Stakeholder Consultation:

RFSA RFA Design and Process

April 2021

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

IDEAL

ABOUT IDEAL

IDEAL is an activity funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) that works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL addresses knowledge and capacity gaps expressed by the food and nutrition security implementing community to support them in the design and implementation of effective emergency and non-emergency food security activities.

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Abbreviations

BHA	USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
DFSA	Development Food Security Activity
CLA	Collaborating, Learning and Adapting
CoP	Chief of Party
FFP	Food for Peace
IDEAL	Implementer-led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning
IP	Implementing partner
LOE	Level of effort
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
R&I	Refine and Implement
RFA	Request for Application
RFI	Request for Information
RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
TOC	Theory of Change
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Background

Figure 1: Screenshot of the Virtual Stakeholder Consultation

The IDEAL activity is funded by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. A very important part of IDEAL's work are Stakeholder Consultations, which provide structured opportunities for implementing partners (IPs) and BHA to engage with each other on critical issues affecting food security programming and identify solutions together. Stakeholder Consultations are highly participatory, interactive exchanges between BHA and IPs that provide:

- An opportunity for BHA and IP peer-to-peer dialogue and mutual problem-solving
- A venue for partner and BHA representatives to articulate challenges in a safe learning space and hear challenges faced by others with an open mind
- An opportunity for myth-busting (clarifying partner misconceptions about BHA expectations and preferences and vice versa)
- A space for BHA and IP staff to work together in crafting or refining new, improved approaches to emergency and non- emergency food security activities

BHA requested a consultation with implementing partners on the elements of and process for BHA's solicitation of Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSAs). In early April 2021, IDEAL convened a Stakeholder Consultation, bringing together nearly 40 participants over two days from both implementing partners and BHA. This Stakeholder Consultation offered partners the opportunity to provide input into the RFSA solicitation process to improve the clarity of the Request for Applications (RFAs), improve the quality of RFSA designs, and lower barriers for non-traditional applicants.

Pre-Consultation Qualitative Outreach and Analysis

The content for this Stakeholder Consultation was informed by implementing partners' input during a qualitative outreach process held prior to the event. IDEAL invited past and current RFSA partners as well as organizations in the food security community who have not historically implemented RFSAs to interviews regarding the RFSA RFA content and solicitation process. For several weeks, IDEAL staff performed interviews with these partners to have deep initial discussions on BHA RFSA RFAs, to gauge interest in the event at large, and to promote the event and allow partners to ask questions. These conversations were the foundation of the event itself, leading to the overall design of the event as well as the themes for discussion. To gather this initial qualitative data, IDEAL staff performed one and half hour interviews with 25 staff from 13 partners and one independent consultant. Positions of these staff ranged from Senior Directors of Food Security to Business Development Directors and Specialists to Chiefs of Party for currently funded RFSAs.

Interview questions (see Annex A) were designed together with BHA to elicit input around partner experiences for the BHA RFSA RFA design and solicitation process. These informative interviews explored design elements of RFAs, submission requirements of RFAs, and the solicitation process (acknowledging that aspects of the design and process have varied over the last five years and that each RFA can vary depending on context, even among those released in the same year). Once the interviews were complete, IDEAL analyzed the exhaustive notes, identified common themes, and sent a summary of that analysis to all participants one week prior to the event.

From the pre-consultation interviews, nine major themes emerged to be discussed further during the Stakeholder Consultation event:

- Theory of Change
- Complexity vs. Focus
- Prescriptiveness and Level of Detail
- Barriers to Application for New/Non-Historic Partners
- RFA Release Timing
- Multi-Phased Approach
- Key Personnel
- Contextual Information
- Proposal Development Burden

Stakeholder Consultation Convening Sessions

The consultation entitled "RFSA RFA Design and Solicitation Process" was held virtually on Zoom through two half-day sessions (8:00 AM - 12:00 PM EDT) on April 7 and 8, 2021 (see Annex B for the agenda). Attendees included representatives from USAID/BHA (11 total), staff from 12 IPs with experience applying for and/or implementing RFSAs (19 total representatives), and 17 staff of the IDEAL activity.

To access the slides from the Stakeholder Consultation, click here. You can also watch the recordings of the Stakeholder Consultation for Day 1 and Day 2.

Day 1

During the beginning of Day 1, Karen Romano (IDEAL Activity Director) welcomed participants and provided a brief introduction to IDEAL, the purpose of Stakeholder Consultations, and the objectives of the event. Dan Houston (Strategic Planning and Activity Design Team Leader, USAID/BHA) also provided remarks for the event.

