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Walmart and USAID: The Evolution of a Global Cross-Sector Partnership

“People expect a lot of us, and they have a right to. Due to our size and scope, we are uniquely positioned to have great success and impact in the world, perhaps like no company before us.”

— Lee Scott, CEO of Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., October 24, 2005

As Kathleen McLaughlin walked through the doors of the Walmart home office in Bentonville, Arkansas, she passed by a painting of what had become an iconic image of the changes that had taken place at Walmart over the last decade. The painting depicted a convoy of Walmart trucks lined up behind a police patrol car waiting to enter the city of New Orleans with food and water in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The August 2005 storm devastated the city and the surrounding region. At the time, CEO Lee Scott encouraged his executive team to respond, not in a “measured” way, but “in a way appropriate to our size and the impact we can have.” Walmart’s response to the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina had been a transitional moment for how the company saw its role in society.¹

As McLaughlin made her way to her office, she considered the vision Scott had presented to Walmart’s employees just a couple of months later in his speech, “Twenty First Century Leadership.” In this speech, Scott compelled the entire organization to consider its role in the world and its contribution to a healthier, more sustainable society.²

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©2015 Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. This case was written for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. by Ted London (Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business and Senior Research Fellow at the William Davidson Institute) and Colm Fay (Research Manager at the William Davidson Institute) with the assistance of graduate students Puneet Goenka (Ross School of Business), Kristine Schantz (Ross School of Business and School of Natural Resources and Environment), Diana Won (Ford School of Public Policy), and Leila Yosef (Ford School of Public Policy). This case was prepared as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a situation.

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This vision had also led to some very large and very public commitments by the company in the areas of energy, waste, products, employees, and community engagement. In 2010, for example, Walmart had committed to sourcing at least \$1 billion in food from small and medium-sized farmers in emerging markets, and increasing the incomes of those farmers by at least 10% by 2015. It also launched a global commitment to sustainable agriculture, pledging to train 1 million smallholder farmers and farm workers in emerging markets by the end of 2016, half of whom would be women.³

When McLaughlin joined Walmart in 2013 as senior vice president of corporate affairs and president of the Walmart Foundation, she inherited the responsibility for delivering on these commitments. To achieve these goals, Walmart had come to recognize the value of establishing partnerships with organizations in the development sector that had access to networks of implementing partners, projects, and smallholder farmers across much of the developing world. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) had been a particularly important partner over the last decade. USAID had a budget of over \$20 billion to address critical development challenges overseas, such as global health, poverty alleviation, and food security.⁴

While McLaughlin felt comfortable that the company would meet its targets, she also recognized that it was time for Walmart to consider more ambitious goals, such as re-thinking its collaborative relationships with smallholder farmers. She wanted Walmart to play an even greater role in meeting some of the biggest challenges facing society, like how to feed over 9 billion people by 2050⁵ without dedicating more land to agriculture or increasing farm inputs. Achieving this would require a deeper engagement with smallholder farmers, who managed over 80% of the world's farms.⁶ McLaughlin and her team would also have to figure out how this type of engagement would impact Walmart's supply chains and benefit the smallholder farmers.

While philanthropic dollars deployed through the company's Foundation could be powerful, the ability for the business to provide a purchase order to farmers could also be an important tool in achieving these goals. As a buyer, Walmart sourced more than \$4 billion in goods from small- and medium-sized farmers in emerging markets.⁷ Placing McLaughlin in her dual role with the business and the Foundation had been a conscious decision toward promoting a more integrated strategy across both entities to benefit society.

McLaughlin knew that Walmart would have to re-evaluate its partnership strategy, including its relationship with USAID. Establishing a global collaboration between two large transnational organizations had been challenging, but after some early learnings, these efforts were now much more productive for both organizations. Walmart's new goals, however, would require that her team carefully evaluate both its external collaboration strategies and its internal capabilities and processes for executing this kind of collaboration.

She needed a complete picture of Walmart's engagement with USAID over the past decade — what had worked, what had not worked, and the lessons learned. There were two people she knew could help her. She called Beth Keck, senior director of Walmart's Women's Economic Empowerment group, and Sarah Thorn, senior director for Federal Government Relations, into her office.

"Thanks for coming," McLaughlin said. "As you know, we have a meeting with our relationship manager at USAID, Rob Schneider, in 10 days to discuss how we should move forward in our collaboration. With our evolving goals in sourcing from smallholder farmers, we need to take a fresh look at our collaboration. I want us to think about how we should work with USAID going forward — how this relationship can help us deliver benefits for society, while being sustainable for the Walmart business to engage in. To get started, let's review how we got here and what we've learned along the way."

Walmart

Sam Walton began his career in retail as a Ben Franklin's "five-and-dime"ⁱ franchise owner, with nine successful franchises in Arkansas and surrounding states. In 1962, realizing that there was an untapped market for larger format stores that offered deep discounts, he opened the first Walmart store in Rogers, Arkansas, with the vision to "save people money so they could live better."⁸

By the end of the 1960s, Walmart consisted of 24 stores generating revenues of approximately \$13 million. By the end of the 1970s, Walmart was a national retailer, publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange, generating revenues of more than \$1 billion.⁹

In 1983, Walmart launched its discount wholesale brand, Sam's Wholesale Club, which would later become Sam's Club. In the late 1980s Walmart experimented with its retail store format, introducing the Hypermarket, which combined grocery with non-grocery items. However, feedback from customers suggested that Walmart needed a more substantial grocery offering, and so, in 1988, the company introduced its Supercenter format, which combined general merchandise with a supermarket.¹⁰

In the 1990s Walmart began looking to international markets for expansion. It began in 1991 with a joint venture with Cifra, the largest retailer in Mexico, and subsequently invested in retail operations in Canada, China, Brazil, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Germany, and the U.K.¹¹ By the end of the 1990s, Walmart had 564 supercenters, along with 1,869 discount stores and 451 Sam's Clubs.¹² By 2001, it had become the largest general retailer and grocer in the U.S.¹³ International expansion continued into the 2000s with entry into Japan and the wholesale cash-and-carryⁱⁱ market in India.¹⁴ It was the 2006 acquisition of the Central American Retail Holding Company (CARHCO) with operations in Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua,¹⁵ however, that introduced Walmart to the unique opportunities and challenges of sourcing fresh produce, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables from smallholder farmers.¹⁶

