Refine and Implement Stakeholder Consultation

August 30-31, 2022

Report

Program Cycle Support | Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning

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Abbreviations

BHA	USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
COP	Chief of Party
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
IP	Implementing partner
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
PCS	Program Cycle Support
R&I	Refine and implement
RFA	Request for Applications
RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
SHC	Stakeholder Consultation
TOC	Theory of Change
TOPS	Technical and Operational Performance Support Program
TPQ	Technical and Program Quality
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association

Introduction

The Refine and Implement (R&I) Stakeholder Consultation, co-hosted by IDEAL and Program Cycle Support (PCS) on August 30-31, 2022, provided a forum for USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and implementing partner (IP) staff to collaboratively seek solutions to R&I challenges, agree on recommendations and preliminary action plans, and bust myths in a safe learning space where all could share diverse ideas. A total of 81 participants attended the consultation (45 staff from IP organizations and 36 from BHA). The BHA staff represented a cross section of technical and geographic teams with varying levels of R&I experience. The IP participants represented 12 partner organizations, implementing 16 different resilience food security activities (RFSAs) in 10 countries: Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Niger, and Zimbabwe.

To inform the design of the event and ensure the conversations could focus on solutions, PCS and IDEAL used a three-stage mixed-method approach that identified challenges within the R&I process in advance (key informant interviews; stakeholder survey; follow-up qualitative outreach). The stakeholder survey results allowed PCS and IDEAL to prioritize topics to address within the time available for the consultation. IP and BHA staff ranked two overarching themes as the top two discussion topics:

- BHA and IPs agree on promising practices for RFSA intervention prioritization and elimination
- BHA and IPs brainstorm about the value addition of the refinement period and whether modifications are necessary if the value is not apparent

PCS and IDEAL shared the findings from all pre-workshop input in the consultation pre-read document. Table 1 summarizes BHA and IP informants' beliefs.

Report Organization: We organized the remainder of this report in four sections. Section 1 documents the content shared in the consultation's opening session. The subsequent three sections detail key considerations and proposed solutions from the consultation's breakout discussions on the following R&I topics:

- Creating an enabling environment for prioritization
- Ensuring RFSA designs are fit to context and local priorities
- Enhancing the efficiency of refinement period processes

Each section of the report includes links to the consultation's pre-read document, which offers detailed findings about each of the challenges that participants aimed to resolve during the consultation.

BHA plans to produce a brief that outlines which consultation recommendations BHA can and cannot commit to taking forward. IDEAL will follow up with IP organizations to coordinate a partner response that documents action steps on the IP side, inclusive of action steps that PCS and IDEAL can commit to.

Table 1: Top factors that influence whether BHA and IP staff perceive the refinement period to be valuable

A. Extent to which RFSA designs demonstrate prioritization after a year of learning	**After a year of learning, what contributes to refined RFSA designs looking very similar to the proposal design?** ● Limited clarity among both IP and BHA staff on BHA's vision and expectations for prioritization. (IP & BHA) ● BHA and IP staff are not thinking holistically when determining what to prioritize or eliminate; everyone has a siloed perspective that includes individual preferences. (IP & BHA) ● Belief that some proposed RFSA designs are already strong–not all awards need to be substantially refined. (IP & BHA) Similarly, at times the refinement period validates the original design, and no major refinements are necessary. (IP) ● The request for applications (RFA) structure contributes to challenges with streamlining the activity design. (IP & BHA) ● Substantial cuts are difficult once staff are hired or local partners are signed. (IP & BHA) ● Budgeting guidance related to activity elimination is not universally understood. Implementers are hesitant to remove budgeted interventions and thereby risk reduced funding. (IP & BHA)
B. Extent to which RFSAs tailor Activity design to context and local priorities	**What is hindering RFSAs' efforts to contextualize?** ● Increased use of high-level primary research for learning, which some believe may not contribute to new learnings or learnings at the right level to influence intervention strategy. (IP & BHA) ● Belief that RFSAs miss an iterative learning and adaptive management opportunity without ongoing core activities during the refinement period. (IP & BHA)
C. Efficiency of refinement period processes	**What is hindering efficient refinement period processes?** ● Belief that BHA technical feedback oversteps the 'substantial involvement' clause. (IP & BHA) ● Belief that written technical input and feedback from BHA is often unclear (inconsistent, conflicting, and not fully informed). (IP & BHA) ● Delays in approval of scopes of work lead to substantially delayed research, which in turn leads to delayed implementation (IP & BHA) ● Belief that annual reporting and budgeting cycles are not well-aligned to the R&I model ● Belief that there are too many cooks in the kitchen overall. (IP & BHA) ● Belief that the refinement period timeline is not tailored to country or implementer experience. (IP & BHA)
D. Extent to which RFSAs can build strong relationships with local stakeholders	**What is hindering RFSAs' ability to build strong relationships with communities and local partners?** ● Belief that delayed implementation creates obstacles for the RFSA's relationship with communities and local stakeholders. (IP & BHA) ● Belief that unclear communication from the RFSA may cause confusion among communities about the research focus. (IP)