> *"Partners really are the heart of our programming and you offer incredible value and understanding in how we can improve the [RFSA RFA] process to make it more efficient and effective to produce high-quality programming."*
>
> - Dan Houston

After reviewing the major themes from the pre-consultation qualitative outreach and analysis and establishing ground rules for the event, participants were divided into small groups to discuss three different themes: two groups discussed **Theory of Change**, two groups discussed **Complexity vs. Focus** and one group discussed **Prescriptiveness and Level of Detail**. Each group had an IDEAL facilitator and notetaker and a visual workspace for the discussion that was pre-populated with feedback and recommendations from the qualitative analysis. All groups had a facilitated discussion to answer the following questions:

- What feedback resonated most with us?
- How has our experience differed?
- What else under this theme might be getting in the way or enabling us to have quality, effective RFSAs that reduce food insecurity?

The groups were then tasked with reviewing recommendations from the pre-consultation qualitative outreach analysis and identifying additional recommendations under their given theme. Finally, the groups prioritized 2 - 3 recommendations they believed would be the best solutions to issues raised on their theme to be shared with all participants.

Theory of Change

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

Theory of Change (TOC) was a topic that many partners raised during IDEAL's pre-consultation qualitative outreach as an issue for them in developing quality RFSAs. Partners recognize the importance of the TOC for developing high-quality programming, starting with the problems, and mapping out pathways to get to solutions. However, partners also agree that developing a TOC requires considerable technical skill and resources, which causes partners who have less experience with TOC development to struggle the first time they undergo the process. Developing a TOC is also challenging for field/technical staff who may be pressed for time and who may face language barriers and/or different ways of approaching "logic" than a TOC logical flow. For many partners, the TOC is a complex structure that may not be worth the time it takes to develop.

Small Group Discussion Overview

While there is consensus from implementing partners around the critical importance of the TOC for program logic, many other areas regarding the TOC remain unclear. Expectations from BHA and levels of prescriptiveness required for an effective application are two primary examples. Partners also feel that writing a TOC is very time-consuming and labor intensive, which can be a barrier for smaller organizations and newer applicants. The product of the TOC process is often large, unwieldy, broad, and not practically useful for a program implementation team. Finding ways to simplify the final product (at least at the proposal stage) would help streamline the process and make for more effective programming. Additionally, implementers view the TOC as a tool for two different things and end with two different products: design and program management. This difference can often lead to handover challenges. Finally, TOC guidance continues to change and progress. Therefore, partners would like to see the TOC have a more formal space on the BHA website to make these materials more easily accessible.

Initial Recommendations

Both groups agreed that requiring a condensed version of the TOC (including goal, purposes, and high-level outcomes) would be a helpful alternative to a fully detailed TOC for the proposal process. One group thought that identifying critical elements of the TOC for implementers to focus their attention and resources on would help guide the proposal process. The other group thought that, similarly, the first stage of the TOC should be a light lift on time and resources. Then, in the refinement year, a full TOC could be developed as a RFSA management tool. To help guide this process, partners requested improved TOC capacity strengthening materials, enhanced training for partners, and revised TOC guidance in multiple languages.

COMPLEXITY VS. FOCUS

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

When faced with uncertainty of BHA's design preference for RFAs, partners gravitate to a "kitchen sink" approach to include a wide range of interventions. Partners worry about their proposals being penalized for leaving out critical elements, which results in designing projects that are too complex and that address too many topics. Partners noted that what is being asked for in the RFA in terms of system change and solving complex, protracted problems is not feasible in a five-year program, causing expectations to be inconsistent. Partners expressed concerns that they may not have the same interpretations as BHA, especially on programming principles and cross-cutting elements. Some recent RFAs had more than a dozen programming principles. Therefore, responding to each of those programming principles along with the other elements of the RFA made it difficult to focus.

Small Group Discussion Overview

Complexity vs. focus was such a common theme in the interviews that, during the event, there were two breakout rooms to cover the topic. In both breakout rooms, the groups talked at length about how there are many elements, priorities, and cross-cutting themes. The partners felt as though they needed to include and prioritize all the elements, while they felt did not lead to the most innovative design or solution. In discussions between BHA and partners, the consensus was that the focus should be on results, not the inclusion of all the elements. In the first breakout room, there was also a general feeling that partners are “overpromising” and BHA fully understood and acknowledged that outcome/feeling. To address some of these challenges, BHA discussed how they ask the question of what can be achieved and what can be sustained to address the challenge of identifying an optimal mix of implementation in multi-sectoral projects. There was consensus on the idea that the focus needs to be on the result. During the recommendation portion of the conversation, the group covered the need for a clear focus in the RFA, lack of guidance on designing with the private sector, and understanding evaluation criteria better in relation to the programming principles. It was noted that BHA cannot provide too many parameters as it might result in a lack of innovation and also cannot always state the top priorities for certain contexts as some partners are better equipped to determine those priorities.

One breakout room group in particular felt that the programming principles added to the complexity of the RFAs. BHA explained that these principles should be viewed as good practice and the group agreed that having these programming principles provided is valuable. However, they felt it could be more useful for BHA to develop a core set of programming principles with IPs, which could stretch across RFAs and include supplementary principles when context dictates. When the group discussed other ways to address complexity, the partners recommended allowing IPs more liberty in the program design. The group agreed that it would be important to provide high-level goals, purposes, and sub-purposes in the RFAs, but felt the design below sub-purposes should be left up to IPs.