Over the next nine years, Walmart continued to grow, but at a more modest rate. While it was one of the few retail companies not to experience a decline in sales during the 2008 financial crisis,¹⁷ Walmart faced an increasingly competitive landscape. E-commerce, for example, had a huge impact on the retail sector by enabling greater operational efficiency and changing consumer decision-making through greater levels of choice and information. Walmart, nevertheless, remained an industry giant.¹⁸ As of May 2015, Walmart operated 11,489 stores in 27 countries with an increasing presence in emerging economies across Latin America, Asia, and Africa.¹⁹ The company boasted \$485.7 billion in revenue, a worldwide workforce of 2.2 million associates,²⁰ and a market capitalization of approximately \$250 billion.²¹

With this success Walmart faced increased scrutiny. As the largest retailer in the world, the company was a target for public criticism, both positive and negative. While consumers enjoyed lower prices, there were complaints that Walmart's superstores put many smaller retailers out of business.²² As the largest private sector employer in the U.S., Walmart also faced extensive examination of its employment practices. The media raised questions over treatment of U.S.-based employees, labor practices in factories that produced products for Walmart, and the pressure Walmart's supply chain practices put on its suppliers' margins.²³

i Ben Franklin's was a popular variety store franchise network. A "five-and-dime" store is a colloquial term used to describe a retail format widespread in the mid-20th Century in the U.S. in which many store items were priced at 5 or 10 cents.

ii In the cash-and-carry model, goods are paid for in full at the time of purchase and collected directly from a distribution center or warehouse.

Criticism came in the form of articles, blogs, protests, and legal action. In the past, Walmart had chosen not to respond, limiting the amount of communication it had with external stakeholders. Walmart's culture came from Sam Walton's belief that the company's most effective communication tool was its in-store interactions with its customers. Walmart's philosophy was that it should focus its resources on serving its customers and the company. It did not typically invest in external communications to address negative publicity.²⁴

It was against this backdrop that the U.S. experienced one of the deadliest natural disasters in its history. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana coast as a Category 3 storm, devastating the region with high winds and powerful storm surges. Walmart's stores became sources of vital supplies for those affected, and the company's disaster relief response²⁵ was more swift and comprehensive than even the federal government's.²⁶ Walmart's logistical capabilities, its resources, and its ability to make quick decisions by empowering employees at every level of the organization put it at the forefront of the emergency response. The company contributed \$18 million and 2,450 truckloads of supplies to the disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, which struck the Gulf region just a couple of weeks afterward.²⁷

While Walmart's leadership had been considering how the company should think about its role in society for some time, Hurricane Katrina was an inflection point. CEO Lee Scott emphasized in his October 2005 "Twenty First Century Leadership" speech²⁸ that the response to Hurricane Katrina was:

Walmart at its best ... What would it take for Walmart to be that company, at our best, all the time? What if we used our size and resources to make this country and this earth an even better place for all of us: customers, associates, our children, and generations unborn? What would that mean?

In the remainder of the speech Scott outlined three long-term aspirations: (1) to be supplied 100% by renewable energy, (2) to create zero waste, and (3) to sell products that sustain people and the planet.²⁹ In addition to improving Walmart's environmental footprint, Scott outlined a vision for achieving broader social impacts through the company's efforts, which led to a variety of more specific commitments (see **Exhibit 1**).

To achieve these commitments, the company would have to engage with external stakeholders in new ways. Walmart executives knew that this would initially be challenging, since potential partners in the international development sector might be wary of collaborating with the company. Walmart was considered by some to be part of the world's social and environmental problems rather than part of the solution. Leveraging the resources of the Walmart Foundation offered a tool for building these bridges.

Walmart Foundation

The Walmart Foundation was a separately incorporated, non-profit organization funded solely by Walmart. In 2015, Walmart and the Walmart Foundation combined gave over \$320 million in cash contributions globally, with \$34 million of that outside the U.S. market.³⁰

In working toward its commitments, Walmart observed that sometimes market forces alone were not sufficient to address situations that required significant social change, particularly in emerging markets. In these cases, the Foundation was an important resource for addressing broader social objectives. The Foundation could make philanthropic investments in, for example, stimulating innovation, building capacity, or overcoming barriers, thus creating an environment for long-term, market-based solutions.

The Foundation could also play a role in opening up connections and facilitating dialogue with external stakeholders. This created an interesting paradox. Organizations that were not necessarily comfortable dealing with Walmart were willing to engage with the Foundation. Yet some partners had trouble distinguishing between the Foundation and the company.

Exhibit 1

Global Responsibility

The Twenty First Century Leadership speech outlined a global responsibility agenda for Walmart. Over time, these commitments were framed into three key areas:

Opportunity

- Associate opportunity, diversity, and inclusion – including investments in higher wages, expanding capabilities of employees, and scheduling flexibility.
- Retail opportunity – including investments in training and greater career opportunity across the retail industry.
- Women’s Economic Empowerment - including a commitment to train nearly 1 million women in agriculture, factories, and the retail industry globally and source \$20 billion from women-owned businesses.
- Veteran reintegration – including veteran hiring commitments.
- Supplier/small business development – including investments in supplier development and diversity programs.

Sustainability

- Leading in energy – including the commitment to work toward sourcing 100% of its energy from renewable sources.
- Zero waste – the commitment to achieve 100% waste reduction.
- Sustainable food – including commitments to make food affordable, accessible, healthier and safer, and to train 1 million farmers globally.
- Sustainable materials and manufacturing – including the materials that go into products, how they are made, and how they are disposed of and recycled.

Community

- Community Development – including over \$100 million in grants to local organizations.
- Associate philanthropy and support – including over 1.5 million hours of volunteer time.
- Disaster relief and preparedness – including contributions of over \$43 million globally.

These goals were public commitments to which Walmart held itself accountable, and reported on annually in its Global Responsibility Report.

Source: Created by the authors of the case based on: Walmart. “2015 Global Responsibility Report.” Web. Accessed 29 May 2015. <<http://cdn.corporate.walmart.com/c0/24/2383f0674d27823dcf7083e6fbc6/2015-global-responsibility-report.pdf>>. pp. 4-6.

In its operations, the Walmart Foundation had to be particularly aware of and sensitive to any possibility of being accused of self-dealing. (For more on self-dealing, see **Exhibit 2**). An independent charitable organization, the Foundation had to ensure that its activities were focused on achieving its social mission and that it avoided any activities that might be interpreted as creating a competitively advantageous position for the corporation. Julie Gehrki, senior director of grantmaking for the Walmart Foundation, observed:³¹

Foundation programs focus on transforming systems to improve social outcomes, for example, the food chain, or retail sector employment and advancement. Sometimes, however, concerns about the potential for Walmart’s self-dealing or even the perception of self-dealing can complicate our initiatives or determine rules for how we can go about delivering social impact.

