Welcome!

Stakeholder Consultation: RFSA RFA Design and Process (Day 1)

- Turn on your video camera and introduce yourself in the chat
- Change your name to include your organization and preferred name
- Having technical issues? Chat "IDEAL"

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Overview of IDEAL

Funded by USAID/BHA, we work to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities.

www.fsnnetwork.org/IDEAL

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Stakeholder Consultations

What distinguishes a Stakeholder Consultation from any other meeting?

- Peer-to-peer communication
- Mutual problem solving
- Articulating challenges
- Clarifying misconceptions
- Creative space to refine or craft new approaches

Objectives

Goal: Increase the quality of programming of BHA-funded RFSAs to reduce food insecurity

Gives partners the opportunity to:

- Help shape and provide input into the RFSA solicitation process and content in order to improve the clarity of RFAs
- Improve the quality of RFSA designs
- Lower barriers to allow for a wider range of applicants

Ground Rules

- Be present and engage thoughtfully in the conversation
- Listen respectfully as people share
- “Share the Air” to make room for all voices to be heard
- No personal or organizational identifying info should be shared after the event

Agenda

Day 1 Overview

8:00 - 8:30	Opening
8:30 - 9:00	Major Themes from Qualitative Outreach
9:00 - 9:10	Break
9:10 - 9:20	Activity Instructions
9:20 - 10:30	Breakout Room Activity *(with break)*
10:30 - 11:30	Gallery Walk
11:30 - 12:00	Next Steps

Day 2 Overview

8:00 - 8:20	Day 1 Recap
8:20 - 8:40	Recap Major Themes
8:40 - 8:50	Activity Instructions
8:50 - 10:00	Breakout Room Activity *(with break)*
10:00 - 11:00	Gallery Walk
11:00 - 11:10	Break
11:10 - 11:40	Prioritization Activity
11:40 - 12:00	Closing

Consultation Process

- IDEAL interviewed **25 staff from 13 partners**
- Positions ranged from Senior Directors of Food Security to Business Development Directors and Specialists to Chiefs of Party for currently funded RFSAs
- Interview questions were designed together with BHA to elicit input around partner experiences for the BHA RFSA RFA design and solicitation process

Major Themes

Theory of Change (TOC)	RFA Release Timing	Key Personnel	Complexity vs. Focus
Multi-Phased Approach	Contextual Information	Prescriptiveness Level of Detail	Barriers for New Partners

Note: *Proposal Development Burden was also a theme but it will not be covered specifically during our activities because it is embedded in many of the other themes.*

Day 1: Major Themes

Theory of Change (TOC)

- The process to develop a TOC and log frame is a useful tool for partners to visualize the proposed program
- Less experienced partners are unclear about the level of detail required for the TOC
- TOC is too complex to develop during the design stage
- It is not clear if the TOC is a helpful tool to design high-quality programs
- Time, language barriers, and/or different ways of approaching "logic"

Day 1: Major Themes

Complexity vs. Focus

- Partners worry about being penalized and so they design projects addressing too many topics
- What is being asked in the RFA and what is feasible for implementation is seen as inconsistent
- Partners worried about different interpretations from BHA on programming principles and cross-cutting elements
- Sheer number of programming principles makes it difficult to focus

Day 1: Major Themes

Prescriptiveness Level of Detail

- All partners appreciate high level of detail in instructions and definitions for RFAs
- About half of partners see the current level of prescriptiveness as effective
- Partners associate more prescriptiveness as effective in eliminating guesswork, especially related to expectations
- Less prescriptive approaches were touted to encourage partners to take risks and be innovative

Activity Instructions

- You will be put into a breakout room with a theme
- An IDEAL facilitator/notetaker will be assigned to each room
- Read through findings/recommendations
- Discuss as a group any missing recommendations
- Prioritize 1-3 recommendations

10 min break will be included in this 70 min activity

Group 1 - Theory of Change

Feedback:

- Process to develop TOC/log frame is useful for partners to visualize the proposed program
- The TOC is viewed as the foundation of the RFSAs
- Resources provided by BHA are helpful for partners to analyze needs and move them into the TOC
- Developing a TOC requires substantial resources
- Less experienced partners are unclear about the level of detail required for the TOC
- Partners sense that they need to develop a full TOC/intervention plan at the proposal stage
- TOCs are too broad/unfocused because partner are trying to address too many issues/topics
- TOC is too complex to develop during the design stage (not clear if it is a helpful tool to design high-quality programs)
- Challenges faced by field/technical staff when developing a TOC include limited time, language barriers, and/or different ways of approaching "logic"

Discussion Notes:

- Consensus that TOC is important for thinking through logic of program
- TOC processes are critical to solid design but BHA's expectations and prescriptiveness (e.g. RFA identifying high-level objectives that might not be the high-level objectives logically in a TOC, USAID expectations around formatting of TOC) has increased
- How informative is TOC for reviewers complexity and the fact they haven't been part of pre-existing conversations?
- Is very thorough, detailed TOC development at the proposal stage necessary given R&I requirements and ongoing adjustments to TOC throughout the program?
- TOC development is incredibly time intensive (the formatting alone)
- TOC is a key tool for different things - 1) design and 2) program management. At the design stage, can lead team down many rabbit holes. Ultimately, a lot of TOC gets revised once RFSA is awarded. Design and program management teams are often different groups - TOC is handed over to program management teams, in which case there there might not be sufficient buy-in if they haven't been involved in developing TOC submitted with application.
- TOC as an annex is the equivalent of a 'show your work' section - is this necessary when there is so much detail and elaboration in the technical narrative?
- Those developing TOC and writing proposal must be the same group (or well aligned) - this is a lot of work for 1-2 individuals to manage (TOC needs to be revised every time proposal is revised and vice versa). Not a matter of hiring additional staff to help with process since TOC and proposal writers are often the same people.
- Leading TOC development requires specialization - attending a TOC training is probably not sufficient. This can be a barrier for smaller organizations and new applicants. There are few consultants available who have this expertise.
- TOC development can be expensive (requires field assessments, problem trees, etc.) - begins before RFA is dropped. This is all a heavy investment.
- Final TOCs end up being massive graphics that can be difficult to use, particularly if you're not familiar with TOC or previously involved in development
- Condensing TOC into "summary version" that's more readable, usable can be helpful, particularly at the design stage
- The end goal for IPs and USAID is delivering a program that achieves the best results, but a lot of time, money, and energy is spent on the process (i.e. developing the TOC)
- What would a condensed TOC look like? Could include goals, purpose, high-level outcomes. The technical narrative can provide more detail about the pathways and the accompanying logic without this being fleshed out in the TOC. Once RFSA is awarded, TOC could be further developed.
- Not clear that immense level of detail required for TOC development at submission stage pays off given the amount of resources required