Initial Recommendations

Building on a recommendation from the interviews, both BHA and the partners agreed that there needs to be clarity in the technical sections in terms of what is required as opposed to what is more of a “gray area.” This will allow BHA to get the quality of applications they need and the partner to spend the appropriate resources on the higher priorities. Partners also felt there needed to be consolidated programming principles and cross-cutting elements with consistent labeling. They felt this solution would help partners view them more as guiding principles and would remove the added complexity of having to address them all in proposals.

PRESCRIPTIVENESS AND LEVEL OF DETAIL

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

When asked about prescriptiveness, about half of the partners see the current level of prescriptiveness as effective. Some partners appreciated more prescriptiveness as it can eliminate guesswork, especially related to BHA expectations. However, others noted that less prescriptive approaches encourage partners to take risks and be more innovative. Regardless of preference on the level of prescriptiveness provided by BHA in the design of RFSAs, all partners appreciated a high level of detail in the instructions and definitions for RFAs.

Small Group Discussion Overview

As was found in the qualitative outreach, some partners leaned towards more prescriptiveness, while others felt there needed to be more flexibility to propose innovative designs based on the target area context. In general, non-historic partners preferred prescriptiveness as they felt that the trust relationship with BHA was not strong enough to take risks in program design. However, some felt that leaving more space for innovation was necessary in order to accommodate for contextual information gathered by IPs that may differ from information provided by BHA on target area context in the RFA. Overall, the group felt that prescriptiveness in approaches at a high level is important and that BHA should clearly indicate in the RFA areas in which they are most open to innovation and experimentation.

Initial Recommendations

As suggested in other breakout room groups, in order to provide the right level of prescriptiveness, the group suggested that BHA should provide a TOC with purpose, sub-purposes, and high-level outcomes. The partners would be free to innovate through the process of filling in the lower levels of the TOC. Along with this, the group recommended a clear explanation of what elements are required and what elements allow for more flexibility and innovation. Lastly, the group suggested that adding more pre-RFA communication pathways with partners in-country would be useful for gathering accurate contextual information on the target areas that would inform the design of the RFA. They felt that these communication pathways needed to be more inclusive of non-historic partners and allow for dialogue informed by a local perspective.

Day 2

The second day of the Stakeholder Consultation followed much of the same format as the first day. However, IDEAL facilitators added 15 minutes to the breakout sessions in response to the Day 1 survey results in which participants said that more time in breakout rooms would be appreciated.

"[There was] enough time for detailed conversations and [there was] respect for the views and priorities of implementing partners. We do recognize that BHA works within certain constraints that may not allow some recommendations to go forward. But I feel heard."
- Implementing partner

As on Day 1, participants were divided into small groups to discuss different themes: **Barriers to Application for New/Non-historic Partners, RFA Release Timing, Multi-Phased Approach, Key Personnel,** and **Contextual Information**. Each group had an IDEAL facilitator and notetaker and a visual workspace for the discussion that was pre-populated with feedback and recommendations from the qualitative analysis. All groups had a facilitated discussion to answer the following questions:

- What feedback resonated most with us?
- How has our experience differed?
- What else under this theme might be getting in the way or enabling us to have quality, effective RFSAs that reduce food insecurity?

The groups were then tasked with reviewing recommendations from the pre-consultation qualitative outreach analysis and identifying additional recommendations under their given theme. Finally, the groups prioritized 2 - 3 recommendations they believed would be the best solutions to issues raised on their theme to be shared with all participants.

BARRIERS TO APPLICATION FOR NEW/NON-HISTORIC PARTNERS

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

Partners mentioned several factors that are barriers for new/non-historic partners to apply for RFSAs, including high cost of proposal development, lack of familiarity with RFSA RFA specific terminology, and a lack of information ahead of time on where prospective RFSAs may be located. There is also a perception that there is informal communication within circles of historic partners, giving them an advantage. Additionally, the specificity related to Title II funding is not always clear and can lead to an additional knowledge barrier.

Small Group Discussion Overview

Many non-historic partners have successfully implemented as sub-partners to a RFSA, but transitioning to a prime recipient is quite difficult. There is a perception that, even if non-historic partners have a strong proposal, there may be hesitancy to award a new prime since they are more of an unknown to BHA.

Proposal development is a huge investment, ranging from $0.5 to $1 million, including a high level of effort (LOE) and copious amounts of background work even before the RFA is released. This is a massive hurdle for non-historic applicants, especially due to the unlikeliness of being awarded. Furthermore, many organizations lack capacity or specialization in commodity management, causing some partners to feel hesitant regarding certain RFAs. The BHA proposals focused on commodities also tend to be more complex than other proposals. Finally, there is a lack of consensus about whether BHA-required, non-exclusive arrangements are a help or a hindrance. There may be tensions working with local partners and freely sharing when they may be partnering with competing organizations.