Exhibit 2 Self-Dealing

“Self-dealing” is used to describe the practice of using the assets of a privately funded non-profit organization like the Walmart Foundation for the benefit of its funding source, in this case Walmart. Self-dealing transactions are defined under U.S. Internal Revenue Service regulations. Use of charitable assets in such impermissible transactions can result in taxes and fines as well as loss of tax-exempt status for the non-profit.

As a non-profit organization, the Walmart Foundation was required to use its assets for the public’s benefit. So the Foundation’s programs could not create more than an incidental benefit for Walmart. For example, the Foundation could not fund a training program for farmers or factory workers if the farms or factories were required to sell all of their products to Walmart. Nor could the Foundation fund a retail-training program if Walmart was given any preference in the hiring of trainees.

Source: Internal Revenue Service and Walmart

Walmart recognized that while it was critical to keep the Foundation and the corporation’s activities separate, developing an integrated strategy that bridged opportunities across these entities could accelerate or increase benefits for society. McLaughlin’s arrival at Walmart in 2013 further institutionalized this — she held senior positions in both organizations.

Despite this integration strategy, Walmart recognized that meeting its commitments would require a greater range of capabilities and relationships than existed within the business and the Foundation. Success would depend on Walmart not only engaging with stakeholders in the NGO and development community, but also developing deeper relationships to fully leverage these stakeholders’ assets and networks. One organization that had proven to be a valuable partner was USAID.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

USAID was established in 1961 as the administrative agency for the U.S. bilateral foreign assistance program to over 100 countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and Eastern Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ USAID aimed to end extreme global poverty and enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential. The Agency’s work focused on development objectives that included food security, global health, climate change, and sustainable, broad-based economic growth.

With headquarters in Washington, D.C., USAID’s priorities were set by an Administrator appointed by the U.S. President. As an independent government Agency, USAID was accountable to Congress and the U.S. taxpayer.³² USAID was decentralized and organized in three main types of bureaus: geographic, functional, and central.³³ The bureau heads reported directly to the Administrator (see **Appendix A**).

USAID had 110 field offices^{iv}, or missions, generally co-located with U.S. embassies in developing countries. These missions reported to regional bureaus and carried out USAID’s objectives overseas, while maintaining responsibility for local programmatic decisions^v and program management. Functional bureaus,

ⁱⁱⁱ In the aftermath of World War II, the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan, focused on revitalizing production and addressing trade and financial issues across Europe and Asia. Throughout the 1950s, the U.S. government began to consider foreign assistance programs like this as a key part of foreign policy. Reducing poverty and increasing production in developing countries would create markets for U.S. companies, and helping capitalist economies to prosper could help reduce the threat of communism. USAID was designed to bring together a number of these foreign assistance programs and objectives into a single agency. <<http://www.usaidalumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/USAID-Private-Sector-Programs-Sanbrailo.pdf>>.

^{iv} Based on a count from <<http://www.usaid.gov/mission-directory>> (includes country and regional mission offices).

^v Individual mission priorities and budgeting decisions were also informed by the country ambassador.

such as the Bureau for Global Health and the Bureau for Food Security, focused on the Agency's major development objectives. Central bureaus were responsible for crosscutting management and administrative functions, such as the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning.³⁴

Implementing partners played a crucial role in the delivery of USAID's projects overseas and contributed to the design, management, and evaluation of projects in the field. Implementing partners were often contractors or international NGOs based in the U.S. and other developed countries, with offices, local partnerships, or individual consultants in USAID's target countries.³⁵ Private sector organizations that sought to collaborate with USAID-funded projects in the field often engaged substantially with an implementing partner, at times with little or no direct interaction with the USAID mission in that country.³⁶

The Agency also coordinated or substantially collaborated on a number of U.S. government initiatives that spanned multiple agencies of government, such as the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the President's Malaria Initiative, Feed the Future (FTF), and the Global Health Initiative. For example, FTF was led by USAID, but used resources and expertise from 11 different government agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the U.S. Department of State. It also coordinated with local governments and stakeholders in 19 target countries.³⁷

USAID and the Private Sector

Since its inception, USAID had focused on private sector engagement, introducing a number of innovations that promoted market-based solutions to global development challenges. However, the Agency's approach evolved substantially over time from working for the development of the private sector, to seeking funding and support from the private sector, to working with the private sector to implement development innovations.³⁸

Throughout the 1960s, the Agency promoted the private sector by providing technical and financial assistance to build infrastructure, develop key industries such as agriculture, and promote investment in developing countries.³⁹

In the 1970s the focus of the Agency's private sector work shifted to the development of trade infrastructure that would allow developing countries to more freely operate in international markets. Institutions that promoted imports and exports and advocated for individual sectors were supported. It was during this time that the Agency also began to use its resources to encourage greater access to capital through loan guarantees. USAID's initial experiments in providing housing loan guarantees led to the establishment of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation.⁴⁰

In the 1980s the Agency worked to establish greater country ownership of private sector infrastructure and institutional development to encourage a shift to market-based economies. Broad-based economic growth and investment were encouraged through programs focused on employment, agriculture, and the development of domestic markets.⁴¹

In the 1990s, USAID's private sector activities focused on sustainable development and new interventions for transitional economies, especially in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was also in the 1990s that the role of foreign aid began to change dramatically. In 1990, international aid from developed country governments, also known as official development assistance (ODA), constituted 57% of capital flows to developing countries. However, by the end of the decade, ODA constituted only 18% of capital flows, with the remainder coming from private sources.⁴²

In the 2000s the global development community turned its focus to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight targets to be achieved by the end of 2015. One of these goals (MDG 8) focused specifically on global partnerships for development, which encouraged development organizations to seek opportunities to partner with a variety of actors, including in the private sector.⁴³ This emphasis was reflected in USAID's priorities; the Agency had begun to look to the private sector not only as a necessary component for a thriving economy, but also as a partner for delivering development interventions and generating innovative models to sustainably serve the poor.^{vi} The Agency also launched a number of platforms that allowed it to collaborate more directly with the private sector, including a new partnership platform known as Global Development Alliances (GDAs).⁴⁴

In the 2010s under Administrator Raj Shah, the Agency began to seek additional opportunities to unlock private investment that would significantly impact development in key sectors, such as agriculture and energy. Through letters of intent, private sector companies committed to pursuing responsible investments that would benefit the poor. Donors committed to aligning their efforts to improve the conditions for these investments, and governments agreed to develop policies and regulations that would create a more effective enabling environment.⁴⁵

