

An Evaluation of the Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows Program

Evaluation Brief

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Introduction

The goal of The Mickey Leland International Hunger Fellows Program of the Congressional Hunger Center (“CHC”) is to develop leaders committed to finding innovative and lasting solutions to food insecurity worldwide. This goal is achieved through a unique two-year fellowship that exposes fellows to dynamic food security programming and policy while deepening their understanding of global hunger and poverty. The Leland Program is authorized by the United States Congress and mainly funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Additional support for the program comes from foundations, corporations, host organizations, and individual donors.

During the first year of the program, Leland Fellows are placed with international organizations in developing countries to work directly on food security issues including agriculture, health and nutrition, livelihood development, market analysis, and climate change adaptation. During this time, fellows engage directly with food security initiatives in the field through a variety of activities – from program design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. In the second year, fellows work in a policy environment, usually at the same organization’s headquarters, where they use their experience from the field to help inform the design of sound development policy at the organizational, national, and international levels.

The Leland Program marked its tenth anniversary in 2011. The fellowship was established in 2001 as a sister program to CHC’s U.S.-focused Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. Each year approximately 15 fellows are selected to participate in the two-year Leland Fellowship, which is unique in providing both field and policy experience. To date, five classes of Leland Fellows have completed their service; the sixth class is in progress.

CHC partnered with Innovation Network to conduct this evaluation, which focuses on classes one through five of the fellowship. Innovation Network is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that provides evaluation consulting, training, and research for the nonprofit and philanthropic sector.

To conduct the evaluation, Innovation Network staff worked closely with CHC staff to develop a methodology designed to answer the following questions about the fellowship:

- To what extent has the fellowship deepened the knowledge, skills, and abilities of participating fellows?
- How has the International Hunger Fellows Program influenced the career paths of participating fellows?

- What are the benefits of the fellowship to participating host organizations?

The evaluation team utilized a mixed-methods approach,¹ incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. This involved the development of instruments including a survey administered to all program alumni from classes one through five and interview protocols targeting a sample of program alumni, host organizations and CHC staff.

High level findings for each evaluation question are summarized below:

To what extent has the fellowship deepened the knowledge, skills, and abilities of participating fellows?

Evaluation findings indicate that the fellowship has deepened the knowledge, skills and abilities of participating fellows *a great deal*. The fellowship is credited with developing and transforming fellows' perspectives on food security and international development. Alumni further credited the program in helping them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to become leaders in their field.

How has the Leland Program influenced the career paths of participating fellows?

The Leland Program is recognized by its participants as an opportunity to build credentials and open doors into the field of international development and food security. More than half (58 percent) of the alumni survey respondents indicated that their current position addresses or directly relates to food security *a great deal*. A majority (83 percent) of alumni survey respondents also indicated that the Leland Fellowship has influenced their career path *a great deal*.

What are the benefits of the fellowship to participating host organizations?

Host organizations also gave positive feedback about the fellowship program. Fellows help their host organizations build capacity, pursue additional funding opportunities, and implement stronger reporting practices. In addition, host organizations valued the added perspective the fellows' field experiences brought to the policy year. Several host organizations that were interviewed for this evaluation indicated that they had hired fellows after the fellowship was completed.

¹ The Methodology Appendix includes more specific details on the evaluation methodology and response rates.

Key Findings

To what extent has the fellowship deepened the knowledge, skills, and abilities of participating fellows?