Parking Lot

Recommendations:

- Improve TOC capacity strengthening/ materials for partners

  IDEAL 2019 TOC training and materials has been helpful. Those who attend trainings need to be able to pass along knowledge/skills within their organization. Materials will need to be updated to reflect changing requirements.
- Provide guidance for TOC development
- Scale back TOC requirements, e.g. only requiring high-level outcomes
- Require a condensed version of TOC (goal, purpose, high-level outcomes, external outcomes, assumptions, constraints) rather than a fully detailed TOC for proposal submission

  Could eliminate: tagging sectoral areas, assumptions, interventions, items that are included in the LogFrame

  (Could provide guidance or training on how to create condensed TOC, should this replace detailed TOC requirement at submission stage)
- Begin TOC development process during the Refine phase of RFSA as a management tool
- Include BHA staff experienced with TOC development early in the RFA drafting process
- Provide high-level goal, purpose, and sub-purposes in RFA
- USAID reviewers identify critical elements of TOC to determine any TOC requirements that could be eliminated at proposal stage
- Have more open and direct conversations with BHA during co-creation, including around TOC development
- Balancing level of effort for applicants with utility for TOC reviewers

Group 2 - Theory of Change

Feedback:

- Process to develop TOC/log frame is useful for partners to visualize the proposed program
- The TOC is viewed as the foundation of the RFSAs
- Resources provided by BHA are helpful for partners to analyze needs and move them into the TOC
- Developing a TOC requires substantial resources
- Less experienced partners are unclear about the level of detail required for the TOC
- Partners sense that they need to develop a full TOC/intervention plan at the proposal stage
- TOCs are too broad/unfocused because partner are trying to address too many issues/topics
- TOC is too complex to develop during the design stage (not clear if it is a helpful tool to design high-quality programs)
- Challenges faced by field/technical staff when developing a TOC include limited time, language barriers, and/or different ways of approaching "logic"

Discussion Notes:

- While a lot of attention is given to the ToC during the R&I period, there still is a high level of expectation for high quality ToCs at the proposal stage. Scoring for ToCs at the proposal phase isn't prioritized
  - Unsure how many pts is assigned to the ToC, makes it challenging to prioritize
  - Clarity is an issue. Not clear about BHA's expectations
- Breadth is necessary, but a lot of lower-level outcomes could be missed in the process. How can we refine our ToC dev't process to not be too broad? +2 Hard to prioritize and decide not to pull a particular "lever," knowing that it may affect the outcome.
- There are some goal-level required indicators (e.g. stunting, depth of poverty), but if your activity does not address these outcomes, the ToC turns into a LogFrame or an IPTT. Required vs applicable. For example, if an activity is focused on AgL, why should it measure stunting?
- Do not have a full suite of ToC tools in French. Language barrier is a big issue, esp considering complex terms in the RFA and ToC guidance (which hasn't been updated but the thinking on this has advanced).
  - Revise the TOC Guidance, update it and post it on the BHA website along with other guidance, rather than the IDEAL guidance. Also, ensure that a French Version (at minimum) with full tools is made available.
- Useful tool for systems thinking... there needs to be a much closer relationship between the ToC and the learning agenda.
- Period of change is limited + hard to understand at the design phase. Impt to allow for adaptations throughout the implementation phase.
- Would be useful for BHA to provide recommendations at the Purpose and SP levels based on their analysis and give partners room for creativity for the lower levels of the ToC.
  - Challenge with multi-stage process. Short version required but the inclusion of lower levels help to evaluate the proposal.
  - First stage should be lite and low-cost to get a broader set of partners; should be focused on consultation and co-creation at the community level.

Parking Lot

Recommendations:

- Improve TOC capacity strengthening/ materials for partners; revise the ToC guidance and make it available in multiple languages
- Do not require a ToC at initial application when following a multi-stage process.
- Review timing for requirements
- First stage should be lite and low-cost to get a broader set of partners; should be focused on consultation and co-creation at the community level.
- Begin TOC development process during the Refine phase of RFSA as a management tool
- Provide high-level goal, purpose, and sub-purposes in RFA
- Assign a point value to the ToC as part of the RFA scoring criteria
- Include BHA staff experienced with TOC development early in the RFA drafting process

Group 3 - Complexity vs. Focus

Feedback:

- When priorities are not clear, partners tend to take a "kitchen sink" approach and spend a considerable amount of time and resources to address all interventions
- Large, complex programs make it difficult to focus on a small number of meaningful interventions
- What is being asked and what is feasible is seen as inconsistent
- While the evaluation criteria provide some idea of priorities, there is also a misalignment between the criteria and requirements in other sections
- Programming principles are cross-cutting and not always clear, making partners worried about different interpretations than BHA
- The sheer number of programming principles (over a dozen) makes it difficult to respond within page limits effectively