1. Event Opening

The stakeholder consultation began with a brief review of the timeline of R&I implementation, starting with the 2016 Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) cohort and continuing through the most recent 2022 award in Haiti. A comparison of feedback from early and later R&I cohorts highlighted a few ways in which the process has evolved and improved over the six years, including the following:

- IP and BHA staff now consider **community consultations** a key component of the refinement period, as they provide critical insights to community challenges and aspirations. Notable appreciation for community consultation process began in the 2021 cycle.
- The use and perceived value of **pilots** as a refinement learning activity has been more apparent since 2020 compared with earlier cycles.
- In recent cycles, BHA has communicated more clearly to RFSAs that implementation does not need to be put on hold during the refinement period—in fact BHA encourages RFSAs to **implement evidence-based interventions during this time.** Beginning with the 2021 cycle, RFSAs appear to have a better understanding that evidence-based implementation is encouraged and acceptable.

Figure 1: Timeline of R&I Implementation
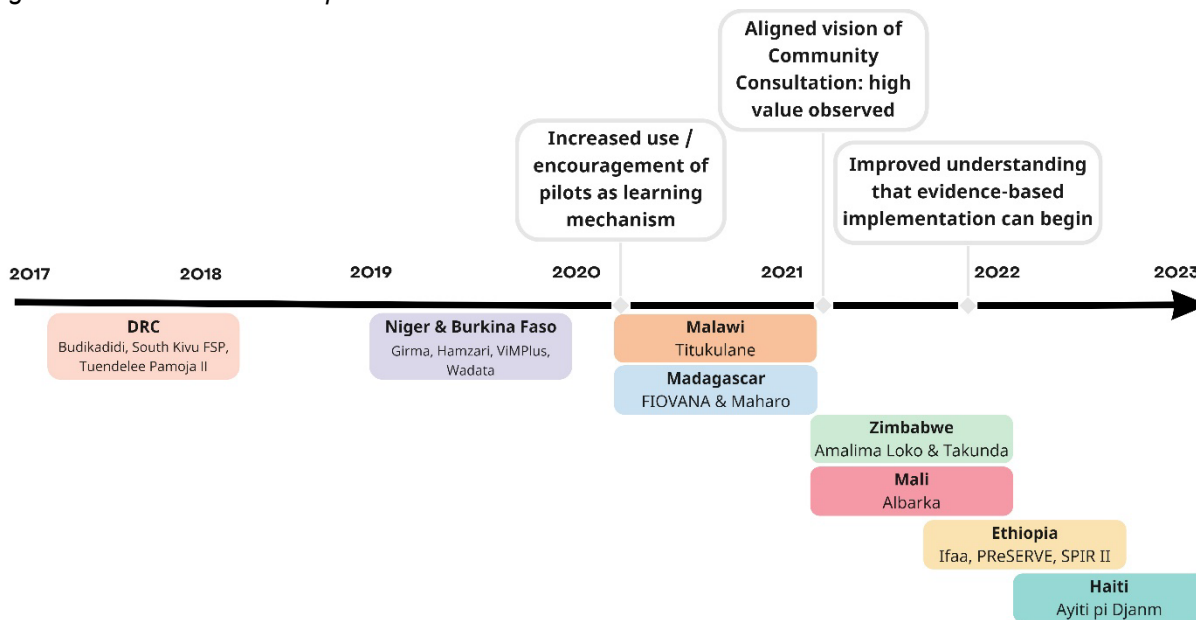
The opening segment of the consultation also explained why several key issues raised by IP and BHA staff would not be covered during the consultation: they were either already being addressed by BHA, did not fit within the two prioritized consultation themes, or were better suited to discussion in a different forum. Topics not covered are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Topics not covered in the stakeholder consultation

Unclear BHA technical feedback (conflicting comments in reports and issues letters, vague guidance, etc.)	BHA acknowledges the challenge and commits to addressing it internally.
Delays in scope of work (SOW) approvals	BHA acknowledges the challenge and commits to addressing it internally.
Challenges with aligning award management processes and the R&I model	Topic does not fit within the prioritized discussion themes of R&I value and/or prioritization challenges.
Minimizing the negative impact of the refinement process on local relationships	Topic is better suited for a knowledge-sharing event as at least half of IP informants did not face this challenge or have overcome it.

2. Creating an Enabling Environment for Prioritization

What Is Working?

This portion of the consultation opened with a brief overview of some prioritization processes that are working well. Representatives from two RFSAs (CNFA-led Amalima Loko and Save the Children-led Albarka) shared examples of a substantial elimination in the activity design and a substantial intervention addition.

- When evidence demonstrated that planned Farmer Field School activities would be duplicative of existing and successful efforts, Amalima Loko elected to remove these interventions from their design.
- Failed assumptions related to what the RFSA expected another stakeholder to provide and great need highlighted by baseline data resulted in the substantial addition of WASH activities for Albarka.
- BHA's acting division chief spoke briefly, to confirm that each case is considered a good example of focused prioritization.

BHA Clarifications

Next, BHA representatives provided clarifications on several of the perceived challenges that surfaced during the pre-consultation survey and qualitative outreach.