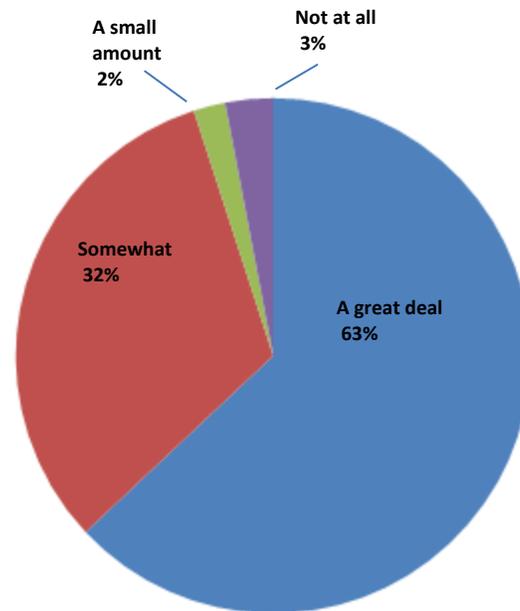
Key attributes of the fellowship program are the professional and substantive hands-on learning that takes place during both the field and policy placements and the unique perspective gained through the contrasts and connections of these two environments. Leland Fellows enter the fellowship program as qualified professionals with skills and expertise that they build upon as they deepen their level of experience and broaden their knowledge and understanding of the development field. Fellows are placed with international and local NGOs, U.S. government development agencies, multi-lateral organizations, and private sector entities that are committed to increasing levels of food security for the most vulnerable populations. Fellows work in program areas such as agriculture, health and nutrition, school meals, emergency response, economic development, gender integration, and climate change adaptation, according to their background and experience. They help manage and implement projects and new initiatives, monitor and evaluate programs, provide technical assistance, and conduct research.

[The Fellowship] was a professional position where I had leadership and management responsibilities that taught me a lot about ... working in developing country contexts.

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Sixty-three percent of alumni responding to the survey reported that their own perspectives on food security and/or international development evolved a *great deal* as a result of the fellowship.

Chart 1: The Degree to which Alumni Perspectives in Food Security and/or International Development Evolved as a Result of Fellowship Experience (n=63)



It was a great learning experience to connect the dots between country office program planning, ... policy implementation, and field beneficiary experience. SURVEY RESPONDENT

Many of the alumni interview respondents specifically described or referred to the way in which the fellowship program rounded out what they saw as an uneven range of previous professional experience; those with field experience valued their time in a policy setting and vice versa.

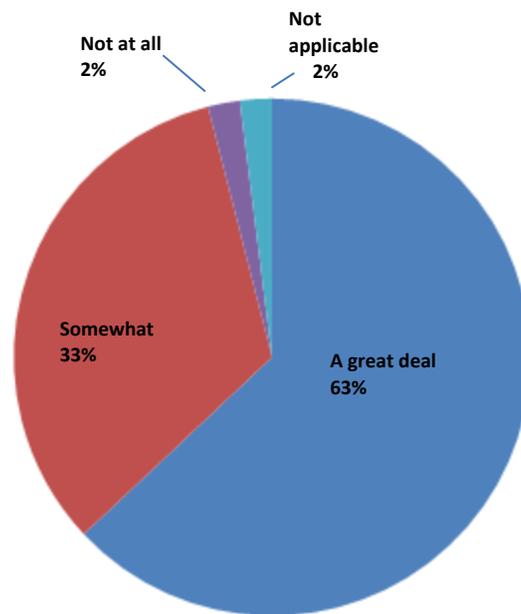
Most of my experience prior to the fellowship had been either academic or very field based and I didn't have a ... big picture sense of international development and the Fellowship helped me with that. ALUMNUS, CLASS 4

CHC staff concurred that the fellowship exposes fellows to new experiences and provides a concrete understanding of the opportunities and challenges that exist when doing international

development work. As mentioned by one CHC staff person, “Everything changes when you are actually doing the work. Fellows come face to face with all dimensions of ... the work.”

Sixty-three percent of alumni responding to the survey felt that the program helped them a *great deal* to develop the skills, experience, and knowledge necessary to become a leader in their field.

Chart 2: The Extent to which the Leland Fellowship Helped Alumni Develop the Skills, Experience, and Knowledge Necessary to Become a Leader (n=60)



... [T]here is a strong leadership emphasis, because it really pushed a lot of us out of our comfort zone and really challenged us to do things that we might not have done previously. ALUMNUS, CLASS 2

Site supervisors from the host organizations also concurred that the fellowship was instrumental in providing opportunities to nurture and develop leaders. As described by one policy site supervisor, “Every single fellow I know of is playing a leadership role somewhere.”

Fellows described a wide range of knowledge and skills acquired through the fellowship:

- Program management experience
- Improved understanding of local and donor politics
- Budgeting and project implementation
- Cultural competencies working with local staff
- Enhanced research and analysis skills
- Greater fluency in foreign languages
- Increased self-confidence
- Policy/advocacy experience: educating lawmakers, conducting Hill briefings
- Deeper understanding of local and organizational context

I was allowed to wander and make mistakes and fail – and, in turn, increasingly strengthen my own understandings, convictions, and leadership development skills.