Discussion Notes:

- The RFAs seem to list everything that could influence FS directly or indirectly. If it's listed in the RFA, partners are compelled to include that in the design. We make an assumption that we need to cover everything and prioritize, but there are certain design elements that wont have as much of an impact.
- The intention to achieve results might necessitate the inclusion of many elements. We want to achieve results and show evidence, but also acknowledge that there are many ways to achieve our outcomes. What is BHA willing to let go of?
- How does BHA communicate more effectively? Trying to understand what is triggering applicants to make the proposals complex with many interventions.
- The cross-cutting themes, there were several that were required. Couldn't tell if they were required or suggested in the RFA? Example: SBC, gender, social inclusion. Trying to ensure all the cross-cutting themes fit into all our activities. Debate between trying to budget priorities and over-promising.
- Some of these RFAs are in contexts where the systems are damaged beyond a point where the RFAs and our interventions will be able to influence. Certain interventions require reaching out to higher levels of the government. The connection (or lack of connection) between these systems makes addressing our context more difficult, hence why proposals tend to over- promise.
- BHA fully understands and acknowledges the challenges that multi-sectoral projects face. These interventions aren't just spread across sectors, but are also meant to be integrated. CoPs are trying to identify the optimal mix of implementation. To address one of these challenges, we ask the question of what we can achieve and what we can sustain. Came up with the R&I model to be able to give a project a potential to be able to operate longer than the duration of the project. Not sure if we are adequately conveying this intent to our partners?
- Is the framing of this question accurate? Is it complexity vs focus - does it have to be either/or?
- For multi-sectoral programs, we look at where to focus in terms of systems level. We have to work with several stakeholders. In terms of complexity, we need to design something that covers all these areas.

<u>**Discussion about Recommendations**</u>

- We need flexibility to switch between technical interventions. The focus should be on the result, and so to see what interventions we need to implement to achieve that.
- If the focus is linked to the result, is that focus clear in the RFAs coming out right now?
- The design may look obvious, but it is that ability to move across sectors. A shopping list of potential interventions that will help us achieve our results.
- Another challenge is bringing in the private sector. ***Need clear guidance in the design to incentivize the private sector.***
- For programming principles and all the areas that must be included - ***is there a way to include these more specifically in the evaluation criteera?***
- As development theory evolves, this list of interventions/cross-cutting themes will grow further.
- There are typically several annexes in an RFA written by multiple people - figuring out how these pieces come together? During a proposal writing process, there are assigned role for technical experts to write their sections. This results in very strongly written sections, but they do not necesarily come together. The more you spell out a section, the heavier it becomes in the proposal.
- When we put gender as a seperate evaluation criteria, we are communicating with the partners that we are serious about gender.
- In terms of BHA providing more clarity for prioritizing the technical sections, there could be a risk in that it sacrifices innovation on the side of the partners? If you are given everything and told exactly what to do, proposals will start to look the same. So it is in finding that balance.
- To add to that, BHA is not in a position to always know what the top priorities for a certain context are. The partners are better equipped to do that, so yes, the solution lies in finding that balance.

Parking Lot

Recommendations:

- Clearer guidance on what elements must be included and what "gray areas" will not be penalized upon evaluation, and linking to the evaluation criteria where possible.
- Guidance on "focus"/how it is evaluated helps narrow interventions
- Definitions of programming principles/cross-cutting elements.
- Development of tools for programming principles outside of RFA process
- Clarity in the technical sections in terms of what is required vs. what is a "gray area"

Use to prioritize:

Group 4 - Complexity vs. Focus

Feedback:

- When priorities are not clear, partners tend to take a "kitchen sink" approach and spend a considerable amount of time and resources to address all interventions
- Large, complex programs make it difficult to focus on a small number of meaningful interventions
- What is being asked and what is feasible is seen as inconsistent
- While the evaluation criteria provide some idea of priorities, there is also a misalignment between the criteria and requirements in other sections
- Programming principles are cross-cutting and not always clear, making partners worried about different interpretations than BHA
- The sheer number of programming principles (over a dozen) makes it difficult to respond within page limits effectively

Discussion Notes:

- Programming principles vs. cross-cutting themes: hard to determine how to address with limited pages
- Not clear in solicitation what we mean by focus
- Targeting difficult to understand for newcomers
- Design process leads us to look at things broadly: guiding principles, TOC + hunger is complex - eventually leads to "kitchen sink"
    - Everything drives you to add rather than subtract,
    - Holistic approach is the way to go, but should not get dinged for using this approach
    - Targeting the most limiting factor(s) might be one way to address - prioritize interventions based on this
- Helpful to use indicators and targeting as a way to understand what BHA wants to achieve
- Programming principles are valuable, just need to be more focused
    - Should be viewed as good practice
    - Encouraged to provide feedback on these principles during comment period (draft RFA)
- IP concerns with asking questions during solicitation as it can show thinking during competitive process - could be recommendation
    - Comments should be taken onboard to influence RFA but specific org comments and responses should not be released
- When written feedback is provided, there is no published list, there is just a revised RFA - unsure of process but there should be anonymous list
- Outside of RFA process, could be useful to have core set of programming principles developed with IPs and have supplementary principles where context dictates - with aim to reduce number and remain consistent
- Conscious effort to reduce complexity [Coco Chanel quote on removing one item and then being ready] could be a way for BHA to actively try to reduce complexity
- Provide high-level goal, purpose and sub-purposes in RFA - according to TOC standards but leave design below sub-purpose up to IPs
- Difficulties with defining focus because limits IP innovation - can agree on objectives but difference comes in how organizations achieve these
    - Having higher level defined is useful
- As we all know, the budget structure for RFSA are amazingly complex. However, they must be, given USAID internal needs to report on funding source and program element. More prescriptiveness on which PEs to choose would be better – and long as they are as few in number as possible! USAID has good guidance/instructions on how to do the budget and budget narrative. Additional instructions on how to handle the common problems USAID see repeatedly on budgets would be very welcome (how to set up additional checks to spot errors given that some workbooks may have over a half a million cells, how to set up the budget to calculate fringe on two separate classes of employees – how to handle the complexities of applying NICRA given the multiple funding sources and their restrictions, how to incorporate sub budgets into the main budget).