- **Perceived budget concerns**: RFSAs do not lose funding if they eliminate interventions during the refinement period. RFSAs can shift funding to other activities that meet the RFSA's food security objectives.
- **Challenges with broad RFAs**: BHA cross-sectoral design teams are making progress in efforts to enhance the focus RFAs, in order to support the IPs' prioritization process. The FY22 RFA for Mozambique, which narrowed in on improving health and nutrition outcomes for women and children, demonstrates this.
- **Updates to BHA expectations for prioritization:** BHA busted a prevailing myth by explaining that the agency is not exclusively looking for major eliminations to the activity design. At times, prioritization may mean adding elements that refinement period research indicates are critical to achievement of the activity's outcomes. When RFSAs demonstrate adequate focus at the proposal stage, prioritization may simply amount to additional modifications that ensure the contextualization of interventions, coordination and layering with other actors and investments, and alignment with community priorities.

Participants spent the remainder of the session in breakout conversations, followed by plenary summaries of those conversations.

Breakout Discussions: Addressing the factors that BHA and IP staff believe influence whether a refined design looks very similar to the proposal design

Table 3: Breakout discussion topics - factors BHA and IPs believe influence whether a design looks similar to proposal design

BHA and IP Belief	Discussion Focus
Limited clarity among IP and BHA staff on BHA's vision and expectations for prioritization. (IP and BHA)	Partners and BHA explored a shared vision of intervention prioritization. This included identifying factors that would indicate that substantial streamlining or eliminations were necessary, indications that a RFSA design is sufficiently focused at the proposal stage, and other interpretations of "prioritization."
Some proposed RFSA designs are already strong–not all awards need to be substantially refined. Similarly, at times, the refinement period	Participants brainstormed how BHA could share expectations for prioritization to enhance both IP and BHA understanding and to ensure consistent messaging. The groups also offered suggestions on the timing of the conversations that allow BHA and IPs to reach agreement on whether a RFSA needs to substantially

BHA and IP Belief	Discussion Focus
validates the original design, and no major refinements are necessary.	prioritize efforts and streamline the design during the refinement period.
BHA and IP staff are not thinking holistically when determining what to prioritize or eliminate.	Participants brainstormed strategies that could help ensure more holistic decision-making during internal and BHA/IP collaborative processes, including specific strategies that might help to overcome any organizational reluctance to change.
Substantial design eliminations are difficult once RFSAs hire staff or sign on local partners.	Participants identified changes to R&I processes that could help RFSAs avoid a negative impact on staff and local partners when refinement learnings indicate a substantial aspect of the implementation strategy should be eliminated.

BHA and IP participants agreed that the following examples are good indications of whether a RFSA will need substantial modifications during the refinement period. Those in attendance felt using these examples in written or verbal guidance would contribute to an enhanced understanding of prioritization expectations for BHA and IP staff. Annex A provides more detail on each listed item.

Table 4: Indicators of need for modifications to a RFSA proposal during refinement period

Indications that a proposed RFSA design needs to be streamlined during the refinement period	Indications that a RFSA Proposal is focused and may only need small modifications during the refinement year
- Too much is proposed - Insufficient contextual considerations - Limited evidence supporting design - Targeting challenges - Duplication of efforts - Weak sustainability strategies - Inadequate intervention layering/integration/sequencing - Unbalanced ratio of impact to effort - Too many assumptions that must hold in order to achieve impact	- Design is well-informed by sociopolitical and ecological context - Evidence-based interventions - Well-thought out complementarity/integration - Clear sustainability vision - Clear causal logic
Additional Considerations	
- The definition of prioritization can go beyond "streamlining". For example, it should include the extent to which a RFSA tailors the design to local priorities. - When streamlining, it is also important to consider factors beyond theory of change (TOC) logic, such as staffing capacity and availability, and other operational aspects.	

Proposed Solutions

The ideas shared below represent the full menu of suggestions stemming from consultation conversations. In the few cases where we were able to confirm a priority of those in attendance, it is noted. In most cases, there was not sufficient time during the event to understand which of these IP and BHA staff consider to be priority solutions.

Proposed Solutions: Sharing prioritization expectations to enhance IP and BHA understanding of prioritization and to ensure consistent messaging

Table 5: Proposed solutions to enhance IP and BHA understanding of prioritization to ensure consistent messaging

Proposed Solution	Considerations for Operationalizing	Timeline Considerations
BHA should develop enhanced written guidance on prioritization expectations and support with enhanced verbal guidance. *Prioritized by majority in attendance*	**General** The guidance should outline the vision and clear parameters (perhaps using the examples collaboratively discussed above) that indicate whether a proposal may need extensive refinement or may already be considered sufficiently focused. **Include in RFA** ● Reiterate prioritization expectations in the RFA, including links to more in-depth guidance. ● If BHA has intervention priorities, they should share them in the RFA. ● Identify and articulate the main evidence and information gaps in the RFA. ● RFAs should outline the rationale for key personnel (often interpreted by IPs as priority areas) and provide flexibility-guidance may dictate strategic direction that is different than the design. **Value of verbal guidance** Participants stress that while written guidance is a priority, it is critical to pair this with opportunities for discussion and to ask questions. In general, participants would like more guidance and conversations with BHA outside of formal feedback (e.g., PREPs and issues letters).	**Share expectations very early in the activity cycle** Have all R&I guidance shared earlier in the solicitation process with more details shared during the proposal/program cycle. General expectations for streamlining should be clear to the partner pre-award, with details worked out over the refinement period. Share initial information about the prioritization vision and general expectations during post-award orientation or the Inception Workshop or orientation session. Partners can use internal meetings to disseminate the vision.