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Fellows attributed the most important aspects of their skills acquisition to good host pairing and a strong commitment by the host organization. Ninety-six percent of the alumni survey respondents indicated that they *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that the fellowship provided them with a foundation that has been helpful in their post-fellowship pursuits.

Table 1: Extent to which Fellowship Provided Alumni with a Foundation that has been Helpful in Post-Fellowship Pursuits

	Percentage	Number
Strongly Agree	71%	45
Agree	25%	16
Disagree	2%	1
Strongly Disagree	2%	1
Total		63

Fellows enter the program with a variety of backgrounds and expertise, which are enhanced through their direct field and policy work. Additionally, CHC provides a high-level contextual overview of the work fellows undertake, including through trainings, additional professional development opportunities, and the space to share resources and expertise. Fellows benefit directly from the participatory, multi-sectoral nature of the program in their post-fellowship pursuits.

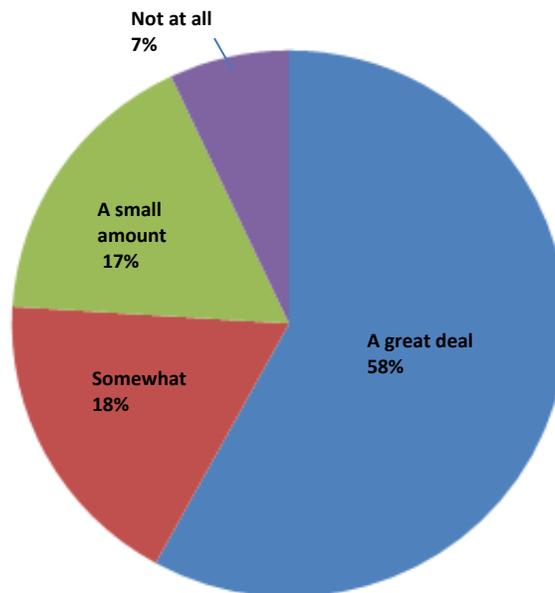
Has the fellowship influenced the career paths of participating fellows?

Most Leland alumni continue to do work that directly or indirectly promotes global food security. The Leland Program is almost universally recognized by its participants as an opportunity for building their credentials and opening professional doors that would otherwise be difficult to access. In addition, alumni report that the fellowship gave them experience that enabled them to be more effective in their post-fellowship work.

The people who come out of this program are very capable and they have a very wide view of how to make a difference in the field and within the organization. The experience itself builds confidence and allows them to really stretch themselves. POLICY SITE SUPERVISOR

Fifty-eight percent of the alumni survey respondents indicated that their current position addresses or directly relates to food security *a great deal*.

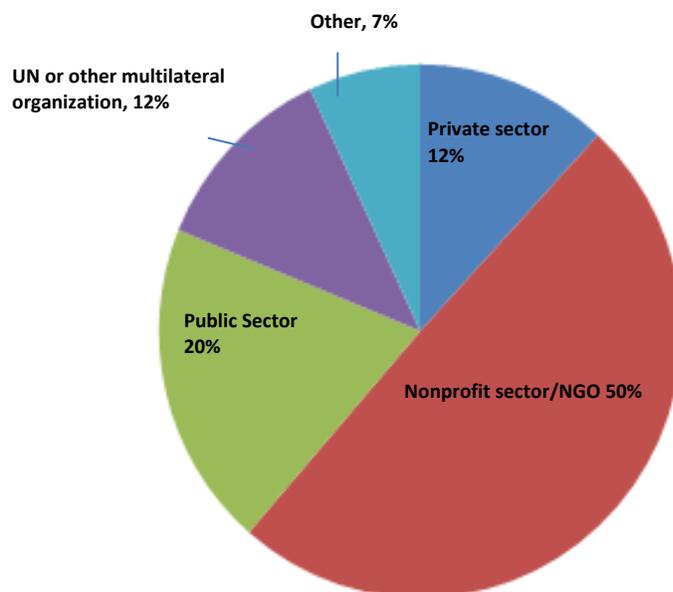
Chart 3: Extent to which Current Position Addresses or Directly Relates to Food Security (n=60)



This is particularly important because one of the stated goals of the Leland Program is to foster a community of anti-hunger leaders who will continue to work towards alleviating food insecurity worldwide.

