing feedback, reviewing revisions, assessing teaching, providing recommendations for improvement, and overseeing the development of a course improvement plan.

In Fall 2016, the program was modified to have a more structured approach. The CMP was revised to be delivered using the Canvas online learning management system (LMS) along with Box online file sharing. Both mentor and instructor are granted access to the system and guided through the process using assignments, discussions, and other tools in the Canvas LMS. In many ways, Canvas sets up the mentoring experience similar to a semester course (as Canvas is designed to support). The mentor provides review and critique of learning materials (as an instructor of a course would). The CMP Administration Team reviews progress and interactions in Canvas and provides additional feedback to the instructor and mentor as needed. As a sample, the current schedule of activities and deliverables is provided in Table 1.

The review and feedback process is guided by forms that are first used to guide self-assessment by the instructor, then completed by the mentor, and returned to the instructor. After the first two semesters of the CMP, the teaching assessment piece was separated from the mentoring to provide an independent evaluation. This enabled the mentor to be an advocate and supporter of the effort while a third party provided an assessment of both the instructor and mentor. Assessment is coordinated using a standard Teaching Assessment Worksheet, which is adapted from a design created by the ASCE ExCEEd Teaching Workshop. Unfortunately, the independent assessment has not been initiated because of priority to other project needs.

As instructors are working on their lessons, they have access to effective teaching workshop materials from the USPCAS-W training programs as well as Technical Advisors from the U present in Pakistan.

More information about the CMP is available at <http://water.utah.edu/uspcasw>.

Table 1. Deliverables Completion Schedule (details of deliverables provided after table)

	Submission Deadline* (MUET Instructor)	Review Deadline* (Mentor)
1	Schedule Meetings	February 2, 2018

2	Syllabus	February 2, 2018	February 9, 2018
3	25% of Lessons	February 16, 2018	February 23, 2018
4	Learning Assessments	March 2, 2018	March 9, 2018
5	50% of Lessons	March 16, 2018	March 23, 2018
6	75% of Lessons	April 6, 2018	April 13, 2018
7	100% of Lessons	April 27, 2018	May 2, 2018
9	Course Improvement Plan	May 11, 2018	May 18, 2018

*Note: The instructor and mentor must work incrementally on lesson deliverables, which means as deliverables are completed the instructor uploads and requests review from mentor. For example, the deadlines for 25% of lessons are February 16 (submitted) and February 23 (reviewed), but the instructor should upload Lesson 2 to Box as soon as it is ready and the mentor should review and provide feedback to the instructor before the lesson is delivered to the students.

Assessment Approach

Continuous assessment was part of the process. Each semester the CMP team would review the program and make on-course adjustments for the subsequent semester. A more complete and semi-independent assessment was performed in 2017 to provide broader and more generalized recommendations for improving and sustaining the program beyond USAID funding. The results of the 2017 assessment are report here.

The 2017 assessment was based on primary and secondary data:

Primary data. (1) A questionnaire (designed in consultation with the MUET M&E Specialist) was sent to all faculty who are currently employed by the Center and have participated in the CMP (i.e., faculty who are adjunct or who are no longer with the Center were not included). The response rate was 10 out of 15. However, 3 of the 5 who did not participate in the questionnaire provided information about their experiences through one-to-one discussions on the topic. Several of the respondents to the questionnaire were asked follow-up questions in-person (either because of a particular comment they made or because of nonresponses to the open-ended portions of the questionnaire). (2) Mentors that had multiple mentoring experiences with the same instructor and course were asked to provide longitudinal assessment using a questionnaire/survey.

Secondary data. In recent semesters, the USPCAS-W U team has been using a learning management system called Canvas to track assignments completed by both mentees and mentors. This tracking information was referenced for Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Fall 2017.

Assessment Results – MUET Instructor

The CMP began in Fall 2015, but only 3 MUET faculty members have participated every semester. The data indicate that most faculty have been mentored for more than one course—and by more than one mentor (see Table 2).

Table 2. MUET faculty participation in CMP of those responding to survey

	Range	Average
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No. of semesters	2-5	3.4
No. of different courses	1-4	2.3
No. of different mentors	1-5	2.5

Perceived Course Improvements from CMP

Overall, faculty thought that their participation in the CMP had improved their course content and delivery in several specific ways, including learning objectives, technical content, experiential learning, real-world Pakistani examples, and teaching approach/style (Table 3). The perceived improvement of the technical content was the highest rated category, although it was not stressed in the structure of the CMP. The CMP elements and templates focused on effective teaching proven practices – learning objectives, assessment, active learning, experiential learning, etc. This impact was anticipated, but it was not an intentional focal point of the structured mentoring because the emphasis was meant to be fundamental pedagogy and not the technical content.

The mainstreaming of gender was one area for which less improvement was perceived. This was not an intentional element of the CMP. However, it is a major intentional element of USPCAS-W, which we assumed would translate over to discussions of course delivery. It was also an area we were hoping would feedback to the mentors to influence the integration of this element into their teaching. One improvement we will look to make in the future development of the CMP is to include intentional elements assessing gender and diversity in examples, case studies, etc.