Global Development Alliances (GDAs)

Launched in 2001 and endorsed by then Secretary of State Colin Powell, the GDA was a partnership platform aimed at engaging the private sector to develop sustainable, market-based approaches to global challenges.⁴⁶ From 2001-2015, USAID brokered more than 1,500 alliances via the GDA model with over 3,500 distinct partners. As a result of these strategic partnerships, USAID raised more than \$20 billion in combined public and private resources in various geographies around the world during this period.⁴⁷

Historically, USAID had been reluctant to work with the private sector. Many within the organization did not trust corporate motivations and there was a sense that USAID already had the experience, systems, and resources to tackle these global challenges alone. However, beginning in 2001, experiments with the GDA model signaled a willingness to collaborate with business, and USAID began to see that the private sector could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.⁴⁸

GDAs invested in activities that aligned USAID's development goals with the interests of a private sector partner (see **Appendix B**). Private sector partners were required to provide a one-to-one match to USAID resources such that for every \$1 of USAID funding, at least \$1 of private sector cash/in-kind contributions would be mobilized as part of the partnership. In addition, the partnership was expected to advance social and economic development, rather than creating an exclusive benefit for a particular company. Resources, risks, and results were shared among partners and common goals were defined. Alliances proposed innovative, sustainable approaches to meeting these goals.⁴⁹

Alliance concepts could be submitted for consideration to a specific USAID mission, bureau, or independent office, or a USAID bureau or mission could request partnership ideas addressing a particular issue.^{vii}

vi USAID distinguished between private sector development and private sector engagement. Private sector development aimed to strengthen the enabling environment for the private sector in target countries by addressing issues related to market access, improving government efficiency, improving infrastructure, supporting economic development through private companies, and encouraging local financing. Private sector engagement involved collaborating with private sector partners to leverage additional resources, expertise, or market knowledge to improve the implementation of development interventions.

vii Published by USAID in 2011, "Understanding Private Sector Value: An Assessment of How USAID Measures the Value of Its Partnerships", found that 37% of alliances identified financial resources as the primary contribution from the private sector, 33% of alliances identified expertise as the primary contribution from the private sector, and 30% of alliances identified contribution to business or market-based practices and approaches as the primary contribution of the private sector.

Building Better Partnerships

While the GDA model provided a partnership framework that was effective in engaging partners around common issues, these engagements were still limited to individual projects that were negotiated with the relevant USAID bureau or mission, both in terms of scope and funding, rather than being part of an overall partnership strategy. This model also highlighted some key challenges that partners faced in working with USAID — lack of engagement with partners early in USAID’s program design cycle; a complex, bureaucratic, and decentralized organizational structure; an unfamiliarity with speaking the language of business; and limited data on its engagements with the private sector, which made it difficult to identify areas of shared interest.⁵⁰

Relationship Management

In early 2013, USAID’s Office of Innovation and Development Alliances (now part of the U.S. Global Development Lab) piloted a Global Relationship Managers network for its top 40 corporate partners. The role of the relationship manager was as a single point of contact for key partners and to ensure continuity of processes and information sharing. Relationship managers were in charge of ensuring that USAID and its partners could forge more productive partnerships to better leverage their collective assets. For companies that were engaging across a range of offices and missions, relationship managers would serve as the main point of contact.⁵¹

Robert Schneider, the relationship manager working with Walmart, characterized it this way:

Ten years ago we thought the GDA model was the best way to move partnerships forward. Now we’ve realized there are many ways to move forward and many paths to go down. We spent a lot of time promoting just one model of partnership during the early days of the GDA, not realizing we were leaving other kinds of partnerships on the table.

How the organization supported private sector involvement in development would likely continue to evolve. For example, with the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, the global development conversation began to focus on a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs placed a greater emphasis on engaging with the private sector to develop integrated solutions to large, complex global challenges. As a result development agencies, including USAID, began to reconsider how best to partner with the private sector.⁵²

An Emerging Partnership

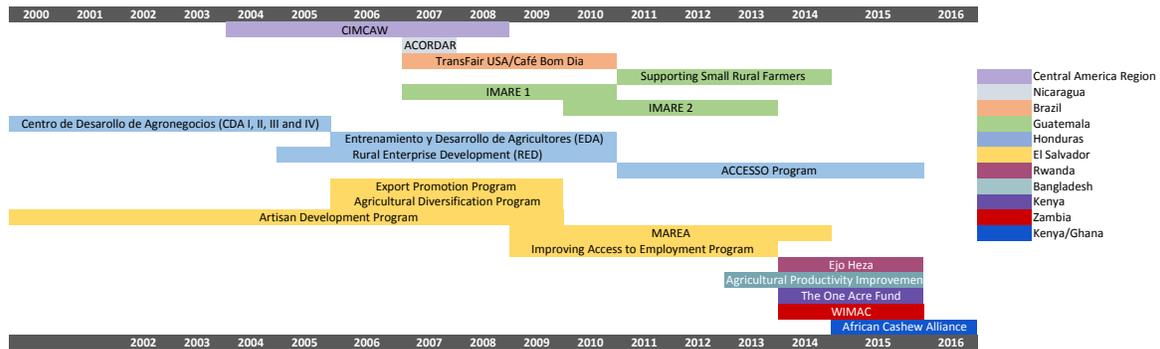
The relationship between Walmart and USAID began in the early 2000s in Central America where CARHCO, prior to and after being acquired by Walmart, engaged with USAID’s implementing partners in the region. This was the first of three distinct phases in the relationship between Walmart and USAID. See **Exhibit 3** for an overview of the timeline of collaboration between Walmart and USAID.

Locally Developed Projects

Walmart’s collaboration with USAID initially focused on projects that were locally developed and implemented by the respective country offices. The partnership between CARHCO (later Walmart) and USAID was representative of this type of collaboration. In these cases, USAID’s in-country implementing partners reached out to Walmart’s local offices to explore interest in partnering at the early stages of a project’s development.