Proposed Solutions: Reaching agreement on whether a RFSA needs to substantially prioritize efforts and streamline the design during the refinement period

Table 6: Proposed solutions to reaching agreement on whether a RFSA needs to prioritize efforts and streamline design

Proposed Solution	Considerations for Operationalizing	Timeline Considerations
BHA should contextualize the expected level of refinement to individual RFSA proposals. *Prioritized by majority in attendance*	**Agreement Officer's Representative (AOR) leads agreement effort** Empower the AOR to manage the process/guidance. For example, the AOR and Chief of Party (COP) and/or senior leadership could discuss and agree on specifics of refinement needs early in the activity cycle.	**Decide EARLY in the activity cycle** ● BHA to outline specific streamlining expectations during issues letter process/ orals. This could include a summary that clarifies top concerns. ● BHA to clearly outline prioritization expectations (level of streamlining necessary) during co-creation phase. ● Clarify/agree on level of streamlining needed at the Inception Workshop, with the goal to emerge with clear directions and milestones. Make these conversations a continuous process.

Recommendations: Enhancing holistic-decision making in internal and collaborative processes

Table 7: Recommendations to enhance holistic-decision making in internal and collaborative processes

Recommendation	Specific Recommendations / Considerations for Operationalizing
Internal Processes (BHA and IP)	
BHA needs to consider how the framing of the RFA could influence increased holistic approaches	Some participants believe that BHA should update the RFA process to promote a more holistic approach. Others assert that the RFA is not the stage for the holistic design because so much changes between the time a RFA is released and when the award is finalized; they believe the focus on holistic design must take place during pre-award agreements and the refinement period.
IPs and BHA need to intentionally practice integration	• Think beyond BHA and the IP—look at investments (e.g., USAID, US Government, other donors, National Government) that could inform elimination/prioritization decisions. • Enhance stakeholder mapping efforts to understand duplication or overlap of RFSAs planned implementation. • Propose strategies that demonstrate solid integration between activities and purposes versus isolated components.
IPs and BHA need to plan for internal alignment prior to arriving at Inception or Culmination Workshops	• The BHA support team coordinating ahead of R&I touchpoints should ensure a common vision and the promotion of common goals for the refinement period and the proposed refinements partners share at Culmination. • IPs organizing internal workshops with activity leaders and technical advisors should summarize and prioritize refinements prior to meeting with BHA. • IPs should ensure strong coordination between the design and implementation teams.
IPs and BHA need to ensure clear lead roles for final prioritization decisions	• BHA should assign someone to review the activity from a holistic technical perspective. For example, a designated point person in BHA could review BHA's technical comments and filter to only what is relevant before sharing with the partners. • The activity COP should help the full RFSA team understand the holistic vision, including communicating that eliminated interventions will not affect the budget, for those who may be hesitant to make substantial cuts out of budget concerns. • IP staff should consider the power dynamics between HQ and field staff and give those working in the context the power to make adjustments and decisions.
IPs need to ensure broader perspectives contribute to prioritization decisions	• Take an operational perspective. Outside of the TOC, look at what actually is going well and consider what activities RFSAs have the capability and staffing to do at the highest technical level. • Engage generalists (BHA and IP). Their voices are essential because they are not steeped in a particular sector. They can provide a clearer understanding of the scope and bandwidth of an activity. • Ensure 'cross-cutting' staff are involved in refinement discussions. • Involve the entire RFSA team, including all implementing partners in the entire refinement process

Recommendation	Specific Recommendations / Considerations for Operationalizing
IPs and BHA need to ensure that past and continued learning efforts play a key role in holistic decision-making	• Ensure findings from previous RFSAs in the same country are integrated into the R&I learning process • Enhance the integration of continual learning processes and adaptive management in refinement period processes.
BHA and IPs need to consider internal power dynamics	• Those in the room with the loudest voice or the most power should not make all the decisions.
Collaborative Processes (BHA and IP)	
BHA and IPs need to consider power dynamics in joint settings	• Those in the room with the loudest voice or the most power should not make all the decisions. • BHA should consider participating in R&I touchpoints in listening mode and providing nuanced suggestions instead of design requests or technical input.
Shift the emphasis away from what BHA and IPs think is important. Use a more dynamic and organic approach that involves greater community and local actor involvement in the R&I process	• IPs and BHA need to do a better job of connecting community priorities directly to decision making and ensuring this perspective does not get lost in the approvals and revisions process. If there is agreement between BHA and the IP that the bottom line is what the community thinks is most important, the sectoral prioritizations of BHA and IP staff would not carry as much weight.
Enhance BHA and IP dialogue for holistic decisions	• Initiate more consistent and more direct communication between IPs and the BHA technical teams to help the two groups better understand each other's perspectives. Given limited time/resources, place less emphasis on back and forth documentation between the IP and BHA. The purpose of written communication could be primarily to confirm mutual understanding and agreement. • IPs need to receive BHA feedback on proposed refinements early enough to incorporate as much as possible before culmination workshop conversations.
BHA and IPs to ensure broad perspectives contribute to prioritization conversations	• Increase IP involvement with the food security support mechanisms during the refinement period. Have the support mechanisms be more of a facilitator in the refinement process. • Increase involvement of Mission generalists in the R&I workshops. • IPs should exchange experiences on cross-cutting themes during the Culmination Workshop.
BHA and IPs to agree on markers that will inform collaborative decisions	• For dynamic contexts: Agree to make collaborative decisions based on pre-agreed markers (e.g., local community buy in). Use the markers to determine which divergent strategies would be most effective. Alternatively, test multiple strategies and evaluate effectiveness.