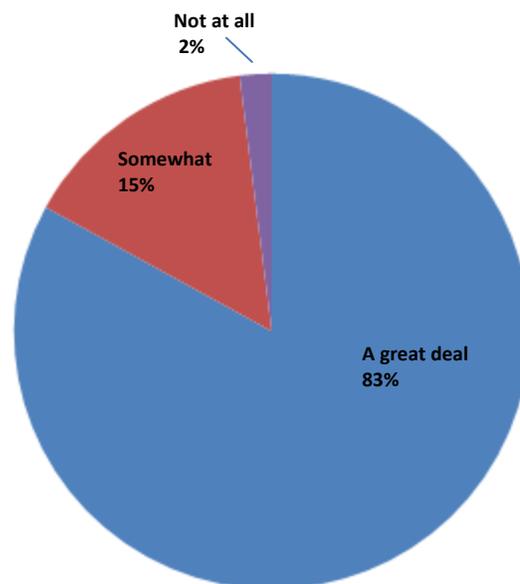
Alumni graduating from the fellowship work in a variety of sectors, with the greatest percentage working in the nonprofit/NGO sector (50 percent) followed by the public sector (20 percent), usually in the U.S. government development agencies.

Chart 4: Sector of Employment (n=60)



Eighty-three percent of alumni survey respondents indicated that the Leland Fellowship had a *great deal* of influence on their career path. The fellowship program also exposed participants to different perspectives and experiences that continue to help alumni be more effective in their post-fellowship work.

Chart 5: Degree to which Leland Fellowship Influenced Alumni Career Path (n=60)



The fellowship was spectacular in content ... and in launching my career in international food security. SURVEY RESPONDENT

The program is credited with providing fellows with the following:

1. **STRENGTHENED CREDENTIALS.** Both program alumni and host organizations saw value in the dual nature of the fellowship. Having the opportunity to work in both a field and headquarters office provided first-hand experience, knowledge, and understanding of two unique perspectives and enhanced the professional credibility of the fellows.

You can read all the books you want, but there's nothing like being there and working on the program. That's how I got my start and the people who I respect the most doing policy work are those who have actually been out there with the people we are trying to help. POLICY SITE SUPERVISOR

2. EXPANDED WORK EXPERIENCE. By providing an opportunity to work in both field and policy settings, the fellowship gave fellows a chance to develop new skills from a broader array of professional experience.

[The skills learned in my policy placement] really helped me transition into a job after the fellowship. And they were attractive to the people that hired me, and I've been using those skills ever since. ALUMNUS, CLASS 2

Working at the local community level as well as the national office of a large INGO [International Non-Governmental Organization] gave me a very unique set of skills which were very valuable once I moved onto other areas of that INGO. SURVEY RESPONDENT

3. ACCESS TO KEY ORGANIZATIONS AND POSITIONS. Participating in the fellowship provided fellows with direct contact to organizations and types of work they may not have had access to otherwise.

The fellowship allowed me the opportunity to take in that first-hand knowledge with USAID ... at a particular time [where such access] was almost impossible. ALUMNUS, CLASS 1

[You] can't get a job in the field without field experience. [You] can't get field experience without a job in the field. The Congressional Hunger Center was ... instrumental in facilitating that for me ... I think that [time in the field] ... allowed me to get to the position I'm in now. ALUMNUS, CLASS 3

4. BROADER NETWORKS. The fellowship also provided fellows an opportunity to develop and broaden their professional and peer networks and tap into existing networks of the Congressional Hunger Center. Ninety percent of alumni rated the quality of professional connections made as a fellow as 'excellent' or 'good.'

**Table 2: Rating of Professional Networks/Connections
Made as a Fellow (n=62)**

	Percentage	Number
Excellent	40%	25
Good	50%	31
Fair	10%	6

The networks and connections I [made] have been ... helpful to my career. ALUMNUS,
CLASS 4

What are the benefits of the fellowship to participating host organizations?