Parking Lot

Recommendations:

- Guidance on key elements/less penalized elements
- Guidance on "focus"/how it is evaluated helps narrow interventions
- *Consolidation of programming principles/cross-cutting elements and ensuring consistent labeling
- *Opportunities for discussion of programming principles outside of RFA process with aim to reduce and ensure consistency
- Make clear when requesting comments that specific orgs making comments will not be released broadly
- Summarize key responses/analysis from draft to final RFA
- Conscious effort to make RFA less complex and transparency in that process
- Provide country-level high-level goal, purpose, and sub-purposes in RFA but leave below sub-purpose for IPs to design

Group 5 - Prescriptiveness and Level of Detail

Feedback:

- About half of BHA's partners see the current level of prescriptiveness as effective, while the other half either want more or less
- Partners associate more prescriptiveness as effective in eliminating guesswork, especially related to expectations
- More recent RFAs are seen as more prescriptive, making developing proposals easier even for newer partners
- Less prescriptive approaches were touted to encourage partners to take risks and be innovative
- New partners want more prescriptiveness, larger, more traditional partners wanted more flexibility
- Interaction and communication with BHA at each stage to understand what focus and priorities are most important is highly valued

Discussion Notes:

- Prescriptiveness is setting clear expectations. Level of detail is clarity of instruction, context, lessons learned, etc.
- BD advises to address all in document, seems put together by many people with different perspective, leaving out might mean loss, more presciptiveness preferred
- Would like to understand what kind of budget priority is expected for different program areas - how to be effective in various focus areas that require larger budgets after splitting among tech areas
- Avoid too much prescriptiveness to allow innovation in activities and approach in tech areas, can bring limitations in activity design b/c cannot move away from expectations even if data collected on context may point in a different direction
- Challenge with innovation - sometimes feels resistance to innovative ideas when large money is on the table
- USAID/BHA comes from the perspective that IPs understand the context better but question, perhaps there is a lack of faith that USAID may not accept innovative designs - build in flexibility on where IP can innovate, maybe more flexibility after project awarded? - example of WASH infrastructure not allowed vs. softer programming
- Is BHA really not allowing these innovations? New partners feel a higher level of fear, less trust since traditional partners seem to win most often; seems to depend on the RFA and level of prescriptiveness (Kenya less prescriptive, Uganda more clear cut) already written into the proposal, more innovation allowed where BHA is less sure how to address the problem - this idea of clarifying areas open to innovation seems to resonate
- What kind of communication and feedback channels are available after the RFA drops? More during pre-release of RFA, consultations with partners in the focus country, places for partners to give input before RFA drops and for partners to get an understanding of potential BHA priority and focus - positive feedback on breakout sessions during public briefing period during period following draft RFA, especially in person, for Mali and Zimbabwe
- Question from BHA whether they should engage new business/business development more actively pre-RFA to increase understanding of BHA priorities in general - strong support for new business representative in the chat room - could be included in rec for additional pathways of communication pre-RFA

Parking Lot

Recommendations:

1. Provide purpose/high-level TOC outcomes while partners provide lower branches
2. Clear explanation of what elements are required and which elements allow innovation/flexibility
3. Prioritize essentials during proposal with more flexibility during the refine phase of R&I
4. Add additional communication pathways pre-RFA (RFI) or post draft RFA that are inclusive of potential new partners and allow for dialogue
5. Additional guidance on how to budget resources appropriately among different technical areas
6. BHA engage new business/business development representatives more actively pre-RFA

Welcome back!

Stakeholder Consultation: RFSA RFA Design and Process (Day 2)

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Agenda

Day 2 Overview

8:00 - 8:30	Opening Day 1 Recap
8:30 - 8:50	Day 2 Major Themes Activity Instructions
8:50 - 10:15	Breakout Room Activity *(with break)*
10:15 - 11:00	Gallery Walk
11:00 - 11:10	Break
11:10 - 11:40	Prioritization Activity
11:40 - 12:00	Closing

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Gives partners the opportunity to:

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- Improve the quality of RFSA designs
- Lower barriers to allow for a wider range of applicants

Ground Rules

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Major Themes

Theory of Change (TOC)	RFA Release Timing	Key Personnel	Complexity vs. Focus
Multi-Phased Approach	Contextual Information	Prescriptiveness Level of Detail	Barriers for New Partners

Note: *Proposal Development Burden was also a theme but it will not be covered specifically during our activities because it is embedded in many of the other themes.*

Day 2: Major Themes

RFA Release Timing

- Knowledge of release dates allows partners to better prepare
- Inconsistent timing of draft/final RFA publications

Multi-Phased Approach

- With both co-creation and R&I process, feeling like the initial proposal phase is too complex/intensive
- Local partners are restricted in their influence to design quality programs in the first phase

Barriers for New Partners

- Cost and lack of information on prospective RFSA locations
- Less familiarity with specific terminology and funding sources

Day 2: Major Themes

Key Personnel

- Helpful in identification of BHA priorities
- Number of roles and prescriptiveness seeming to increase over time
- Recruitment challenges with uncertainty of award

Contextual Information

- Half of partners find contextual information useful, thorough and a launching point for proposals, but certain cases do not align with reality of local context
- Coordination with existing or planned USAID programs are difficult due to insufficient information