Proposed Solutions: Mitigating the negative impact of substantial eliminations on hired RFSA staff or local partners

Table 8: Proposed solutions to mitigate the negative impact of eliminations on hired RFSA staff or local partners

Proposed Solution	Specific Recommendations / Considerations for Operationalizing
IPs should practice phased hiring	• Prioritize hiring staff that are needed for the refinement period, but do not bring on non-essential positions until refinement decisions are made.
IPs to ensure clear teaming agreements and staffing contracts	• Include standard language in teaming agreement, such as a clause of conditionality that explains that final staffing positions will be determined based on what is eliminated from or added to the refined design. • When extending contractual agreement for partners, partially obligate as opposed to obligating a full year. • Offer fixed-term contracts with a clear understanding that the contracts may not be continued. • Renew staff contracts for a shorter term than 1 year.
BHA to consider enhancing RFA language	• Add language in RFA to improve the understanding by parties who are preparing the application that the modifications to the RFSA design following the refinement period learning may result in the elimination of some sectoral areas of focus (similar to current language on geographic areas).
BHA and IP to agree on substantial eliminations early in the Activity cycle	• Identify and agree on likely substantial eliminations pre-award. • RFSA leadership should identify early on which areas have the potential to be cut, and hold off on hiring related positions as full-time until after refinement. If necessary, use consultants to get the work done until staff are hired.

3. Ensuring RFSA Designs Are Fit to Context and Local Priorities

What is Working?

This portion of the consultation opened with a brief overview of some prioritization processes that are working well. Pre-consultation conversations highlighted that for the most part,

- BHA and IP staff believe that partners are contextualizing and tailoring the RFSAs to local priorities.
- Community consultations are contributing to shared visions and understanding of necessary implementation nuances.
- Pilot studies are considered effective for iterative learning and testing innovative approaches.

BHA Clarifications and Myth Busting

Arif Rashid provided clarifications on two perceived challenges that surfaced during the pre-consultation survey and qualitative outreach.

- In response to concerns expressed about the drawbacks of a RFSA not being able to implement during the refinement period, **BHA emphasized that the agency encourages the startup of proven, <u>evidence-based interventions</u> during the refinement period**. Additionally IPs often begin small-scale

operational research and the piloting of implementation strategies. The IP and AOR agree when the start of specific implementation strategies can occur.

- Over the years, a myth has blossomed that has led to high-level primary research (often conducted by external consultants) being the most common form of refinement period learning. **BHA emphasized that the agency does not expect partners to carry out high-level primary research,** nor does BHA prefer this type of learning over other methodologies. BHA wants partners to determine the most effective means of filling evidence and knowledge gaps. BHA also hopes to see partners using much more existing data to inform refinements than has been common in recent years.

Breakout Discussions: Addressing two key factors that BHA and IP staff believe influence whether RFSA designs are fit to context and local priorities

Table 9: Breakout discussion topics addressing key factors that BHA and IPs believe influence whether RFSA designs are fit to context and local priorities

BHA and IP Belief	Discussion Focus
Increased use of high-level primary research for learning may not contribute to new learnings or learnings at the right level to influence intervention strategy	Participants explored a variety of learning efforts that are proving to be successful at fitting RFSA designs to context and local priorities. They shared ideas about what to do differently to ensure that everyone understands that BHA does not expect or prefer high-level primary research to other methods, nor do partners always prefer it. Participants also discussed how to mitigate any potential trade-offs that might occur from relying more on iterative learning efforts and desk reviews, and less on high-level research.
RFSAs miss an iterative learning and adaptive management opportunity without ongoing core activities during the refinement period	Participants brainstormed processes that could help BHA and partners come to agreement on the evidence-based activities to implement during the refinement period, including discussions on what satisfies the criteria for "evidence based."

Proposed Solutions

The ideas shared below represent the full menu of suggestions stemming from consultation conversations. In the few cases where we were able to confirm a priority of those in attendance, it is noted. In most cases, there was not sufficient time during the event to understand which of these solutions IP and BHA staff consider to be a priority.

