

BETTY McCOLLUM
4TH DISTRICT, MINNESOTA

2256 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-6631
FAX: (202) 225-1968

165 WESTERN AVENUE NORTH
SUITE 17
ST. PAUL, MN 55102
(651) 224-9191
FAX: (651) 224-3056

www.house.gov/mccollum



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August 17, 2016

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

I am writing to request that the Government Accountability Office begin an immediate and thorough investigation of Planet Aid, a non-governmental organization, and its possible misuse of federal funds provided under contracts with several U.S. government agencies.

To help improve global health and advance food security around the world, the United States government contracts with various organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance through a variety of Congressionally-mandated programs. In recent years, several U.S. government agencies have contracted with Planet Aid and its affiliates to provide services in furtherance of these goals.

Recent media reports by the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) suggest that Planet Aid and its affiliates have engaged in a “shell game” with funds received from contracts with the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). In addition to an opaque contracting and financing structure that passes federal money to affiliated subcontractors, journalists have found evidence that suggests Planet Aid may have failed to fulfill its contractual obligations to the FAS on several projects in Malawi.

Similarly disturbing, media reports indicate that Planet Aid is connected to a global organization, the Teachers Group, which has been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and foreign law enforcement for fraud and corruption. The senior leadership of the Teachers Group is wanted by the International Criminal Police Organization. Former members of the group have described it as a “cult.” Finally, in a 2001 FBI report obtained by CIR, investigators noted that the Teachers Group diverted funds “for personal use. Little, to no money goes to the charities.”

Following the investigations by both CIR and the British Broadcasting Corporation, the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development and the United Nations Children’s Fund -- two highly respected international development and humanitarian relief organizations -- suspended funding to a Planet Aid-affiliate known as Development Assistance from People to People Malawi.

Planet Aid maintains an active contract with the FAS to provide services in Mozambique under the McGovern–Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. The USDA has

responded to media inquiries about its relationship with Planet Aid and its affiliates by stating that annual audits and site visits have uncovered no evidence of wrongdoing by Planet Aid or its subcontractors.

However, media reports indicate that “visiting auditors [were steered] to Potemkin village farms that looked prosperous but were merely for show.” Given the alleged sophistication of the Teachers Group, it is plausible that USDA auditors have not been given the access they need to fully investigate the performance of Planet Aid and its affiliates.

While recent media reports have focused primarily on the possibility of misconduct with FAS contracts, Planet Aid and its affiliated organizations have significant relationships with other U.S. government agencies.

For instance, Planet Aid is registered as a private voluntary organization with the U.S. Agency for International Development. And at least one Planet Aid affiliate has received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for services related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa.

Given the evidence that has been uncovered by investigative journalists and the decision by international partners of the United States government to suspend funding to a Planet Aid affiliate, it is clear that a more thorough investigation is needed into how American taxpayer dollars that flowed to this organization and its affiliates are being spent now and how they have been spent in the past.

Specifically, I am requesting the Government Accountability Office investigate the following:

1. Have all federal funds disbursed to Planet Aid and/or its affiliates been spent appropriately, including by subcontractors?
2. Did federal agencies that contracted with Planet Aid and/or its affiliates meet their legal responsibilities in overseeing these agreements?
3. Is the FAS annual audit and site visit process, as it currently functions, sufficient to determine whether federal contracts overseas are being properly executed?

I urge you to begin a comprehensive inquiry immediately. I hope that such an investigation will be thorough and draw upon whatever resources are necessary to ensure that the issues surrounding this global organization are fully examined.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Please contact Jenn Holcomb, my Legislative Director, at (202) 225-6631 with any questions about this request.

Sincerely,



Betty McCollum
Member of Congress