Activity Instructions

- You will be put into a breakout room with a theme
- An IDEAL facilitator/notetaker will be assigned to each room
- Read through findings/recommendations
- Discuss as a group any missing recommendations
- Prioritize 1-3 recommendations

10 min break will be included in this 85 min activity

Group 1 - Barriers to Application for New/Non-Historic Partners

Feedback:

- The cost of developing a proposal can be a significant barrier
- Non-historic partners cited a lack of information on where prospective RFSAs may be located as a barrier for positioning/partnership.
- The perception that informal communication is more available within circles of historic partners
- New/non-historic partners have less familiarity with RFSAs as well as specific terminology in the RFA
- Understanding the differences between funding sources (Title II and CDF) is a challenge

Recommendations:

1. Conduct a RFSA orientation session to go over terminology/funding sources for new partners separate from RFA release

2. Create a pre-qualification process for new partners to become shortlisted

3. Increase # of awards/reduce budget size to allow for entry of new partners as prime

(Should be linked to a more streamlined proposal development process, as the process itself is a substantial investment)

4. BHA to share intelligence about funding source/allocation requirement for commodity management so orgs can determine whether they're able to pursue opportunity - this is typically shared at draft RFA stage, but would be helpful to know even earlier

5. BHA to indicate that commodity management experience is not required in application, and then provide capacity building opportunities for commodity management during refinement year

6. 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

7. BHA to identify third party contractor to manage commodity management interventions within RFSA

8. BHA to encourage new and local/national applicants - needs to be stated clearly in RFA, orientation; included in scoring criteria

9. BHA to allow exclusive arrangements (can be tension working with local partners when they're partnering with others)

Use to prioritize:

Discussion Notes:

- Difficulty transitioning from sub to primes
- Perception that even if non-historic partners have a strong proposal, there might be hesitancy to award RFSA due to lack of trust since org is more unknown to BHA
- For non-historic applicants, proposal might look a little bit different from what reviewers are used to reviewing - does this hinder new non-historic applicants?
- Proposal development is a huge investment ($500k-1m, high LOE) and requires background work before RFA is even released - this is a high bar for non-historic applicants, especially because they feel it's unlikely they'll be awarded
- Background info is gained from informal networking/networks that non-historic partners are less aware of or have less accessibility to
- RFSA opportunities may be unappealing from a business perspective to orgs with value adds like health when half of the budget (e.g. in the case of Haiti RFA) is allocated for commodities - this is a loss for BHA since these orgs might have a lot to offer outside of commodities
- Few orgs have capacity or specialization in commodity management - huge barrier for non-historic partners
- Allocation for commodity management is a big consideration for whether partners decide to pursue RFSA - if this allocation was more apparent earlier on, could help partners decide early whether to pursue
- Shorter term emergency funding could be one way for non-historic orgs to build up experience with commodities to make them more competitive for RFSAs
- Non-historic partners may have more innovative ideas since they're not traditional partners - is BHA willing to take a risk to see what non-historical partners can offer?
- TOC requirements can be a barrier due to learning curve - BHA has very specific things they're looking for in a TOC that differs from what TOC requirements for other donors may look like
- Submitting proposals to BHA is more complex than some other donors and platforms
- Perception that local/national partners do not feel ready to prime due to number of barriers for smaller, non-historic partners
- Difficult for BHA to access different sources of funding (CDF is typically a different funding source - gives partners more flexibility)
- Difference between managing commodity supply chain process (procurement, storage, etc.) and the distribution and management of commodities on the ground - perhaps RFSAs could be made to focus more on the latter
- Lack on consensus around whether non-exclusive arrangements are helpful or hindering:
  - For non-exclusive arrangements, IP might not be able engage in the design - perhaps not a solution that's much of a game-changer
  - Experience with non-exclusive partners has been positive if embraced as full partners
  - BHA uses non-exclusive language in an effort to be aligned with larger USAID policies; there are ways to structure teaming agreements or using NDAs so partners can share freely
  - For non-exclusive arrangements, can be tension working with local partners and freely sharing information when they're partnering with others
- Where does WFP fit into strategic positioning of USAID commodities? Possibility of leveraging their pipelines or using them as subcontractor? This would help IPs without commodity management experience more easily navigate the barrier commodity requirements present
- EFSPs typically deal with distribution of shelf-stable RUTFs - for IPs looking to build up commodity management/distribution experience, this is an option to explore
- Recommendation to increase # of awards/reduce budget size to allow for entry of new partners as prime - is this feasible? BHA: It's worth considering. Making multiple awards in a single country may make oversight more difficult for Mission. Easier for BHA to take a risk on an innovative idea on a smaller area where there's demonstrated experience and evidence base (e.g. a successful pilot)

Parking Lot

Group 2 - RFA Release Timing

Feedback:

- Partners appreciate receiving key information for future RFSAs
- Knowledge of release dates allows partners to better prepare
- A disadvantage in preparedness when key information is missed
- Inconsistent timing of draft/final RFA publications
- Delays result in challenging identification of key personnel
- A limited window between draft and final RFA
- Partners start working before RFA release to develop quality applications

Recommendations:

Provide earlier info about countries considered for RFAs

Provide earlier info about release dates for draft RFAs

Include RFSA RFAs in mission forecasts

Release info about potential RFSA location a year prior to the release of draft RFAs

Standardize release dates for draft and final RFAs

Communicate and transparently disclose estimated key dates

Ideal Timeline:
Country Identification: April of prior fiscal year
Draft RFA - sept (oct?) of prior FY
final RFA - January
submission - april
ILs/orals - june-july (may-June?)
Co-creation - July?