Proposed Solutions: Determining and agreeing on effective refinement learning efforts

Table 10: Proposed solutions to determine and agree on effective refinement learning efforts

Proposed Solution	Specific Recommendations	Considerations for Operationalizing

IPs and BHA to increase the use of alternative learning methods
 	
Prioritized by majority in attendance
	- IPs should refrain from using broad high-level primary research studies as the default learning method.
	- IPs should increase the use of well-designed pilots, desk reviews, past program results, and alternative iterative learning methods such as:
	  - Social analysis and action approach
	  - Community clusters
	  - Joint assessment and action planning with communities
		- RFSAs to ensure shared learning with the communities (desk reviews, climate vulnerability).
		- BHA or support mechanisms to provide a webinar on promising community visioning processes.

Proposed Solution	Specific Recommendations	Considerations for Operationalizing
	• PCS should integrate technical "café chats" / open conversations between the IPs and BHA during the Inception Workshop to agree on what studies/methods are essential.	
BHA and IPs to give pilot studies the same status and credibility as high-level primary research studies	• BHA should encourage pilots, as relevant means of refinement period learning. • BHA and IPs should identify mechanisms for sharing the learning on how and when RFSAs can use pilots. • RFSAs should ensure that the means for determining whether a pilot is working or not are included in the M&E plan.	• Pilots can be an effective learning method if an intervention is new to the local context. • Use pilots to decide between multiple implementation methods. • RFSAs do not need to consider pilots as "breakthrough research". Rather, they should use them to localize and contextualize the programmatic focus. • Pilot design can include using human-centered design with the community in order to adapt an intervention approach to the local context. • Pilots should be scaled up during implementation and adjusted and refined throughout the implementation phase. They shouldn't be restricted to the refinement period. • RFSAs should avoid scaling up a pilot until there is evidence to demonstrate that it is working. Avoid forcing forward simply because time and resources have already been dedicated and there is no other backup plan. • RFSAs would like more flexibility in pilot designs (e.g., less rigor and no Scope of Work). • IPs and BHA should discuss ahead of time how many pilots are appropriate to include. • IPs could ask communities directly during consultations if they believe a specific pilot activity would be acceptable and effective in their context.
RFSAs to make better use of existing data	• BHA technical advisors and Mission contacts could act as a resource to link partners to existing evidence. • IPs should increase the use of desk reviews and learning from previous projects. • IPs could use the food security support mechanisms as a resource	• IPs and BHA should call on all available sources (internal and external) to locate existing evidence. • MIT Poverty Action Lab may be able to help IPs locate existing evidence. BHA has offered to provide a link to MIT.

Proposed Solution	Specific Recommendations	Considerations for Operationalizing
	for building an evidence base by learning from the experience of other RFSAs, and consolidate existing resources and evidence to support perceived gaps.	• IPs could provide a desk review bibliography that can be reviewed by BHA. • IPs should capture tacit knowledge from staff.
IPs to design more efficient and effective primary research studies	• IPs should identify complementarities in the studies conducted and combine, as relevant, versus submitting many separate SOWs. • IPs and BHA should ensure that study designs will contribute to prioritization/elimination decisions. • IPs and BHA should use social and behavior change studies to prioritize behaviors the RFSA aims to change. • IPs should use existing effective methodologies (e.g. seed systems), contextualizing the tools and SOW as necessary. • BHA should identify and articulate evidence gaps in the RFA to help partners streamline research efforts.	• Create an approval checklist for SOWs similar to the approval checklist for TOCs created by The Technical and Operational Performance Support Program (TOPS) and USAID's Office of Food for Peace.
BHA and IPs to emphasize that learning continues throughout the life of the award. It is not limited to the refinement period.	• IPs should engage in continued stakeholder consultation. • IPs should ensure that learning methods explore whether interventions are still relevant. • IPs and BHA should agree that iterative adaptations, based on new learning, will take place during the refinement period.	• It may take more than the one-year refinement period to determine whether an intervention is successfully contextualized.
RFSAs to attempt to mitigate any challenging tradeoffs resulting from relying more on iterative learning and less on externally conducted primary research	• IPs should ensure the availability of resources for learning efforts (staff, materials, tools).	

Proposed Solutions: Reaching agreement on what evidence-based interventions can be implemented during the refinement period

Table 11: Proposed solutions to reach agreement on what evidence-based interventions can be implemented during the refinement period

Proposed Solution	Specific Recommendations / Considerations for Operationalizing
IPs and BHA need to have regular open dialogues prior to workshops and approvals	BHA should set up benchmarks/milestones for IPs to understand when interventions or pilots can start. If an intervention cannot start until the 2nd year, IPs should understand this in the earliest conversations.

IP and BHA need to establish what criteria will determine whether sufficient evidence exists to begin implementation	• Agree (between BHA and IP) on core interventions that are apt for iterative learning and can begin during the refinement period. These interventions provide opportunities for adaptive management and can be modified as the RFSA learns more. For example, this could include interventions that may have evidence gaps, but for which there is low risk if starting implementation without all gaps filled.
	• BHA should develop guidance that lists examples of conditions that might suggest an intervention can be implemented during the refinement period. Possible considerations:
	   ○ The right staff is in place.
	   ○ The intervention has a high chance of success (e.g., VSLAs).
	   ○ Activities have been successfully implemented by other partners in the operational area.
	   ○ Evidence shared by the partner is grounded in the local context and has been triangulated with other findings
	• To allow more core interventions to begin during the refinement period, BHA and IPs should agree on interventions that are good candidates for iterative learning during the Inception Workshop.