Table 3. Perceptions of MUET faculty regarding course improvements due to participation in CMP

My participation in the CMP has improved...	Average*
a. The learning objectives of my course(s).	4.4
b. The technical content of my course(s).	4.5
c. The student learning assessments I use in my course(s).	4.0
d. The experiential learning elements in my course(s).	4.3
e. The mainstreaming of gender (i.e., inclusion of readings or assignments that highlight gender related issues) in my course(s).	2.9**
f. The inclusion in my course(s) of real-world examples from the Pakistani context.	4.3
g. My teaching approach/style.	4.3

* Average response to Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree...5 = strongly agree.

** Two respondents marked “NA” for “not applicable.”

Variation in Quality of Mentorship

A primary challenge facing the CMP discovered in the assessment is the ability to maintain consistency across assigned mentors. Four out of 9 faculty respondents thought that the quality of mentorship varied significantly across different mentors. Three out of 7 thought that the quality of mentorship by the same mentor(s) varied significantly across semesters – but 2 of these 3 indicated that the variation was due to quality improving over time. Only 1 out of 7 faculty who had received mentorship for the same course over multiple semesters thought that they had not received useful feedback for all semesters.

At least one mentee received suggestions from different mentors that appear to be substantively different for the same course. The comments of 2 mentees indicated that they may have received suggestions that did not transfer well to the local context. One of these modified the suggestions to make more locally applicable (e.g., applying high level concepts to local level issues in Pakistan); the other did not (but perhaps should have in light of complaints from students).

An individual respondent noted that a more senior mentor was less effective because the mentor devoted less time to the task. Although not meant to be a generalization, it did point out an important issue about the time commitment possible from senior faculty members with large research programs. Even if those individuals teach the same course there may be challenges in devoting sufficient time and attention to the task. Also at play here may be the fact that senior faculty members might be less familiar with the development of course materials since it may have been a very long time since he or she had to do this activity.

Use of Canvas for CMP

One area that was envisioned and believed to be a significant improvement was the use of the online learning management system to deliver the CMP. This was designed to help provide consistency of mentoring activities. It did accomplish this, but it seems to have helped all conform at the price of greater tedium. Seven out of 10 thought that the increased structure provided through Canvas (e.g., the use of Canvas assignments) improved the CMP. One respondent mentioned that monitoring through Canvas was the least valuable aspect of the CMP and that uploading to Box should be sufficient (Faculty Respondent F2). Another thought that there were too many notifications and deadlines – which is not in-and-of-itself a feature of Canvas, although it is facilitated by Canvas (Faculty Respondent F10).

Ninety percent of questionnaire respondents thought that the CMP should be continued – and the one respondent who said it should not explained what they meant: it should continue but only for new courses (Faculty Respondent F2). Another respondent thought that the CMP “should be more demand based now” (Faculty Respondent F9; see also Box 3).

Assessment Results – Mentors

There were 9 mentors that worked with the same MUET faculty member on the same course at least two times. These mentors had a unique perspective to assess longitudinal improvement across semesters. Five of the 9 mentors responded to survey questions and provided additional feedback to support the assessment of the effectiveness and impact of the CMP. One mentor that responded provided feedback on two mentees. A summary of their observations and suggestions follows.

Improvement of Teaching

Mentors were asked to identify which improved the most because of the program – course content or instructor’s teaching, both equally, or neither. Three of the 5 mentors noted both to have improved. Two mentors noted a lack of improvement. The reasons noted for lack of improvement were different.

One mentor noted the reason to be the mentee did not dedicate the time to trying to improve content or teaching, despite multiple easy interventions (e.g., using a textbook) were noted. The one mentor that responded for two mentees noted the mentees were already accomplished instructors and did not need mentoring.

The types of specific improvements varied. The one area most noted was the increased introduction of active learning activities, case studies, and practical problem-based learning. This was positive to hear since traditional instruction in Pakistan emphasizes theoretical aspects of the topics. An emphasis of USPCAS-W is adapting instruction to provide more practical training and tangible impact to community needs directly related to the achievement of the SDG for water.

Trend in Improvement

Mentors were asked to rate the degree improvements with each time the course was mentored - degree of improvement increased each successive mentoring semester (the mentoring had a greater impact each successive semester), the degree of improvement decreased each successive mentoring semester (the mentoring had less impact each successive semester), or the degree of improvement was the same or had no trend each successive mentoring semester. It was anticipated that the degree of improvement (i.e., the delta) would increase for the second and even third time because mentees would be gaining confidence and experience, and the fact that additional USPCAS-W training in effective teaching was supplementing the CMP. However, this was not observed by the mentors. Two noted the degree of improvement was the same, which was positive but did not reflect the synergistic impact of multiple training programs.

Challenges

A difficult challenge noted was the unwillingness or seemingly too busy to adjust attitude of mentees. Multiple mentors noted making relatively easy-to-implement adjustments that were ignored and not applied multiple times. It was also observed that different responses were noted for different mentors, possibly indicating the importance of the mentor in the relationship.