Exhibit 3

Timeline of Walmart and USAID Collaboration



Source: Created by the authors of the case

CARHCO already had substantial experience in working with smallholder farmers through its Direct Farm business model, which was launched in 1972 by Corporación de Supermercados Unidos S.A. (CSU). In 2000 CSU joined the CARHCO group, which was acquired by Walmart in 2006. The business model focused on sourcing directly from growers to reduce the influence of middlemen and thereby lower prices.^{viii} However, local stores faced the risk of greater variation in quality and quantity since they were relying on a large network of small suppliers. To mitigate this, the company emphasized recruiting buyers who were agronomists, so that they could provide technical assistance directly to the farmers. This training was designed to help farmers improve the quality of their fresh produce and to ensure a consistent supply at the quantities required. Unique within Central America, this model provided the company with a differentiated business model and a distinct competitive advantage (see **Exhibit 4**).⁵³

Exhibit 4

Measuring the Success of the Direct Farm Model

Through its use of the Direct Farm model, Walmart aimed to ensure consistent availability of fresh, high quality produce and predictable prices for its customers — points of differentiation that bred customer loyalty in a highly competitive market. To achieve this, Walmart had to ensure it had stable relationships with its growers. A key indicator of the success of any partnership project was how many of the growers continued as suppliers for Walmart after the project ended. This was a measure of the mutual value created through the financial and social performance of these projects.

Source: Created by the authors of the case.

In the 1990s in Honduras, however, this model was not working. Hortifruti — CARHCO’s wholesale buying agency in Honduras — struggled to source high quality fresh produce locally. The gap between Hortifruti’s need for high quality fresh produce in large volumes and smallholder farmers’ ability to meet those expectations was substantial. As a result, Hortifruti imported 80% of its fresh produce, with the remaining 20% coming from large farms and local markets in Honduras.⁵⁴

In 2000, Fintrac, USAID’s implementing partner for the Centro de Desarrollo de Agronegocios project approached Hortifruti and a number of other local buyers of fresh produce to participate as buyers. The project would invest in strengthening horticultural value chains by providing technical assistance and improving links to markets for smallholder farmers. The project aimed to provide sustainable incomes for rural farming families and increase their well-being.⁵⁵

viii The Direct Farm model is known as *tierra fértil* in Spanish, which translates as “fertile land.”

After agreeing to participate, Fintrac assessed Hortifruti's needs in terms of produce mix, quality, quantity, and price through a series of interviews and discussions. Using these data as well as information from other local buyers, the Fintrac team customized the design of the project's technical assistance programs. The project, which emphasized a "farm-to-market" approach, provided assistance to farmers on production practices, post-harvest handling, processing, distribution, logistics, and marketing of their produce. Additionally, the project sought to engage other partners in the value chain to overcome constraints Hortifruti had been unable to surmount with its Direct Farm model. This included enhancing farmers' access to fertilizers and pesticides through improved connections with agricultural input suppliers and access to credit through partnerships with local banks.⁵⁶

Hortifruti extended its engagement with Fintrac in 2006 under a new grant from USAID supported through the Millennium Challenge Corporation in the Entrenamiento y Desarrollo de Agricultores program. After the acquisition of a majority stake in CARHCO by Walmart (which also occurred in 2006), the Hortifruti brand maintained its involvement in the program until 2010. It was replaced by the Rural Economic Diversification program, a USAID program aimed at increasing the competitiveness of micro, small, and medium-size enterprises.⁵⁷

With these improvements in the value chain, Hortifruti was able to source over 60% of its fresh produce from local farmers by 2009. The project was also aligned with its goals of increasing entrepreneurial capacity and facilitated its business dealings with farmers. The technical assistance provided by the project made it easier for Hortifruti's buyers to communicate the company's evolving needs directly to farmers.⁵⁸

The company's experience in this project demonstrated that collaboration with development sector partners could deliver real business value, even if farmers were not supplying exclusively to Hortifruti, by improving agricultural practices, encouraging entrepreneurship, developing stronger relationships, and enhancing the market environment in which the farmers operated. This had long-term benefits; the farmers could continue to supply Walmart and other purchasers after the funded project had ended. As of June 2015, Hortifruti continued to source from USAID-supported smallholder farmers in Honduras through the USAID-ACCESO project implemented by Fintrac.⁵⁹

Global Alliances

By 2007 Walmart and USAID had begun to work together on GDA projects. The GDA model encouraged much greater interaction between Walmart's home office in Bentonville and USAID headquarters in Washington D.C., although the collaboration was initially controversial. Many within USAID were skeptical of Walmart's motivations. Similarly, Walmart was apprehensive about the alliance. The Walmart team did not know much about USAID or how it operated and struggled to fully understand the different roles that implementing partners and aid agencies could play in a global partnership.⁶⁰

Many of these early concerns were addressed in the first GDA that Walmart participated in, a labor standards project implemented by Development Alternatives International (DAI).^{ix} Kristi Ragan, a strategic advisor at DAI, helped build trust between the organizations by bridging gaps in communication and increasing understanding of the value that could come from the collaboration. Ragan, in particular, advocated for USAID's GDA team to shift from seeking opportunistic partnerships based on partners USAID already knew to seeking strategic relationships based on whom the Agency needed to know. Ragan observed:⁶¹

^{ix} The first GDA that Walmart participated in was the Continuous Improvement in the Central American Workplace (CIMCAW) project that focused on improving labor standards in the garment industry in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic.

USAID always believed they had sufficient resources and worked well in a closed system, and that they didn't need anyone else. The same thinking existed on the Walmart side as well. Bringing these two together signaled an acceptance that there are no single-actor solutions left on big problems.

Indeed, rather than focusing on how much corporate money it could raise, USAID began to think more broadly about how it could use its partners' other assets to gain access and influence. In 2007, USAID's Jim Thompson, acting director for private sector alliances, characterized it this way during a partnership meeting with Walmart:⁶²

We're not here for your money. ... We're here for your supply chains.

Inclusive Market Alliance for Rural Entrepreneurs (IMARE)

In 2007 Mercy Corps, a USAID implementing partner, which was already working with farmers in post-conflict zones in Guatemala, was looking for off-takers for some of its smallholder farmer programs, and connected with Walmart buyers locally who were interested in collaborating. This interest was communicated to the Mercy Corps office in Washington D.C., which finally led to a connection with Walmart's home office in Bentonville. Mercy Corps subsequently presented Walmart with a proposal to collaborate on a GDA that aimed to improve the livelihoods of 20 smallholder farmer groups in Guatemala.⁶³

Similar to the collaboration between Fintrac and Hortifruti, this project focused on providing technical assistance in the areas of farm management, post-harvest handling and processing techniques, and on developing sustainable market links. Walmart was initially concerned that the producer groups involved would not be able to produce the kinds of high quality, fresh produce that the company needed. Since these producer groups were spread over a wide geographic area, Walmart also felt that delivery might be inconsistent and that the quality of the end product would suffer as a result. However, after further discussion with Mercy Corps, Walmart agreed to collaborate.⁶⁴