Initial Recommendations

One of the ways to mitigate the and lack of commodity experience would be to identify third-party contractors to manage commodity interventions within RFSAs. Given the increasing importance of the co-creation process and refinement year, limiting the number of technical requirements during the proposal process would also help lower barriers for new/non-historic partners. Additionally, if BHA wants new and local/national applicants, this should be stated explicitly and clearly in the RFA and could be included as a part of the scoring criteria.

RFA RELEASE TIMING

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

Partners appreciate receiving information about potential countries for future RFSAs and expected release dates of RFAs as consistently and as early as possible. Knowledge of expected RFA release dates allows partners to prepare bids, form teams, and consider partnerships. Partners less familiar with RFSA "cycles" or unaware of specific emails or meeting before the release of the draft RFA can be at a disadvantage in preparedness for design and partnership. Inconsistent timing of the release of draft/final RFA publications makes planning challenging, especially for partners working with BHA for the first time. Delays in the release of RFAs lead to partners struggling to identify key personnel or lead to partners losing team members over time. Similarly, the window between the draft and the final RFA was seen as too short given the size and complexity of the programs being developed. Many partners start working on RFSA design well in advance of the RFA release due to the limited time allowed to develop and submit a quality application once the RFA is live.

Small Group Discussion Overview

Participants of the small group discussed the challenges faced by the uncertainty of inconsistent timelines for the RFA release process, a common theme raised during the pre-consultation process. Partners noted that the gap between the release of the final RFA and the submission date makes it difficult to plan because the application submission date is unknown until BHA releases the final RFA. The proposal development process starts well before the draft RFA is even released, such as conducting initial assessments in the targeted areas and holding community consultations. However, if BHA makes significant changes between the draft and final RFAs (such as changing geographies or focus/content), partners noted they need additional time to consult with communities, validate their approach, or even redesign their proposals, if needed. Making these adjustments is challenging for partners to do within a limited timeframe. BHA RFAs also seem to be released during the same quarter as other funding opportunities and compete for partner attention.

Initial Recommendations

Overall, partners expressed that having a consistent timeline would increase transparency across the entire RFA process. They suggested 60 - 90 days between the final RFA and the submission deadline as a more reasonable timeframe. Lastly, the participants also suggested that BHA publicize countries for future RFAs well in advance to reduce barriers to entry for new/non-historic partners. Partners also said sufficient time is needed to revise applications after the co-creation phase.

MULTI-PHASED APPROACH

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

Many partners stated that the initial proposal design process is overly complex and intensive given the multi-phased approach of the pre-award co-creation, and the post-award refinement periods. When looking specifically at the initial design phase, partners noted that it is challenging to work through the design with local partners as there cannot be exclusivity yet. Therefore, partners are unable to share all the information and those most familiar with the local context are structurally restricted in their influence to design a quality program. Later within the multi-phased approach, some partners raised questions around the clarity and value of the oral presentation. Partners questioned how the oral presentation links to the initial application and issues letters as well as how much the oral presentation counts towards an invite to co-create versus if the invitation was based on a written submission. Lastly, multiple partners agreed that the most useful parts of the multi-phased approach were the co-creation and R&I phases. In these phases, there is an opportunity to communicate more clearly with BHA and local partners. Although, having an opportunity like the R&I period after the submission did make some partners feel like having a finalized design at submission was unnecessary.

Small Group Discussion Overview

Both partners and BHA agreed that the multi-phased approach makes sense overall but that there are areas that could be improved. In going through the phases of the RFA, the group discussed the first stages, co-creation, and R&I (with the main focus being on co-creation, R&I, and how that affects their approach). In the early phases, there has been confusion and lack of clarity in requirements, which often leads to rework in later phases. BHA and partners discussed the need for clear and open communication. This disconnect of when and where detail is required frustrates partners, as they are looking for clarity on length and duration of the early planning stages while knowing there is time to edit and add in later stages. BHA made it clear that partners should never have to start over. Partners discussed amongst themselves the need to involve frontline workers sooner in the process, but also mentioned that it is hard to bring them in with exclusivity issues.

During co-creation, there remains a personnel and information transfer issue as several of the partners mentioned they do a handover from proposal to implementation team. Partners suggested adjusting timing, such as allowing for an operational setup period, allowing for partners to bring on a few key personnel earlier, and pushing the R&I phase from three months to six months. BHA also wondered how shifting the R&I timing would affect overall implementation. The biggest takeaway during the discussion was that both sides really wanted open communication as much as possible during the phases.

Multi-phased approach was briefly discussed in a second breakout room. In that discussion, they covered the complexity of the initial application, burden on staff, issues letters with short response time causing follow-on issue letters, and other issues. Partners mentioned a need for clarity on what each phase includes and how it is evaluated. Oral presentations, for example, may be prepared in line with an issues letter but evaluated on the initial application. In terms of recommendations, the group discussed allowing partner input and creative ideas to inform the RFA design, potentially through a working session or a Request for Information (RFI). Another idea was a pre-qualification round where applicants present ideas, which may allow smaller organizations to participate in niche roles.