One of the stated goals of the Leland Program is to ensure that fellows add value to the work of their host organizations. Each fellowship placement aims to be a mutually beneficial one in which the fellow gains experience and expertise while the host organization benefits from the fellow's skills and hard work. Host organizations provided numerous reasons for choosing to host Leland Fellows, with the high skill level of fellows regularly cited as a primary factor. Host organizations used fellows to build up their capacity in specific areas, pursue additional funding avenues, implement stronger reporting practices, and pursue project opportunities that would otherwise be missed.

Fellows produced a number of tangible work outputs for their host organizations during their field year including supporting program design, creating toolkits, strengthening program implementation, and managing monitoring and evaluation activities.

The value that field-based host organizations assign to their fellows came through in many of the interviews with host organization staff:

Now as other country directors have begun to recognize and hear about the fellows, there's an internal competition within our country programs for who gets to host the fellow. FIELD SITE SUPERVISOR

We've ... benefitted from [fellows] conducting independent assessments of potential new program areas, conducting evaluations of projects, working on monitoring and evaluation systems, [and] developing and writing new proposals. FIELD SITE SUPERVISOR

From my perspective, it's always been a good experience. We've gotten lots done; they've become part of the team in the field offices. For me it's a valuable relationship.

FIELD SITE SUPERVISOR

Having access to a pool of highly skilled and ambitious professionals was cited by host organization staff as being beneficial for both short-term and long-term staffing capacity. Not all fellows, however, could readily identify the concrete impact of their work, especially in their policy placement. This is likely due in part to the slow and incremental nature of policy work.

Policy-based host organizations cited the benefits of having fellows who have had the opportunity to work in the field. This added perspective was a real value to the policy sites:

When I get them, they work on policy issues. They've already been seasoned in the field and they have the experience and background within my organization that can really benefit the things I'm doing. POLICY SITE SUPERVISOR

During their field and policy placements, fellows engaged in a variety of activities for their host organization. Examples include:

- Conducting project evaluations
- Assisting or leading in the development and implementation of new programs
- Developing technical training resources
- Conducting trainings
- Transforming research into policy documents, briefings, and white papers
- Participating in food security/policy advocacy coalitions

Fellows and host organizations alike indicated that the key to establishing a positive experience for both the fellow and the host site was to develop a well-thought-out workplan at the start of the fellowship. Instances where fellows did not fully benefit from their placement almost always occurred when a workplan was not clearly developed and agreed upon by the host organization, the fellow, and CHC. Nevertheless, both fellows and host organizations have benefitted from the Leland Program and several of the host organizations interviewed for this evaluation indicated that they had hired their fellows after the program was completed.

Discussion and Reflections

Overall, program alumni and participating host organizations had positive remarks about the quality and content of the fellowship. There are, however, a few areas in which the program can improve. These are outlined below:

FIELD-POLICY LINKAGE

The linkage between the fellows' field and policy experiences appears to be an important factor contributing to the overall learning and satisfaction of participating fellows. Program alumni indicated that organizational continuity was an asset and that fellows are better served when they conduct both their field and policy placements with the same organization. In instances where there was a clear connection between the placements, fellows were able to broaden their own understanding of the dual nature of field and policy work. In instances where the connection was not as clear or not present, program alumni felt that they did not get as much out of the fellowship as they could have.

One of the challenges in ensuring that the work performed by fellows in the field is connected to work they perform in headquarters is that, in the real world, there is often a communication gap between headquarters and its counterpart in the field that saps effectiveness on both ends. This disconnect is felt first-hand by fellows as they try to make sense of and connect their field and policy experiences. In recent years, CHC staff has made concerted efforts to recruit host organizations that are cognizant of the need to link field and policy work and to enlist staff from both the field and headquarters to develop a high-level workplan for the fellow. The benefits of these changes are just now being experienced by the sixth class², who were reaching the end of their field assignment at the time of this evaluation.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Conversations with both program alumni and host organizations revealed the importance of CHC clearly communicating roles, responsibilities, and expectations to both fellows and host organizations prior to the start of the fellowship. In instances when this communication occurs, fellows and host sites benefit. However, contextual factors, often outside the control of CHC, such as staffing changes within the host

² It should be noted that participants of the sixth class were not formal subjects of this evaluation. All references to the sixth class were obtained through conversations with CHC staff.

organization, may present obstacles. It appears, however, that in instances when fellows and their host organizations had a shared understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities, there was a higher likelihood of mutual benefit. CHC staff has made a concerted effort to systematically communicate expectations, roles, and responsibilities to both prospective fellows and host organizations during the recruitment process and early stages of the fellowship. CHC staff indicated that this effort has translated into fewer conflicts resulting between 6th class fellows and their field sites.