Walmart and Mercy Corps then submitted a GDA proposal to USAID/Guatemala for a three-year project called Inclusive Market Alliance for Rural Entrepreneurs (IMARE). The project received a \$600,000 grant from Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. and \$500,000 from Mercy Corps and other sources, and requested a matching \$1.1-million contribution from USAID, the majority of which would come from the Guatemala mission. As part of the proposal, Walmart Central America was expected to contribute market information, planting schedules, and expertise.⁶⁵

Upon approval of a grant from USAID, Mercy Corps entered into an agreement with Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. However, it was the Walmart Foundation that managed the project and the business in Central America provided services and information. This raised some challenges in terms of how these two different organizational units within Walmart defined and measured success. While the funding came from the business, involving the Walmart Foundation in the program made the issue of self-dealing a potential concern. To mitigate this, the parties confirmed that the farmers engaged in the program were selling products to multiple buyers, and Mercy Corps was required to refrain from influencing the farmers' decision-making processes.^{66, 67}

Walmart's value proposition was based on offering access to consistent prices, predictable demand, and the potential for long-term supplier relationships. This protected suppliers from fluctuations in the prices offered by traditional intermediaries, which were high when supply was constrained, but fell when supply exceeded demand. This proposition did not always necessarily resonate well with the farmers — only a subset was selling to Walmart. And only 12 of the 40 farmers that had become Walmart suppliers remained with

Walmart after the end of the project. While the project met Walmart's social objectives in terms of training a large number of farmers, the long-term impact on Walmart's business in Central America was minimal.⁶⁸

In 2009, USAID launched its FTF (Feed the Future) initiative in Guatemala and extended the IMARE project through 2014. The project was labeled IMARE II and was also implemented by Mercy Corps as a GDA. A critical aspect of FTF was that it was designed to explicitly focus on the most vulnerable populations. In Guatemala, this generally meant farmers located in the most remote regions of the country. Developed with an eye toward maximizing social impact, this nonetheless created new challenges for Walmart and other potential purchasers. Sourcing from more remote regions was more expensive and resulted in longer transit times due to poor infrastructure. The farmers in these regions also typically grew staple crops, such as wheat, which was of less interest to purchasers seeking to meet demand for fresh fruits and vegetables. Because the project's efforts to build supply were not aligned with the demands of in-country buyers, Walmart participated in the alliance for only one year.⁶⁹

Goals-Based Project

In 2010, Walmart had committed to train 1 million farmers globally. In 2011, the company launched the Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative, which pledged to train 500,000 female farmers by 2016 as part of the original commitment.⁷⁰ By late 2012 Beth Keck, then one of Walmart's Sustainable Agriculture directors, had recognized that the strategy of focusing on building projects from the ground up with an evolving set of partners was not an efficient approach to impacting large numbers of farmers. From a business perspective, the approach was not highly effective either, as very few of the trained farmers remained engaged as suppliers for the company. Scale was the driving factor in the evolution of the partnership between Walmart and USAID.

Keck realized that, to reach scale, Walmart needed to look beyond supporting the development of individual projects. Instead it would have to develop a portfolio of partnerships that could leverage the success of existing well-designed projects. By extending these existing projects, Walmart could cost-effectively achieve a high level of impact in a short amount of time (see **Exhibit 5**). As Keck observed:⁷¹

As long as we keep doing one-off projects, we'll never have a decent cost structure, but if we can invest in a project that is already underway ... the cost per beneficiary goes down tremendously.

When Keck and Thorn, Walmart's senior director for Federal Government Relations, approached USAID in March 2013 with their thoughts on a possible partnership strategy, they were pleasantly surprised to learn that the Agency was launching a new relationship management model. This approach was part of USAID's effort to better engage the private sector by providing a single point of contact for each of its key partners. In addition, since the launch of the FTF program in 2009, USAID had been compiling a database of its food security projects within its Bureau of Food Security in Washington D.C. Importantly for Walmart, this data included the degree to which these projects impacted women.⁷²

Schneider was able to provide an aggregated summary of the relevant projects supported by USAID. The Walmart team could then apply additional criteria to narrow the list. From this summary, Keck and Thorn would develop a short list of potential projects that met the company's partnership criteria, had already demonstrated success in the field, and were aligned with Walmart's commitments. It took just four months for the Walmart Foundation to fund the first project in this new phase of the relationship — USAID/Bangladesh's Accelerating Agricultural Productivity Improvement project (AAPI).⁷³ Walmart and USAID were able to achieve this milestone so quickly as a result of their ability to communicate. As Schneider observed:⁷⁴

With the business experience we had on our team, we were able to anticipate what Walmart would need, what they were used to dealing with, and be proactive. Walmart also had public sector experience on their team and knew some of the constraints of working with a large bureaucracy like the U.S. government. It helped that we could speak each other's language.

Shortly thereafter, Walmart Foundation invested in the Integrated Improved Livelihood Program in Rwanda. Both of these projects contributed to Walmart attaining its goal of reaching large numbers of women in a cost-effective manner.⁷⁵

Exhibit 5 Walmart's Global Scan of Potential Partnership Opportunities

Funder	Characteristics	Scale	High Female %	Ease of Implementation *	Ready to Go	Commodity Overlap	Geography Overlap
Gates	Produce, Kenya	•	•			•	
	Cocoa, West Africa	•	•	•			•
	Rice, Tanzania	•	•	•			
	Rice, West Africa	•	•	•			
	Cotton, W. & E. Africa	•	•			•	
DFID	Cotton, Tanzania	•	•			•	
Heifer	Livestock, Nepal	•	•	•	•		
IDH	Cashew, W. Africa	•	•	•		•	•
	Produce, South Africa	•	•			•	•
USAID	Produce, Kenya	•	•			•	•
	Fertilizer, Bangladesh	•	•	•	•		
Solidaridad	Soy, China	•	•				•
	Tea, India / Indonesia	•	•			•	•

Note: Based on scan of 113 programs.