BHA and IP agree on interventions that can be implemented during the refinement period during the inception workshop	• BHA and IPs should agree on interventions that are good candidates for iterative learning. • BHA and IPs should agree on which interventions have a sufficient evidence-base.

4. Enhancing the Efficiency of Refinement Period Processes

What is Working?

This portion of the consultation opened with a brief overview of refinement period processes that those who offered pre-consultation input generally consider efficient. IP staff emphasize that the refinement period provides RFSA teams the time to lay critical foundations, build relationships, and put systems, tools, and processes in place. Additionally, IP staff generally consider AOR expectations for R&I processes and deliverables to be clear.

BHA Clarifications

As explained in Section 1, most of the hurdles to efficiency challenges were not covered during the consultation because BHA is addressing them internally or the topic did not fit within the consultation's overarching themes.

Table 12: Efficiency topics not covered during the consultation

Unclear BHA technical feedback (conflicting comments in reports and issues letters, vague guidance, etc.)	☐	BHA acknowledges the challenge and commits to addressing it internally.
Delays in SOW approvals	☐	BHA acknowledges the challenge and commits to addressing it internally.
Challenges with aligning award management processes and the R&I model	☐	Topic does not fit within the prioritized discussion themes of R&I value and/or prioritization challenges.

Breakout Discussions: Addressing two remaining factors that BHA and IP staff believe create efficiency hurdles

Table 13: Breakout discussion topics addressing remaining factors that BHA and IPS believe create efficiency hurdles

BHA and IP Belief	Discussion Focus
There are too many people involved in making refinement period decisions.	Participants explored ideas about who needs to be involved in refinement processes for optimal efficiency and why?
The refinement period timeline is not tailored to country or implementer experience	Participants brainstormed potential considerations for determining whether a RFSA's refinement timeline and/or refinement expectations should be reduced or extended. This included ideas about when these conversations should take place and who should be involved.

Proposed Solutions

The ideas shared below represent the full menu of suggestions stemming from consultation conversations. In the few cases where we were able to confirm a priority of those in attendance, it is noted. In most cases, there was not sufficient time during the event to understand which of these IP and BHA staff consider to be priority solutions.

- Replace much of the written feedback with more frequent and less formal conversations between IPs and BHA.
- Substantially limit the number of people involved in Inception and Culmination Workshops, as well as post-event technical reviews.
- Tailor the length of the refinement period based on need and context (e.g., number of prioritized gaps, BHA country experience and expectations, implementer experience).

Proposed Solutions: Getting the right mix of "cooks in the kitchen"

Table 14: Proposed solutions and considerations for the right mix

Proposed Solutions	Considerations for Operationalizing
Those involved in refinement period processes need to be familiar with the R&I model and the RFSA and need to be able to engage consistently in the refinement process *Prioritized by majority of the 80+ BHA and IP staff who provided pre-workshop input*	- It is more about how people are engaging as opposed to who. Consistency and continuity are key. - BHA needs to ensure that, to the extent possible, whoever is involved will remain involved for the whole R&I process (e.g., proposal review through culmination). - Partners need someone in BHA's Office of Technical and Program Quality (TPQ) who reviews all of the issues and prioritizes the focus on critical thresholds for the RFSA as a whole. Someone who remains engaged and "directs traffic" for TPQ engagement throughout the process.

Proposed Solutions	Considerations for Operationalizing
	• BHA staff who participate in these processes should be familiar with objectives of and guidance on the R&I model. • BHA staff who participate in these processes should be familiar with feedback and conversations on the RFSA that took place before their own involvement. • For continuity, IPs should involve proposal development team members in the refinement process, including a "keeper of the TOC" who could be responsible for making changes.
Generally, reduce the number of people involved	• Reduce the number of BHA and IP staff at R&I events. Limit the number of stakeholders involved to those who are relevant to the objectives. Alternatively, limit participation to one technical lead each (BHA and IP) for each relevant area at Culmination Workshops. • BHA should reduce the number of people providing written feedback on refinement period deliverables (e.g., SOWs, study results, etc.).
Include key decision-makers	• The AOR, the COP, and the RFSA Activity Manager are key decision-makers, and must be included in Inception and Culmination Workshops. • BHA should give more power to field colleagues because they are in constant communication with the partners. Empowering BHA field staff to manage many current decisions would reduce much of the back and forth. • The AOR and COP need to play key roles in ensuring that everyone focuses on the bigger picture. • It is critical to involve those who could eventually block the roll out of an intervention. • Regardless of the number of people at a workshop or providing written feedback, identify the criteria needed to make a decision. Clarify the role of any proposed participant who is not a decision-maker and how it contributes to meeting the criteria.
Include relevant technical and cross-cutting staff	• Who is involved depends on each RFSAs' refinement process, the proposed activities, and the studies. There needs to be consensus on each technical area and IPs find it motivating to have a technical counterpart at BHA to review SOWs and breakdown barriers. • Technical conversations may also need cross-cutting focal points (e.g., gender, youth, etc.). • Mission staff need to be involved in discussions.