WORKPLAN DEVELOPMENT

Both site supervisors and program alumni discussed the importance of developing mutually agreed upon workplans to enhance the overall quality of the fellowship for participating fellows and host organizations. The workplan serves as an informal contract between the fellow, host organization, and CHC. It provides a roadmap of the work the fellow will complete during his/her placement and, if done correctly, helps to connect the work conducted during the field year to the work performed during the policy year. It is recommended that in situations where the workplan is altered or where staffing changes have taken place in the host organization, a new workplan be negotiated and agreed upon by all the parties involved (i.e., the fellow, the site supervisor, and CHC).

Conversations with CHC staff further confirm that these types of changes are already underway and are helping to ensure buy-in and set realistic expectations when possible. CHC staff indicated that in recent years, fellows are playing a stronger role in workplan development. However, fellows may still face challenges in implementing their workplan if unforeseen problems arise. As described by one CHC staff person, *"The adaptive nature of the work requires everyone to be flexible."*

MENTORING GUIDELINES

Our interviews with alumni and staff revealed the importance of providing opportunities for fellows to be mentored during their field and policy placements. Program alumni who appear to have benefited the most from the fellowship were paired with site supervisors in their field and policy settings who took an interest in actively mentoring the fellows. This appears to be most critical during the field placement, when fellows feel the most isolated from their peers and CHC staff. It is recommended that CHC continue to vet host organizations and communicate the importance of mentorship when selecting host organizations. However, due to the

complexities and time constraints of staff working with fellows in both field and policy settings, formal mentorship may not always be practical. CHC staff has taken measures to set more realistic expectations with incoming fellows regarding the mentorship aspect of the fellowship.

FELLOW COMMUNICATION/RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Site supervisors and alumni both cited the importance of regular check-ins by CHC staff, especially during the field placement. Representatives from the host organizations indicated that this is an area that has improved over time and encourages CHC staff to continue incorporating monthly reporting structures to keep all parties in the communication loop. Conversations with CHC staff further indicate that concrete measures, both formal and informal, are being incorporated to ensure communication between fellows and Leland staff.

We are aware of how each one of them is doing. We are more conscientious about it. We have really tried to give [the fellows] what they want. There's a base level of formal communication that happens regardless of if there's a problem or not. CHC STAFF PERSON

In addition, CHC staff has learned over time the importance of having good relationships with host organization staff. This is especially important when fellows are in the field. As a result of changes in the communication structure among CHC staff, fellows, and host organizations, CHC staff has seen a decline in the number of communication-related problems within the current class.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community building was identified as a challenge by both program alumni and CHC staff. This is mainly due to the geographic distance between the fellows and CHC and among the fellows themselves during the first year. Conversations with CHC staff further indicate that many of the fellows rely on their own personal networks when in the field instead of communicating with their peers in the program. It is recommended that CHC incorporate more intentional community building efforts with the fellows at the start of the fellowship that may continue beyond the fellowship. This may include virtual infrastructure to help generate discussions and promote ongoing dialogue among fellows. However, it is recognized that for community building to occur successfully, there needs to be 1) a willingness and desire among the fellows to

participate and be a part of the network; 2) ease of access to the network; and 3) a benefit for all those taking part.

Conclusion

The Leland Program is a distinctive fellowship program that offers its participants a unique chance to experience the realities of both field and policy work within the context of global hunger. While the overall infrastructure of the fellowship has improved steadily over the past decade, the fundamental nature of international development work, especially in the field, will always cause programmatic challenges for CHC staff and require that both CHC staff and participating fellows remain flexible and adaptive to the constantly evolving nature of their work. It is notable, however, that alumni, especially those who participated in the earlier classes, feel that the minor challenges experienced over the course of the program contributed to the overall learning.

Many participants are attracted to the program for the opportunity to gain first-hand field experience and often complete the program with an enlightened perspective on the complexities of both international field and policy work. Program alumni talk openly about the positive impact of the fellowship on their careers. Many of them credit the fellowship for opening up professional opportunities and providing them with experiences that have made them more effective at what they do.