Initial Recommendations

After spending time discussing the pulled recommendations from the qualitative analysis, including ideas such as clarifying what partners should have ready at each stage, linking requirements, and requiring only a concept paper at initial proposal stage, the group came to consensus on three main recommendations. The first recommendation was to consider modifying requirements by proposal stage, which would allow for innovation later and room to edit/adjust throughout the phases. The second recommendation was to explore possibilities to increase risk sharing between the partner and the donor in the pre-award phase. The partners felt there was room to for BHA to take on the risk of moving some requirements to post-award phase as partners felt they have a large burden in the design but no guarantees. Finally, the last major recommendation was to increase flexibility around the timing and sequencing of the R&I phase to accommodate partner realities around staffing.

KEY PERSONNEL

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

Partners expressed the key personnel portion as helpful to know what leadership in the activity BHA considers to be a priority. Partners commented that the key personnel list has become extensive, which makes hiring challenging due to time, cost, and resources involved in recruitment. Securing quality key personnel that might pass BHA approval has become a barrier for smaller, non-historic partners who already struggle to compete with large, historic partners for personnel, especially on salary scales. Getting people to commit to an uncertain successful application a year from the interview feels unrealistic to some partners. Other partners noted that the prescriptiveness around key personnel should not be necessary, and that this prescriptiveness seemed at odds with the flexibility given in technical design. Partners noted that having the proposed Chief of Party (CoP) lead the oral presentation before an award is made and before the CoP is officially hired is difficult given rules established by human resources, need for confidentiality, and competing commitments of the proposed CoP. Partners also spoke on other key personnel positions (i.e., MEAL Lead and CLA Lead) and the requirement for them to speak English, which excludes many people in local contexts who may be technically qualified but do not meet the language requirement.

Small Group Discussion Overview

The group discussed that, given the prescriptiveness of key personnel qualifications, it is difficult to fill these roles locally. For example, IPs often have to hire international personnel rather than hire local staff, which has overall budget implications. Furthermore, key personnel need to be in the field often which can be a challenge with international staff. Depending on country context, local capacity can be higher or lower and this should also be taken into consideration when articulating requirements. Partners mentioned that there is an opportunity to engage youth more if requirements are lowered for non-key personnel or for lower-level key personnel positions. The group discussed only having a few key personnel while keeping the rest more flexible. These positions would be the ones that engage with USAID the most so there could be more structure around what those positions require. Partners mentioned that there might be some room for creativity or flexibility in the process of scoring key personnel and adjusting key personnel rosters to support the competitiveness of smaller or newer partners. Key personnel positions exist because there have been persistent quality problems in certain technical areas across programs. There might be a way to increase flexibility without it being so onerous on partners (e.g., having two tiers of specific roles vs. key personnel). In terms of scoring, a recommendation was discussed to keep key personnel unscored or to have a simple fixed point value be an additive or subtractive factor in overall evaluation of application. The group also discussed the timing of when key personnel are due and the idea that some could be due at the time of submission, while others be required for apparently successful applicant to fill in the last two months.

Initial Recommendations

The group voted to bring forth several recommendations, including decreasing the number of fixed key personnel positions with strict requirements. Other technical or management functions should be defined, but applicants can propose how to address them. The group also wanted to recommend re-visiting key personnel qualifications to allow for a broader pool

> *"I love that USAID is so consultative and willing to hear our feedback and improve."*
> - Implementing partner

of candidates. Finally, the group recommended staggering timing of when key personnel need to be hired and approved by BHA.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Feedback from Qualitative Outreach

About half of partners found background/contextual information provided by BHA useful. Country-specific sections and analyses (e.g., market, gender, etc.) for these partners were seen as thorough and serve as a launching point for partners to develop proposals. In certain cases, contextual background/analyses provided by BHA did not align with the partners reality of the local context. In those cases, partners decided to conduct their own analyses at times in order to submit proposals based on the local context. Consultation with local stakeholders and government officials is often unclear and so partners have difficulty identifying where priorities may lie. Many partners also found information about existing or planned USAID programs in the implementation area to be insufficient, making coordination during design (especially for sequencing, layering, and integration) difficult.

Small Group Discussion Overview

Partners expressed appreciation for contextual information as it provides background on what is happening in-country and highlights areas that are strategically important to BHA. However, concern was expressed that the information was not detailed or precise enough to inform effective program design, which creates a situation in which partners must invest in significant contextual research in order to create a competitive program design. This is a significant barrier to non-historic partners who may not have representation on the ground or fewer resources for application pre-work. In addition, the research creates a burden on those providing contextual background and information (such as government officials and community leaders) who may be interviewed by multiple organizations. However, some partners still felt that reaching out to government officials and communities during the proposal design process was an imperative step in the design process. Another issue raised by partners was the appearance of specific, unique topics in RFAs (such as wildlife management in Zimbabwe) with very little explanation as to the rationale for including the topic as a focus. Partners also wanted to understand why certain geographic areas and topics were targeted in an RFA. Finally, the group reflected on what information was necessary when designing a winning proposal and what information gathering could be left to the refinement period.