Proposed Solutions: Considerations for determining the length of a RFSAs refinement period

Table 15: Proposed solutions and considerations for determining the length of a RFSAs refinement period

Proposed Solutions	Considerations for Operationalizing

BHA to avoid using a one-size-fits-all formula for the refinement period	• Tailor the length of the refinement period based on a triangulation of criteria, such as:
	   ○ **Quality of design submitted with the proposal**
	   ○ **How much learning is required and whether there is a need for fresh data**

Proposed Solutions	Considerations for Operationalizing
	▪ How much information is available from past programming in the country and whether or not the context or the operational area has shifted since past implementation ▪ The type and duration of learning necessary to obtain meaningful findings (e.g., pilots may take more time to generate enough learning to inform decisions) ▪ Whether new approaches need to be tested ○ **How much programming experience BHA has in a country** ○ **Implementer experience in the country** ○ **The level of logistical and administrative start up necessary** ○ **The length of time necessary for BHA approvals**
Other Considerations	
BHA to determine the timeline during the initial conversations with the awardee, before the Inception Workshop	● BHA should set up benchmarks/milestones for IPs to understand when interventions and pilots can start. If an intervention cannot start until the 2nd year, IPs should understand this in the earliest conversations.
Start the refinement period as soon as the award is signed	● IPs should not have to wait to start work until after the Inception Workshop, which can often be delayed due to government shutdowns, BHA availability, and other factors.
Host the Inception Workshop as early as possible	● Make the Inception Workshop less elaborate so that it can be hosted earlier. Map out the key information gaps, tools, and methods that will be used and decide on a realistic timeline.

Annex A. Details: Shared Vision of Prioritization

Table 16: Shared vision of prioritization

Indications that a RFSA proposal needs to be streamlined, with examples
Too much is proposed For example: • A proposed Activity design contains a laundry list of unfocused interventions. The design is too complex and cuts across too many sectors. • A RFSA does not propose variation according to the zone of intervention or the priorities of communities. • The TOC contains more outputs than necessary to achieve outcome. • Multiple livelihood options are proposed, but there is not clarity about what is most viable/sustainable. • Design targets a distinct population (e.g., women or youth) for too many community groups, resulting in time constraints
Insufficient contextual considerations For example: • Design language is not context-specific and does not address volatility, when applicable. • Alignment of RFSA design to government strategy is unclear. • Substantial changes have occurred in the context since proposed design. • Partner is new to operational zone and has limited knowledge of context.
Limited evidence supports the design For example: • Implementation strategy is not supported by studies in the region that informed the design, including, but not limited to existing evidence from last award. • There is not adequate evidence that a proposed design will work well.
Targeting challenges For example: • The target group for outcomes is not specific. The design needs clarity on participant categories and behavior changes; who is targeted/what needs to change for intended outcome to be achieved. • The participant reach (in terms of the population) is limited. • Secondary data lacks information on particular target groups.
Duplication of efforts For example: • Other organizations or the government are implementing similar activities • Capacity in the community already exists. The RFSA needs to trim down the strategy to only what is needed. • Other actors are identified who are able to take on certain activities or with whom the RFSA should coordinate to layer activities
Weak sustainability strategies For example: • Overly generic and vague sustainability strategies • Proposing interventions without a clear exit strategy
Inadequate intervention integration/ sequencing For example: • Siloed interventions with no clarity in how interventions are connected • Interventions under different purposes that are not well linked (could undermine one another)

Indications that a RFSA proposal needs to be streamlined, with examples

Additional design challenges
For example:
- Too many assumptions that need to hold in order to achieve outcomes
- Impact to effort ratio of an intervention is unbalanced

Indications that a RFSA proposal is focused (well-prioritized) and may only need small modifications during the refinement period

Strong contextual analysis
For example:
- Informed by sociopolitical context
- Proposal outlines how RFSA will respond to volatility

Evidence-based interventions
For example:
- Implementation strategy identifies and articulates evidence and gaps as part of the TOC
- Interventions have proven successful and evidence backs this up.
- Proposed interventions are supported by BHA experience/data of interventions global effectiveness

Well-thought out complementarity/ integration
For example:
- Design demonstrates complementarity with other organizations implementing in the zone and other USAID-funded projects (who has comparative advantage)

Clear sustainability vision
For example:
- Sustainability vision is clear—government actors and private sector clear represented
- Activity design prioritizes interventions that are sustainable and scalable
- Activity design outlines solid plans for integration/coordination with local actors.
- Activities in the proposal are clear government priorities

Clear causal logic
For example:
- TOC pathways are clear, with little ambiguity in logic.
- Clearly layered and sequenced interventions that contribute to a multiplier effect

Other factors (beyond streamlining) that should be considered as "prioritization" efforts

Tailored to local priorities
For example:
- Communities are on board with what the RFSA is doing—communities and stakeholders identify priorities during visioning process. RFSA priorities are aligned with community and participant priorities
- The intervention strategy takes into consideration the views of the government and other local stakeholders (e.g., private sector). These views inform priorities (these actors may not be known during proposal phase)
- Ability to clearly articulate community consultation findings with TOC assumptions