Source: Walmart

Bangladesh: Accelerating Agriculture Productivity Improvement (AAPI)

In 2010, the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), funded by USAID in collaboration with the Bangladeshi government, launched AAPI. The project sought to strengthen agricultural production systems and improve food security in Bangladesh by training rural smallholder farmers in fertilizer deep placement (FDP) practices that would increase their productivity and incomes. The project also sought to strengthen the value chain through capacity building, policy reform, and enterprise development.⁷⁶

AAPI offered Walmart a potential platform to cost-effectively provide training to female farmers. In particular, AAPI focused on training farmers in supply chains that were predominantly male, and Walmart saw an opportunity to leverage the existing project infrastructure to train women. Bangladeshi women made up a significant amount of the agricultural workforce, but typically lacked access to training and technology.⁷⁷

To move the collaboration forward, USAID/Bangladesh and AAPI presented a concept paper to USAID's Bureau for Food Security, which then shared it with the Walmart Foundation. Given that the mission and

AAPI were hesitant to place too great a burden on the existing project, they proposed using the funds to open up a new geography. The goal was to provide training on FDP techniques to 40,000 rural women. This technology was especially useful in rice production, which was primarily grown by men as a subsistence crop, but was also applicable to other types of crops such as fruits and vegetables that were typically grown by women.⁷⁸

The mission recommended that Walmart transfer funds directly to the implementing partner to avoid the bureaucratic and contractual hurdles USAID would require if it were an intermediary in the transaction. To facilitate the funds transfer, IFDC and the mission separated the management team for this project from AAPI core activities. IFDC submitted reports to both USAID and Walmart on a frequent basis and sent copies to the USAID mission, minimizing the need for regular reporting between Walmart and USAID.⁷⁹

The FDP technique often resulted in more fresh produce than a single family was able to consume. If women trained by the program were able to pool their surplus produce, they could sell it to local buyers, generating additional income for their families. Participants in the training program began to inform others, resulting in larger than anticipated groups at the training programs. With Walmart Foundation support for the final two years of the project, IFDC trained 40,000 women directly in this technology, with many more benefitting indirectly,^x enabling them to improve their families' livelihoods.⁸⁰

Rwanda: Integrated Improved Livelihood Program

The Integrated Improved Livelihood Program in Rwanda, also known as Ejo Heza, which means "brighter future" in the local language of Kinyarwanda, was one of USAID/Rwanda's flagship programs. Global Communities was the implementing partner for the project, which aimed to improve the livelihoods and food consumption of 75,000 impoverished and vulnerable people in the country, especially women, through training and access to financial services.⁸¹

This project was jointly identified by Keck and Schneider as having the potential for scale in terms of numbers of additional farmers in need of training. The project was also at the stage of the project cycle where there were no further start-up costs, and it had the technical and programmatic capacity to absorb these additional resources. Despite the fact that Walmart did not have a strong business link to Rwanda, the Walmart Foundation valued the fact that Ejo Heza was a comprehensive and technically strong program that could be extended in a cost-effective manner.⁸²

In March 2014 the Walmart Foundation agreed to provide Global Communities with \$1 million to train an additional 50,000 farmers in improved agricultural techniques and bio-intensive gardening^{xi} and, with matching funding from USAID headquarters, was able to come to an agreement to extend the project scope.⁸³

Implementing this project was more complex than the one in Bangladesh due to bureaucratic complications arising from USAID's contribution. Since the project extension was formed outside its typical procurement process, USAID was committing funds without a formal bidding process, requiring the Agency to justify why it used the approach.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the USAID/Rwanda mission was undergoing staff transitions and the new point of contact and respective headquarters staff debated which mechanism or contractual vehicle would be best for the funds. These complications in addition to standard USAID procurement requirements^{xii} meant that the project start date was delayed for almost five months.⁸⁵

x IFDC estimated that 160,000 people would benefit directly and indirectly from these trainings.

xi An approach to gardening/farming that seeks to achieve maximum yield per unit of land while emphasizing the importance of biodiversity to create a sustainable, closed system of production that requires fewer inputs, such as chemical fertilizers.

xii Walmart's policy would not allow its funding to fully cover the growth of the Ejo Heza staff required to manage this project, thus necessitating the finalization of USAID's grant before the project could start.

Through the Foundation's grant, Global Communities sought to train 10,000 farmers in corn and bean production, 15,000 in horticulture production, and 25,000 in techniques to improve dairy production. Sixty percent of these farmers would be women. The biggest challenge in the early stages was communication; the partners had different expectations relevant to reporting, financing, and other activities. Teri Blandon, vice president for Institutional Advancement at Global Communities, observed:⁸⁶

It adds a bit of a complication because we need the blessing of USAID and Walmart to issue press releases, blogs, etc., but it also gives us (Global Communities) visibility as a brand. It has helped us understand the importance of external visibility, not only with this project but also with the other corporate partnerships we have had as well.

Despite the complication of having multiple partners, both the Rwanda mission and Global Communities found the Walmart Foundation to be easy to work with. In fact, the Rwanda mission viewed this partnership as a model for future partnerships with the private sector and sought partnerships of this caliber in other technical areas. By mid-2015, the project had provided almost 37,000 farmers with access to training and extension services.⁸⁷

Global MoU

As a result of having improved data and a better relationship management process, Walmart and USAID saw an opportunity to develop a more formal agreement. In September 2013, Walmart, the Walmart Foundation, and USAID entered into a non-binding memorandum of understanding (MoU) that outlined the organizations' shared priorities and goals, and provided a framework for how Walmart and the Walmart Foundation would fund projects.⁸⁸ ^{xiii} Shah, the USAID Administrator, remarked after the signing of the MoU:⁸⁹

As the world has grown more interconnected, this is the face of development. ... If we are going to end extreme poverty, unnecessary child death, and widespread child hunger, we're going to do it by bringing businesses with real supply chains, logistics capabilities, the capacity to invent new technologies and the determination to measure results, and work in partnership, to some of the farthest corners of the globe.

As Walmart worked toward its commitment to train 1 million farmers, half of which would be women, and USAID searched for the resources and innovation to strengthen its programming, the logic for future collaboration remained strong. The MoU, perhaps more than anything else, illustrated the high level of commitment within both organizations to continue to explore opportunities to collaborate, particularly in the area of food security.

Following the signing of the MoU, Walmart and USAID continued to identify opportunities for collaboration in the area of farmer training. As of May 2015, the Walmart Foundation had funded a total of five projects using this new approach. In Kenya, for example, Walmart collaborated with The One Acre Fund to provide 40,000 farmers with improved agricultural inputs, access to credit, and post-harvest support. In Zambia, the Women's Improved Marketing and Asset Control (WIMAC) project, implemented by Agribusiness Systems International, focused on training and capacity building for 45,000 soybean farmers. And in Kenya and Ghana, the African Cashew Alliance provided training to 35,000 cashew farmers.⁹⁰

^{xiii} The AAPI project in Bangladesh was funded in July 2013, prior to the signing of the global MoU. The Ejo Heza project in Rwanda was funded in 2014 after the MoU was signed.