Communication was noted as a limitation to the effectiveness of the CMP. One mentor noted this as the improvement most needed in the future – to provide more physical interaction to accompany the virtual and asynchronous interaction.

Upon reflection between mentors and coordinators, a key need for the CMP was an organized compendium of effective teaching resources that can be part of the CMP mentoring tools.

Other Observations from Mentors

Generally mentors noted improvement in ability to apply basic organizational elements of course and lesson planning – in particular using learning objectives to organize content. Also, mentors noted an increased confidence in teaching and improved comfort level to adapt courses to meet their individual needs.

Mentors noted the linkage of the course improvements to faculty research. This was not an intentional intervention from the CMP, but a byproduct of the emphasis of the USPCAS-W on building research capacity. Mentors noted the adaptation of course content over multiple semesters to better fit instructor research projects and areas, and another noted the incorporation of research results (specifically student thesis research) into the course content. Both mentors that noted this, highlighted the adjustments as positive for effectiveness. One mentor noted the lack of direct linkage to research as a drawback of the CMP. The suggestion from the mentor was to lead with research mentoring and have that lead to directed improvements in graduate education. Although research connections have not been intentional with the past delivery of the CMP, it will be for future improvement.

Limitations of the mentee assessment

There are several limitations that should be kept in mind. First, this assessment focused on the benefits of the CMP for curriculum and teaching, but it may also be providing benefits for research. For example, some mentees have developed long-term research relationships with their CMP mentors such that their students are benefitting as well (e.g., through exchange program research mentorship and working on papers together). Second, it was apparent through informal discussions that some mentees felt uncomfortable criticizing the CMP in general and their mentors in particular. Those who were least satisfied may have been those who did not participate in the questionnaire. Indeed, there were a few mentees who in-person described their experience with the CMP as not very positive due to low responsiveness of their mentors. Third, this assessment does not directly relate the quality of mentorship to the degree of improvement in teaching effectiveness. It is plausible that MUET faculty who receive better student course evaluations are more effective teachers—but it is also plausible that more effective teachers have had more effective mentors. Reflecting on the plausibility of this causal chain—and the implications it may have for reforming the CMP as well as faculty performance evaluations—is recommended.

Summary

This paper presented the USPCAS-W Course Mentoring Program. The CMP has evolved in 3 years to be a semi-autonomous effort to efficiently develop high quality courses at higher education institutions in developing nations.

Overall, the CMP appears to be well-regarded by most of the MUET faculty. However, there are some problems with implementation. First, not all mentors are equally engaged. In some cases, the lack of mentee engagement (as evidenced through Canvas) may be a reflection of lack of engagement on the part of the mentor because some mentees may “check out” of the program if they perceive their mentors as unresponsive. Second, the Canvas structure (i.e., assignments and due dates for mentees and mentors) has its pros and cons. It facilitates interaction in some cases, but perhaps inhibits it in others. More to the point: the Canvas structure may work best with mentors whose engagement with USPCAS-W either began through their involvement with the CMP or is largely based on the CMP. Moving forward, this assessment has identified a number of areas for improvement.

The primary conclusion of this assessment is that the CMP is perceived by MUET faculty as an effective means of improving course content and delivery at MUET. However, this is based on very

limited data. There clearly is room for improvement and even evolution. The following are the recommendations and ideas that emerged through this assessment process.

1. Shift to a demand-driven approach.

- a. Courses should be “graduated” out of the CMP when MUET faculty member requests it and the request is supported by mentor and USPCAS-W Executive Committee.
- b. Monitoring of mentor input appears to be necessary – but in a demand-driven CMP, each mentor’s input expectations would be different. Therefore, a tailored agreement between the mentee and his or her mentor could be arranged at the outset of the semester.
- c. Module development to support specific repeated requests.

2. Shift to action learning.

- a. For courses going through a second CMP semester, shift from submission-and-review structure to more direct interaction based on action learning to alleviate boredom and evolve CMP structure from “teacher-student” to “mentor-mentee” structure.

3. Ensure equity of mentorship quality.

- a. Devising a system that ensures improved course content and delivery in an equitable way for all participants is important. In addition there should be a revised incentive system that rewards *quality* rather than *quantity* of mentorship.

4. Integrate the CMP with research programs.

- a. Although improved research collaboration has always been understood as a potential benefit of the CMP, it may be that a more intentional integration of curriculum and research would benefit all parties involved, including students.

5. Turn the CMP into a locally-based program.

- a. One faculty member suggested this—and it is an interesting idea. Sometimes the best way to learn is to teach, and certainly stimulating a vibrant community of practice has been a goal of the USPCAS-W. That would require some shift from the “technical assistance” model of capacity building currently being used by the CMP.

6. Incorporate lessons and learning materials into the online materials.

- a. The learning is entirely dependent on mentor oversight and instructor independent effort to use materials available to them through USPCAS-W programs and more broadly. This could be structured as a mastery-based learning program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project reported herein is sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the sole responsibility of the University of Utah and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. The support of USAID and its personnel involved with this effort are gratefully appreciated.

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