Make co-creation process a post-award activity to avoid procurement sensitivities

Use to prioritize:

Discussion Notes:

- RFAs tend to come out right before a holiday
- The gap between final RFA and submission date can be frustrating -- makes it difficult to plan because the due date is unknown until the final RFA drops (recommended 60-90 days between the final RFA and due date)
- The work begins before the draft RFA even comes out, need to conduct a vulnerability assessment in the target area as soon as possible
- Would love to see more transparency across the whole process, e.g., estimated drop date, due date, etc.
- One way to be transparent is to be consistent, but there is a lack of consistency regarding timelines. Orgs start the application process well in advance, but consistent timing could help
- If there have been significant changes between draft and final RFAs, such as change in geography, partners need more time to consult with communities.
- It takes at least one month to conduct community consultations and another month to validate and adapt your proposal accordingly. The more changes there are, the more time it will take to shift internally.
- Sometimes changes warrant a change in overall design of the proposal (e.g., Malawi was a change in geography, Mada was a change in focus/content)
- RFI vs. draft RFA? How would this impact overall release time? Would an RFI process help or hinder? Perhaps could pilot in one country, if it was very targeted in the information it was seeking, it could potentially reduce barrier to local partner orgs? This won't necessarily help with the challenge around release dates
- The guessing game around RFSA country locations is always very intense. The large, experienced countries know the signs, but new partners don't. It would reduce barriers if countries were communicated earlier.
- Various RFAs are released in the same quarter and compete for partner attention.
- Feed the Future and RFSA RFAs timing tends to vary and it difficult to predict and coordinate
- Would like BHA to make sure there is sufficient time to revise the application after the co-creation process while taking into consideration other funding deadlines.
- PL: Two weeks to make significant changes and address issues letter is extremely tight. Again consistency would be helpful.
- PL: Need more discussion around the co-creation process. For example, wasn't able to ask questions during oral presentation due to procurement sensitivities. This then isn't co-creation, and can feel like a drain on time.
- During presentations, would like it to be useful as it is a huge lift and a barrier for new entrants. If the oral just confirms what they had originally thought, it might be worth dropping this altogether. Sometimes this changes, which can also throw partners off. Would like presentations to be consistent.
- It would be good to know if the presentation is playing a decisive role, but is inconsistent across RFSAs
- Regarding the standardize release recommendation: propose the ideal scenario with timelines to BHA, including countries (April of the prior fiscal year), draft RFA, final RFA, oral presentation dates with consistent timing between deadlines
- BHA: try to take into account dates, holidays, etc. Responsiveness and quality of key applications are considered. A proposed ideal timeline would be helpful
- Proposed timeline:
  draft RFA - sept (oct?)of prior FY
  final RFA - January
  submission - april
- ILs/orals - june-july (may-June?)
  - co-creation - July?
- Issues Letters for Title II: it takes 120 days

Parking Lot

Group 3 - Multi-Phased Approach

Feedback:

- The initial proposal design process is complex/intensive
- Questions raised around the oral presentation (clarity, value, etc.)
- Oral presentation requires extra efforts from partners
- Questions raised around the decision process between written submission and oral presentation
- Limited information can be given to local partners in the initial design phase
- Partners familiar with local contexts are restricted in their influence to design quality programs (to protect prime partners design secrets)
- With both co-creation and R&I process, there seemed ample opportunities to refine the design and secure communications with local partners
- Later phases fully designed as part of the initial submission seemed like an unnecessary effort

Recommendations:

Clarify what partners should have ready for each proposal stage

Ensure requirements at various proposal stages are linked

Consider modifying requirements by proposal stage

Require only concept paper or reduce requirements/annexes at initial proposal phase

Explore possibilities to increase risk sharing between the partner and donor in the pre-award phase

Increased flexibility around the timing and sequencing of R&I to accomodate IP realities around staffing

Use to prioritize:

Discussion Notes:

- Kenya and Zimbabe RFAs did not have clear requirements for the R&I phase. Partners concerned about putting together the full design for the initial phase and being asked to start over.
  - the lack of clarity made it unclear to the partners what to invest on
- Success in the initial stage impedes a more detailed planning in further stages, like in co-creation phase. Teams are remobilized to participate accordingly, and that might not be consistent.
  - ideally, the ones on the frontline would be participating in the initial planning phase.
- Partners unclear of what to propose in the first stage due to lack of clarity in the Kenya RFA.
- Absolutely do not want partners having to start over after the R&I period.
- Bringing in more frontline staff into the planning phase. Something for the partners to prioritize.
  - Frontline staff should be fully engaged in the baseline data analysis.
- If there is a pre-award co-creation phase, what would be the most beneficial in terms of finding the balance?
  - If its pre-award, still limited in who is in the room. Matter of particality in terms of having the right people in the room.
  - An RFA planning meeting was floated as an information gathering session for the partners. Ensuring transparency in terms of what information is required from the early stages.
- At the co-creation phase, even though competition is reduced between partners, the right people are not necessarilly involved at this stage, which is caused due to many practical constraints.
  - There is a handover between the proposal team and implementation team. This is where some programs/partners feel the need to start over after the co-creation stage. Have a different group of people taking over from each stage. Maybe could ensure a mix of people are consistently present across the early stages.
- PL: anything in the proposal is worthy of questioning.
  - Some questions in the issues letter could put partners down contradictory paths.
  - Issue of staff not familiar with the field context asking the questions in the issues letter.
- Want open conversation with the partners. Something missing in terms of the communication between partners, local partners, donor..
  - If someonne from BHA can step in and be a clarifying point of contact. Concerned about disagreeing, stepping on the toes.
    - Especially pertinent to threshold questions.