Looking Ahead

As McLaughlin, Keck, and Thorn discussed the history of Walmart's collaboration with USAID, they realized that this new MoU was not the end product of a long relationship, but rather the foundation for a new beginning. Indeed, it was clear that any future collaboration between Walmart and USAID would happen in an environment of change within both organizations. While the relationship between Walmart and the Walmart Foundation had evolved, there seemed to be opportunity for an even more unified strategy across both entities. USAID was also evaluating its experiences with the new relationship manager model and exploring how to refine its approach to collaboration with the private sector, an emphasis also reflected in the new SDGs.

Given the size of its commitments, Walmart's most recent partnership strategy had emphasized reaching scale by reducing the cost per farmer trained. But McLaughlin and her colleagues also recognized that this approach would likely be insufficient to address the kinds of goals they wanted to focus on in the future. In October 2014, Walmart CEO Doug McMillon said:⁹¹

We've learned on our sustainability journey that we're most successful when our initiatives create social and environmental value and business value at the same time. Food is our number one category worldwide, and we are going to do even more in our grocery business in the years ahead. Paving a sustainable future for food is necessary for society and our business.

Looking ahead, McLaughlin wanted to ensure that her team's efforts were aligned with McMillon's vision. This meant developing and executing a sustainability strategy for Walmart that would accelerate and increase social impact, while strengthening the company. Under those conditions, the opportunity for a sustained and scalable investment from Walmart was substantial. Partnerships could play a key role in the sustainability strategy, at least in terms of enhancing social impact.

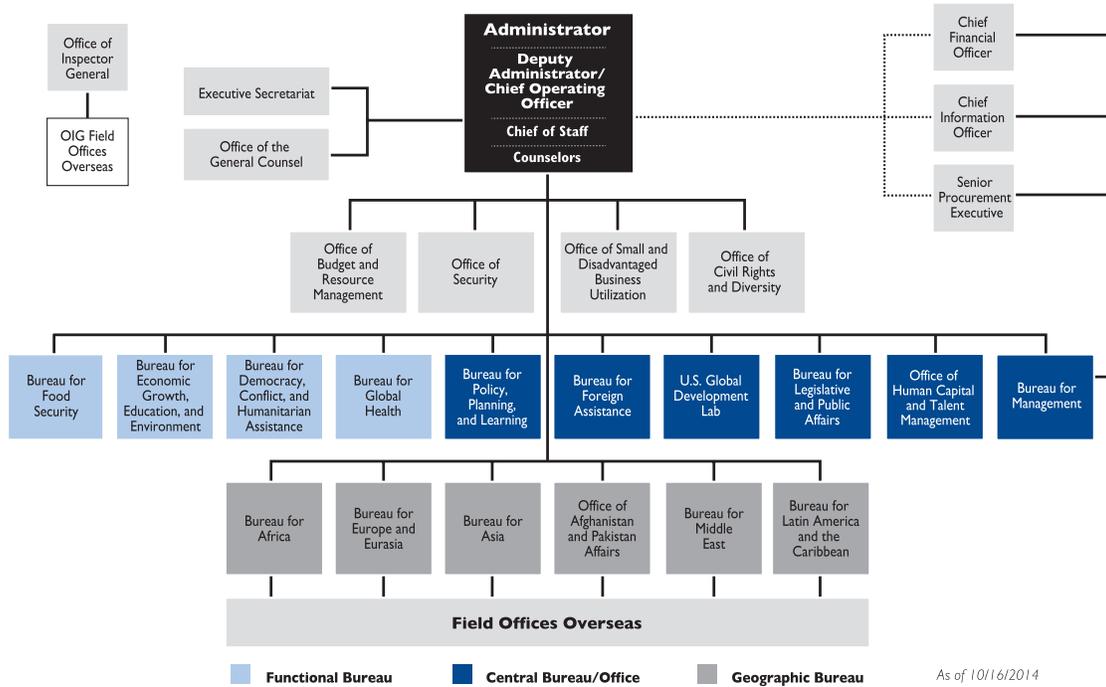
Success, she knew, required at least two components. The first was an internal design aligned with this new approach to partnering. The second was a partnership model that enabled innovation and flexibility, while achieving sustainability at scale. But how could Walmart best develop and execute this type of collaboration? What structure and metrics should the company use? What resources, including purchase orders, could it leverage and what were the business implications? Was there a role for the Walmart Foundation that would also respond to the need to avoid self-dealing? What should the organization look for from partners? What else should she consider?

What McLaughlin did know was that Schneider would be at her Bentonville office in 10 days. This was the opportunity to begin a new journey. She was determined to be prepared.

Appendices

**Appendix A
USAID Organizational Structure**

U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



As of 10/16/2014

Source: USAID. "Organization". Web. Accessed 8 June 2015. <<http://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization>>.

Appendix B

The Private Sector in Development

Private sector engagement in international development has expanded beyond philanthropy and corporate social responsibility to businesses engaging in investments that share environmental or social objectives. Increasingly, the phrases “mutual value,” “triple bottom line,” and “shared value” are being used by the corporate sector to communicate outcomes that simultaneously benefit host communities, shareholders, and the environment. Bilateral and multilateral donors have emphasized the importance of the private sector in development through international policy as well as global compacts.

The German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation (GIZ) focuses on sustainable development and resource management. Since 2000, GIZ has implemented a public-private partnership program (develoPPP.de) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The matching grant program engages companies in designing development projects that align with core business objectives. GIZ assembles consortia of companies in strategic alliances around a particular issue or sector as well as developing strategic projects with individual companies.⁹²

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) promotes private sector engagement as a key element in helping countries to graduate from donor support and to address extreme poverty through enterprise development and job creation.⁹³ In addition to investing in local private enterprises, DFID often takes a systems approach, supporting public and private institutions that enhance the enabling environment for these enterprises and make markets work better for the poor.⁹⁴ DFID, for example, played an important role in the initial development of Vodafone’s M-Pesa business, which has evolved into a major mobile money platform in Kenya and many other countries.⁹⁵ Rather than establishing alliances with private sector partners, DFID often leverages models such as challenge funds and competitive investment programs to incentivize the private sector to develop innovative solutions that address poverty.⁹⁶

These different programs highlight an important point about how donors seek to work with business. In some instances donors provide grant funding directly to the private sector to support activities that a company would not otherwise do on its own, or where support is not available from commercial providers. This concept, known as “additionality,” is designed to spur private sector investment in addressing a social issue through market-based approaches. Alternatively, donors may co-invest with a private sector partner or partners to address a specific social issue. In these cases, the presence of additional resources, capabilities, and social capital improves the environment for private sector investment by reducing risk and addressing market-level constraints.

Source: Created by the authors.

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Notes



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