Initial Recommendations

The group felt that BHA could provide clearer rationale and context on choosing certain regions, intervention areas, goals, purposes, and needs of target populations (as perceived by USAID) within a country. The group suggested ways for BHA to reduce the burden of data gathering on applicants and relieve local stakeholders of interview fatigue. Finally, the group felt that BHA could explore the possibility of shifting the process and development of some analyses and annexes (i.e., economic, gender, environmental, market, etc.) to the refinement period as opposed to having them as requirements at the application stage.

Prioritized Recommendations

For the final activity of the Stakeholder Consultation, participants were tasked with prioritizing the recommendations from the various themes. IDEAL migrated all of the prioritized recommendations from the breakout rooms from the two days to a single slide. Participants had ten minutes to read through all 24 recommendations and consider the question: **Which recommendations will best enable quality, effective RFSAs that reduce food insecurity?**

Through the annotation function on Zoom or via private chat to the facilitators, each participant voted for up to the three recommendations that they considered highest priority. As the table below shows, the top recommendations included:

- Limit technical requirements needed for initial proposals
- Suggested timeline for RFA release and phases
- Require a condensed version of the Theory of Change

Joan Whelan (lead for BHA's Applied Learning Team) closed the event thanking all of the partners for their participation in the event and for the important input provided. She also reiterated that all of the recommendations would be considered, noting that actions on those recommendations deemed feasible in the context of BHA's systems, processes and policies would take into account not only the partner feedback but also internal review inputs from BHA staff as well as program evaluations and reports.

Recommendation	Vote Tally
Limit technical requirements needed for initial proposal (e.g., # of annexes), with the understanding some of this can be fleshed out during co-creation/refinement year	11
Suggested Ideal Timeline for RFA release and phases Country Identification: April of prior fiscal year; Draft RFA : Sept. – Oct. of prior FY; Final RFA: January; Submission: April; ILs/Orals: June - July; Co-creation: July	9
Require a condensed version of TOC (goal, purpose, high-level outcomes, external outcomes, assumptions, constraints) rather than a fully detailed TOC for proposal submission	8
Add additional communication pathways pre-RFA (RFI) or post draft RFA that are inclusive of potential new partners and allow for dialogue	6
Reduce number of fixed key personnel positions with strict requirements in the RFA. Define technical or management functions, but allow applicants to propose how to address them	5
Provide a clear explanation of what RFA elements are required and which elements allow innovation/flexibility	4
Provide country-level high-level goal, purpose, and sub-purposes in RFA but leave below sub-purpose for IPs to design	4
BHA to reflect more stakeholder engagement in the RFA and relieve burden from applicants/local stakeholders	4
Make co-creation process a post-award activity to avoid procurement sensitivities/burden	3
Increase risk sharing between the partner and donor in the pre-award phase	3
Increase flexibility around the timing and sequencing of R&I to accommodate IP realities around staffing	3
Provide clear info, rationale, and context on why certain regions, intervention areas, goals, purposes, needs and USAID perceived priorities of target populations within a country are selected	3
Review timing allocated for requirements across the various stages	2
Improve TOC capacity strengthening/materials for partners. Revise the TOC guidance and make it available in multiple languages	2
BHA to identify third-party contractor to manage commodity management interventions within RFSA	2
BHA to encourage new and local/national applicants (needs to be stated clearly in RFA/orientation, included in scoring criteria)	2

Stagger timing of key personnel requirements (for submission and review by BHA so not at the same time)	2
Modify requirements by proposal stage	2
Shift certain analyses (economic, gender, market, environmental, etc.) to the refinement year	2
USAID reviewers identify critical elements of TOC requirements that could be eliminated at the proposal stage	1
Provide guidance on "focus"/how it is evaluated helps narrow interventions	1
Consolidate programming principles/cross-cutting elements and ensuring consistent labeling throughout the RFA	1
Revisit key personnel qualifications (to allow for a broader pool of candidates)	1
Communicate and transparently disclose estimated key dates (including changes as they happen) for RFA release	0