Recommendations Discussion

- A lot of detail required in the proposal and issues letter. Necessitates a lot of planning and prioritizing what to invest on, but knowing that we will be redoing a lot of this in the later stages. Already trying to refine when we get the issues letter.
- For example, for TOC recommendations, requiring just a summarized TOC at the proposal stage.
  - RFA prescriptiveness - clarity on what is expected, what is mandatory, what can be flexible
- Clarity on the length/duration of the earlier planning stages, for example at the issues letter. The design and implementation stages involve different teams.
- At the R&I phase, feels like newer people are being recruited. You are educating the staff in some ways as they might not have contextual knowledge.
- Recruitment is the most risk averse thing that IPs do. Will not be hiring folks till we are certain of getting the award.
- Lot of the steps in the refine period do not align with the reality of the
- This will be difficult to change. Recognize the difficulties and complexities posed by this. When would it help to have conversations around hiring?
  - Could adjust timing. At HQ level, recognize an operational setup moment. Focus on that piece alone, which would include hiring.
  - Field level - could there be flexible on the donor's part to allow the partner to bring on few key personnel on board in the earlier stage.
  - Push the R&I phase from 3 months to 6 months
    - R&I phase is meant to give partners that time for operational start up, but could push the workshops back.
  - A shared risk between the donor and partner to identify some key staff
- If R&I workshops were to be moved, how does that affect the start of implmentation?
  - Takes a lot of time to hire the crew to start implementation.
  - If you can have the CoP to start on day 1, that is a good place to start. If not, lot of catching up to to in terms of program delivery in Year 1.
    - high level of competition between local staff for hiring

Parking Lot

Group 4 - Key Personnel

Feedback:

- Helps understand what leadership BHA considers a priority
- Extensive lists increase time, cost, and resources needed to find quality personnel on an uncertain timeline, which is challenging (especially for smaller partners)
- Prescriptiveness seems odd given the flexibility in the technical design
- Challenging to name specific roles (like the Chief of Party) for oral presentations, when confidentiality and competing commitments are in the mix
- Challenging to stick with English speakers as it may exclude qualified locals

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Recommendations:

Provide less prescriptiveness on key personnel to allow for best fit based on tech requirements and country context

Provide guidance on key personnel as early as possible to allow for early recruitment

3. Smaller number of fixed key personnel positions with strict requirements. Other technical or management functions defined, but applicant propose how to address them

Revisit key personnel qualifications

Stagger timing of key personnel requirements

Consider KP being unscored, but additive or subtractive factor in evaluation of application

Use to prioritize:

Discussion Notes:

- All resonates. Hard to fulfil the requirements locally. Given prescriptiveness in terms of language, qualifications, IPs often have to bring in international personnel rather than using local. Costs associated with that, cannot spend money on quality staff at the local level. Tradeoff that impacts overall budget of the program.
- Prescriptiveness element - sometimes it appears BHA comes in with someone in mind, more so at higher level positions. Depending on country context, local capacity can be higher or lower and this should also be taken into consideration. Have some nuance in understanding country capacity when articulating requirements. Opportunity to engage youth more if requirements are lowered for positions outside of KP, or lower level KP positions.
  - There are certain functions required that might not have to tie to key personnel. Could be useful to present functions needed and ask IP to show that leadership team encompasses all of these key functions. Could also be tied to adaptive management plan - show that proposing engagement systems with stakeholders where IPs will be able to meet USAID and project needs.
- Implications for how key personnel requirements can affect IP management: depends on award size (amount of money going into award) - awards with higher budgets require more key personnel but at the same time, those key personnel need to be in the field frequently; ongoing meetings with USAID affects how often key personnel can be in the field. If bringing in expats, harder to get them out in the field. More consideration, keeping in mind that staff at all levels cannot be paid for if we want more of them closer to the ground. Tradeoff - not all important positions need to be key personnel with high requirements. M&E and Learning are essential. The COP is essential. Likely the DCOP is essential. But often there are other positions like Resilience Coordinator that don't need to be a key personnel.
  - Recommendation to have a few key personnel and keep 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.
- Issues related to key personnel that impact competitiveness of smaller or newer partners - might be some room for creativity or flexibility in process of scoring key personnel and adjusting key personnel rosters - how that is managed by USAID that can lighten the burden
- 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 where you have approach specific roles vs key personnel.
- Providing guidance on key personnel not as important as other recommendations because IPs tend to cast a wide net - not that much difference from bid to bid on what BHA is asking for.
- Number of key personnel need to balance skills of leadership vs. skills at ground level. What is most important and where do we want to focus because they do conflict.
- Scoring of key personnel: have a fixed point value or be unscored, but you can have additional/reduced point if you have done exceptionally good or poor job at it. Important that there be some flexibility
  - Timing of when key personnel are due - e.g. some could be due at time of submission, while others required for Apparently Successful Applicant to fill in last two months. Perhaps a little more guidance at that point so IPs have longer time to recruit and not everybody has to do it off bat. Would help in terms of proposal production level

Multi-Phased Approach *(this group spent the first 10 minutes discussing the multi-staged approach)*

- Complexity of initial application: TOC and budgets in category of work where regardless of what is submitted, IPs have to go through entire process.
- Multi-staged process increases staff LOE, proposal development costs - can be significant barrier for smaller organizations.
- As process was set up in past round, felt like co-creation process was not real co-creation. No discussion or meeting of the minds - needs to be some tweaking of pre-award co-creation. Seems issues are resolved in Issues Letter process or R&I year.
- Difficult to present full case of program in a shorter proposal and allows for a lot of issues. Seen an increase in number of issues raised in issues letters over the year and time allowed for response is often tight. Can lead to multiple rounds of issues letters which becomes very time intensive. Concerns with staff availability over time as it lengthens pre-award process. By the end of process, different proposal than what was initially submitted which may mean RFA guidance is unclear.
- Oral presentation - at times IPs aligned this with issues letters and during debrief found out presentation was evaluated on initial application. If multi-staged process retained, there needs to be careful thought about what is included at each stage and how it is being evaluated

