

Celebrating a Microfinance Champion

Dr. Scott Leckman wasted no time when his home state of Utah elected a new senator back in 1992. He made an appointment to meet Senator Bob Bennett just one week later.

“Senator Bennett agreed to meet with me, one on one, in his campaign headquarters,” remembered Dr. Leckman, a long-time RESULTS activist who is now RESULTS/REF board chair. “I was very hopeful that getting to him early in his career would be helpful. I talked to him about our issues, and he immediately liked the idea of microcredit.”

Dr. Leckman knew that the Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee (which oversees the foreign aid budget) was the place to be if you’re a senator wanting to advance U.S. financial support and smart policies for microfinance. He encouraged Sen. Bennett to get a spot. When Sen. Bennett joined the subcommittee five years later, he began having a substantial influence.

Since that first meeting, Dr. Leckman and his fellow RESULTS activists in Utah have met annually with Sen. Bennett and his staff in Salt Lake City and in Washington, D.C. “He was always a gentleman,” said Dr. Leckman. At each meeting, the group urged the senator to take specific actions to increase funding and improve implementation of programs for microfinance, and consistently he did.

“He has been *the* champion for microfinance on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee,” said Dr. Leckman. “He was the lead on several letters to the president of the World Bank and met personally with him to advance microfinance. During hearings, Sen. Bennett asked the Treasury Secretary and the Secretary of State hard questions about why we weren’t doing more. After the tsunami in 2005, we put forward the idea of setting aside \$20 million for microfinance in Indonesia, and he liked the idea and made it happen. And every year he’s pressed for more of our foreign aid money to go for microfinance programs for the world’s poorest people. He’s been a wonderful ally.”

When Sen. Bennett joined the Foreign Operations Subcommittee, the U.S. allocation for microfinance programs was \$111 million. That figure has more than doubled since then, reaching \$265 million this year.

Sen. Bennett is now finishing up his last term in office. Recently he acknowledged the importance of both his relationship with Dr. Leckman and his own role in expanding microfinance. During their last meeting together on Capitol Hill in June, Sen. Bennett told Dr. Leckman, “I’m grateful to you for introducing me to microfinance. It’s not something I was talking about.”



Utah RESULTS activists Dr. Scott Leckman, Emily Bennett, and Vanessa Johnson met one last time with Senator Bennett (second from right) in June. “I’m grateful to you for introducing me to microfinance,” Sen. Bennett told them. Dr. Leckman called Sen. Bennett a “champion for microfinance.”

Dr. Leckman and RESULTS staff and activists were able to show their gratitude to the senator when he joined us that evening for the RESULTS/REF International Conference reception. “There are millions and millions of poor women and their families who have benefitted because of your actions,” Dr. Leckman said in his introduction, “I know and everybody in this room knows how instrumental you have been in making their lives better.”

After an enthusiastic round of applause, Sen. Bennett explained his commitment to microfinance. “I’ve been to Morocco and places in Egypt and met with people who have microloans. I’ve seen firsthand how fabulously it works. I’m a conservative Republican, which means I’m a capitalist, and to turn these women into capitalists is a great project. It gives them an independence and a form of self-respect that nothing else can do.”

He closed this way: “People say to me, now that you’re leaving the Senate, list your accomplishments. Looking back on the level of microfinance spending when I got on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee and seeing what level it is now, and knowing how many times I made phone calls and wrote letters and so on, I think my legacy in helping to increase the spending for microfinance is as important a legacy as anything else I have done.”