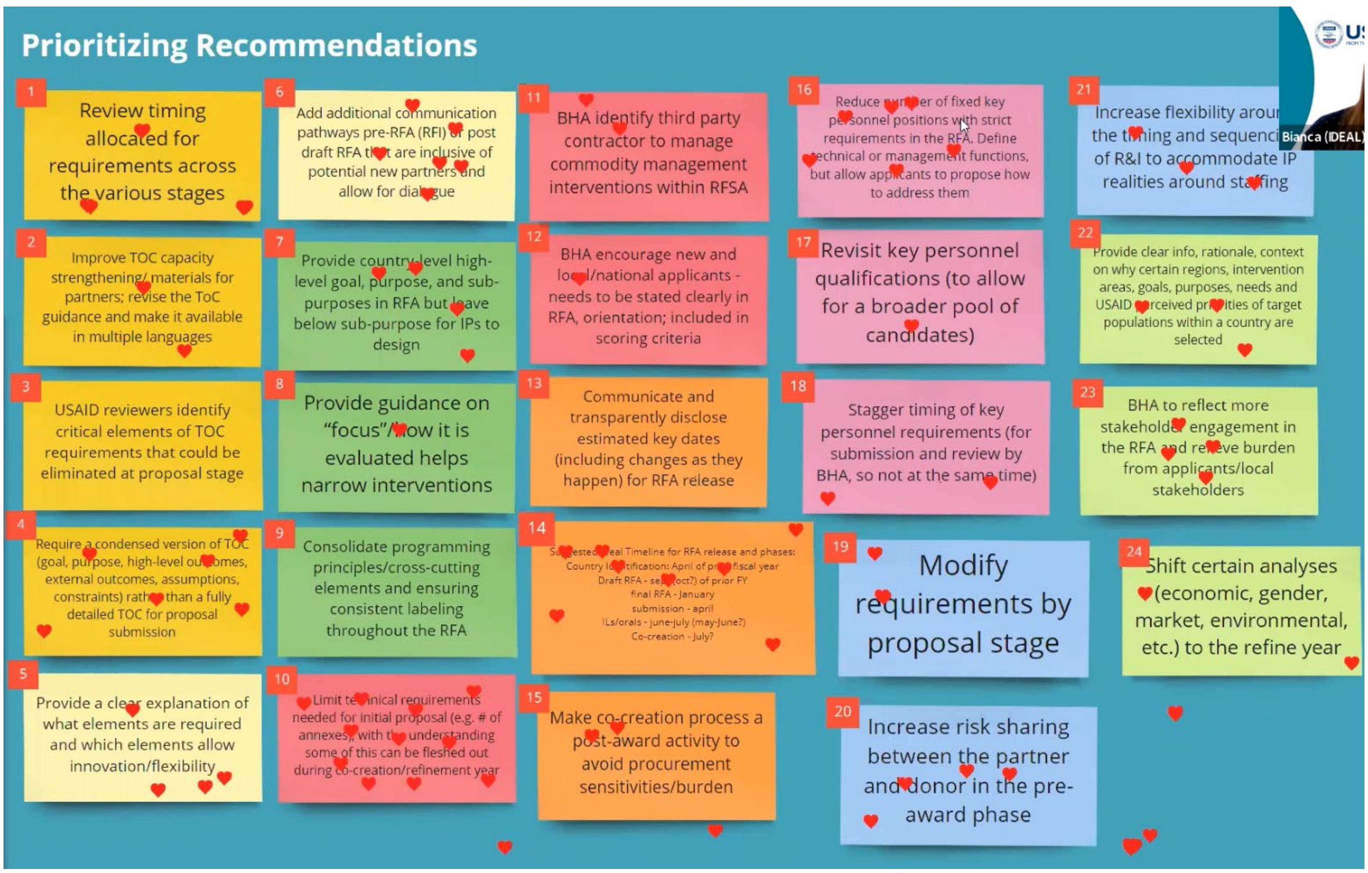

Figure 2: Screenshot of the Prioritization Exercise from the Stakeholder Consultation

Next Steps

Moving forward, IDEAL and BHA representatives will continue to discuss the prioritized recommendations. BHA will review all recommendations and, as feasible and allowable, recommendations may move forward. IDEAL will also assess its role in supporting the IP community on the feedback that emerged throughout the event as well as supporting BHA in any recommendations, as needed. In about six months' time, IDEAL will do a follow up review on what, if any, recommendations have moved forward and publish a follow-up report to the IP community. Finally, this is only the first of several Stakeholder Consultations IDEAL is planning on holding in its remaining implementing years. IDEAL will be reaching out to the IP community in the coming months to narrow down topics to be addressed in future Stakeholder Consultations.

Event Survey Feedback

GENERAL SATISFACTION

The majority of participants (30 out of 33) responded to a survey after Day 1 of the Stakeholder Consultation. The main objective of this survey was to adapt to the needs of the event participants and make any necessary adjustment for the activities in Day 2.

"A lot of people really think the same way - both among NGOs and BHA staff. Good innovative suggestions came out in the discussions."

- Implementing partner

A high number of participants stated that the event met all/most expectations (93%). Some of the components appreciated were:

- The openness and engagement in discussions
- The opportunity to hear from others
- The small and mixed groups of professionals

Regarding both the introduction and gallery walk sections, participants mostly expressed that the timing of each was appropriate: respectively 87% and 73%. Responses regarding the timing of small group discussions were divided: 57% indicated the timing was appropriate, while 43% indicated this section was given too little time. As a result, IDEAL reviewed and adapted the schedule and planning of the event for Day 2.