Group 5 - Contextual Information

Feedback:

- Half of the partners find contextual information useful, thorough and a launching point for proposals
- Certain cases do not align with the reality of the local context
- Consultation with local stakeholders and government is unclear, which makes priorities difficult to see
- Coordination with existing or planned USAID programs is difficult due to insufficient information (especially for SLI)

Recommendations:

1. Provide more clear info, rationale and context on why certain regions, intervention areas, goals, purposes and needs and USAID perceived priorities of target populations within a country are selected

2. Provide more info about existing USAID programs in planned geography

3. Better coordinate timing of RFA releases with other USAID programs in same geography

4. Explore ways for BHA to reflect more stakeholder consultation in the RFA and relieve burden from applicants/local stakeholders

5. Be open to discussion/consideration of different geographic areas and/or technical focus areas

6. Shift the requirement to articulate coordination with other programs to refine year

7. Explore which analyses/annexes (economic, gender, market, environmental, etc.) can be shifted to the refine year

Use to prioritize:

Discussion Notes:

- Contextual information helpful for what is happening in the country and what is important to BHA, not region, good platform on which to build, but then we need to do a deep dive. Months of going out to the field and gather from communities - took 6 months for Burkina Faso, costly
- Coordination with existing or planned programs is very challenging - very little information but asked how coordination would happen
- The information is not detailed or precise, making it difficult for partners to design. Needs also not clear. Clarification session before partners work on details of their proposal. BHA should be informed of situation in the field - as there were 2 different offers, in 2 different regions, so different contexts.
- Burkina Faso - context provided didn't give enough, difficult for us to find the information, resources were hard to procur as a newcomer to get the same level of information on context - similar issue that we're tackling as yesterday in terms of USAID providing high level goals, purposes, outcomes
- BHA has an agenda, reason why they are in certain areas, the info we see is justifying these priorities - the context may also be surfacing other priorities - do we just go with BHA priorities or suggest others? How is this balanced? Politically driven priorities make it difficult to find this balance. Freedom to suggest new priorities to encourage innovation. Potentially misalignment between local vs national governments. Also difficult to know if it is worth it to put resources into certain analyses.
- Finding regional info resonates with BHA colleagues in that they would like to provide more of this info. Also struggle with the timing in terms of aligning with other programs across US agencies. Perhaps some of that coordination piece could be moved to the refine year. Mostly standalone RFAs now as opposed to CSIs. Reasoning for moving away from CSIs was to create score criteria was tailored appropriately to context.
- Is the commenting period after release of RFA the right time to address some of the contextual disconnect?
- Coordination platforms in RISE, Kenya, but not everywhere. Seconds the possibility of exploring coordination during refine.
- Sometimes there is a specific, unique topic that comes up but there is little information as to why this is in the RFA, i.e. Zimbabwe, wildlife management
- Sometimes difficult to gather all the information from the national and local level when the region is vast with accessibility problems, need a minimum amount of time to gather all the info you need before drafting the proposal
- Would be helpful to understand the full picture behind why certain areas are being targeted in the RFA.
- Think about the scale of different projects in terms of coordination, layering, sequencing and integrating - also may not align in terms of geographic regions - in some countries there is a good coordination of donors and projects
- Considering the fact that several organizations may be gathering information on the ground from the same people may be a huge burden on the local officials that are being targeted - if BHA were to do a more thorough job of gathering information, maybe this would relieve some of the burden on those officials - or, what could be other solutions so that the applicant does not have to do all of this initial data-gathering? - maybe it takes BHA thinking out of the box in terms of what is necessary to make the decision on the winning proposal and what can what until the refine year?

Parking Lot

Prioritizing Recommendations

1. 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

3. USAID reviewers identify critical elements of TOC requirements that could be eliminated at proposal stage

4. Require a condensed version of TOC (goal, purpose, high-level outcomes, external outcomes, assumptions, constraints) rather than a fully detailed TOC for proposal submission

5. Provide a clear explanation of what elements are required and which elements allow innovation/flexibility

6. Add additional communication pathways pre-RFA (RFI) or post draft RFA that are inclusive of potential new partners and allow for dialogue

7. Provide country-level high-level goal, purpose, and sub-purposes in RFA but leave below sub-purpose for IPs to design

8. Provide guidance on “focus”/how it is evaluated helps narrow interventions

9. Consolidate programming principles/cross-cutting elements and ensuring consistent labeling throughout the RFA

10. 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. BHA identify third party contractor to manage commodity management interventions within RFSA

12. BHA encourage new and local/national applicants - needs to be stated clearly in RFA, orientation; included in scoring criteria

13. Communicate and transparently disclose estimated key dates (including changes as they happen) for RFA release

14. 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 (may-June?)
Co-creation - July?

15. Make co-creation process a post-award activity to avoid procurement sensitivities/burden

16. 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

17. Revisit key personnel qualifications (to allow for a broader pool of candidates)

18. Stagger timing of key personnel requirements (for submission and review by BHA, so not at the same time)

19. Modify requirements by proposal stage

20. Increase risk sharing between the partner and donor in the pre-award phase

21. Increase flexibility around the timing and sequencing of R&I to accommodate IP realities around staffing

22. Provide clear info, rationale, context on why certain regions, intervention areas, goals, purposes, needs and USAID perceived priorities of target populations within a country are selected

23. BHA to reflect more stakeholder engagement in the RFA and relieve burden from applicants/local stakeholders

24. Shift certain analyses (economic, gender, market, environmental, etc.) to the refine year

Next Steps

What's going to happen next?

- Report of Stakeholder Consultation process, qualitative outreach results, and event written and disseminated
- IDEAL and BHA to continue the dialogue around prioritized recommendations
- As feasible and allowable, recommendations move forward
- Follow-up report on progress written and disseminated in 3-6 months