GENERAL EVALUATION

Out of 33 participants, 25 completed a final evaluation after the event. While 96% communicated that the event helped improve the clarity of the RFAs, a lower percentage (80%) indicated that it helped improve the quality of RFSA designs. For both questions, participants recognized that key factors were:

- Pre-consultations informing thematic areas
- Small group discussions
- Recommendation and Prioritization exercise

A third of participants (32%) stated that the event only partially helped identify ways to lower barriers to allow for a wider range of applicants.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CONSULTATIONS

Major recommendations stemming from partners feedback include:

- Allowing participants to select the topics they wish to discuss and contribute to
- Greater participation from USAID/BHA
- Including a higher number of participants from smaller organizations
- Planning for more time to discuss, develop, and consolidate recommendations

Among the various topics suggested for future Stakeholder Consultations were:

- TOC design
- Budget/cost proposals
- Refine & Implement
- Programming implementation
- Barriers to entry
- Adaptive programming

Annex A: Interview Questions

Role and Engagement in the Application Development Process
• What has been your role(s) in the RFSA Proposal Design Process (what roles are represented in your responses)? • What applications (countries) and stages of the DFSA/RFSA RFAs design and/or award stage have you participated in in the last 5 years?
Design elements of RFSA RFA: Background/Context, RFSA Goals and Purposes, Programming Principles, Substantial Involvement, Key Personnel, Evaluation Criteria, Estimated Funds Available, Anticipated Start Date and Performance Period
• What elements of the RFA content were helpful to you/your team in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • What elements of the RFA content were confusing, hard to understand, or not helpful to you/your team in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • How effective do you find the prescriptiveness of the RFA? Why or why not? • What information or guidance was missing or could have assisted with improving the quality of your response to the RFA? • How would you change the RFA content, elements and/or structure to elicit better applications and activity implementation?
Solicitation Process Elements: Release of draft RFA and supporting materials for review and comment, RFA briefing, release of final RFA, drafting application in response to RFA, submission of application, oral presentation, co-creation, issues letters, finalizing award agreement.
• What elements of the solicitation processes were most useful in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • What elements of the solicitation processes were least useful in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • How have the solicitation processes influenced your organization's application approach and decisions? • What would you change about the solicitation processes to improve the quality of application submissions?
Submission Requirements for the RFSA Application: Context Analysis; Conceptual Framework; Targeting Methodology and Strategy; Technical Sectors and Interventions; Use of Resource Transfers; Gender Equity and Integration; DRR/NRM; Social and Behavior Change; Layering, Sequencing and Integration of Interventions; Sustainability and Exit Strategies; Strategy for Refinement Year; Management and Staffing; Resource Management; Risk Management; Learning Strategy; Cost proposal
• What elements of the submission requirements were most useful in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • What elements of the submission requirements were least useful in designing an appropriate and effective RFSA? Why? • For each solicitation, what are the most important factors that determine whether your organization submitted or did not submit an application? • What would have changed your organization's decision on submitting an application or not? • How could the process be improved to reduce barriers for partners to apply and improve the quality of applications?
Wrap-up
• Thinking of what makes a good RFA, are there any other suggestions that you have for how the BHA RFSA RFAs can help you design a quality activity?

Annex B: Agenda Overview

Time (EDT)	Day 1 Session Information
8:00 - 8:30 AM	**Opening/Welcome (IDEAL & BHA)** **Miro/Tech Orientation** **Icebreaker Activity – Virtual Mingle**
8:30 - 9:00 AM	**Objective Setting and Ground Rules** **Major Themes from Qualitative Outreach**
9:00 - 9:10 AM	*Break*
9:10 - 10:20 AM	**Small Group Discussions** • What feedback resonated most with us? • How has our experience differed? • What else under this theme might be getting in the way or enabling us to have quality, effective RFSAs that reduce food insecurity? **Themes**: Theory of Change, Complexity vs. Focus, Prescriptiveness and Level of Detail
10:20 - 10:30 AM	*Break*
10:30 - 11:30 AM	**Group Report Out**: Recommendations by theme
11:30 AM - 12:00 PM	**Closing**: Day 2 Overview, Day 1 Evaluation

Time (EDT)	Day 2 Session Information
8:00 - 8:30 AM	**Opening/Welcome** **Parking Lot Review** **Icebreaker Activity – Virtual Mingle**
8:30 - 8:50 AM	**Objective Setting and Ground Rules** **Recap of Major Themes from Qualitative Outreach**
8:50 - 9:00 AM	*Break*
9:00 - 10:15 AM	**Small Group Discussions** • What feedback resonated most with us? • How has our experience differed? • What else under this theme might be getting in the way or enabling us to have quality, effective RFSAs that reduce food insecurity? **Themes**: RFA Release Timing, Multi- Phased Approach, Barriers for New Partners, Key Personnel, and Contextual Information
10:20 - 10:30 AM	*Break*
10:30 - 11:30 AM	**Group Report Out**: Recommendations by theme
11:30 AM - 12:00 PM	**Closing**: Day 2 Overview, Day 1 Evaluation