

# Seed System Assessments in BHA Programs

## Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Uptake



November 2021





## Overview

Seed system assessments are critical to inform seed interventions. Seed System Security Assessments (SSSAs/SSAs) are one type of assessment that is often requested and/or expected by donors such as USAID; however, uptake and usage vary. In March 2021, the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded SCALE Award hosted two implementing partner (IP) consultations that included both HQ technical advisors and program implementers to better understand why this is the case and what can be done to improve SSSA adoption moving forward.

Following these consultations, SCALE led a debrief meeting with BHA staff, who contributed further reflections on the ways they have seen applications, assessments, and implementation fall short of meeting minimum standards when it comes to the use of seed systems assessments, and the steps that could be taken to strengthen these activities.

This document begins with a summary of BHA's observations of the gaps and shortfalls around SSSA use at the application stage, collected during the debrief call. A summary of the main barriers to SSSA uptake and adoption as reported by the IPs during consultations follows. The document concludes with a brief analysis of the process and key takeaways.



Photo Credit: E. Millstein-Mercy Corps, Myanmar, 2017

## Application gaps

- Applications fail to include an SSSA or some equivalent assessment of seed systems necessary to inform and justify their proposed seed intervention activities.<sup>1</sup> USAID/BHA expects partners to submit an SSSA for any application including seed provision by the same organization in the same location for the same population for more than three consecutive years.<sup>2</sup> However, many applications are not meeting this minimum expectation. Partners have also questioned the conditions under which the assessment is expected, for example by asserting that the proposed intervention targets a different population.
- Applications mention SSSAs but show an inaccurate understanding of their purpose. Many applications inaccurately reference SSSAs as 'needs assessments' or a means by which the program will determine which seeds to distribute to community members. Understanding of SSSAs as a multi-stakeholder capacity-building effort to characterize and identify systemic

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<sup>1</sup> [Minimum Technical Standards for Seed System Assessment \(SSA\) in Emergencies](#) | USAID/OFDA, SeedSystem and UN/FAO consultations

<sup>2</sup> [USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance Emergency Application Guidelines](#). Annex A: Technical Information and Sector Requirements (page 17). Applicable to Fiscal Years 2021 and 2022.

issues is often lacking and SSSAs are not frequently used to decide or design seed sector interventions. In practice, so few implementers are using SSSAs, it seems clear that it is not generally used to guide design and implementation.

- **Although there is a central repository for SSSAs, they are not widely accessed by the implementer community.**<sup>3</sup> Inadequate access results in partners starting from scratch instead of building on existing assessment data and analyses. Even SSSAs that are several years old hold valuable information that is still relevant in many contexts. A lack of public recognition and praise for SSSAs may also lead partners to undervalue their importance and impact.

## Implementation gaps

Reflections from implementing partners highlighted some of the reasons behind the above gaps. The following represents a summary of the participant contributions across both discussions.

During the consultations, SCALE asked participants to share their thoughts and experiences via collaborative Google documents and the Zoom chat box. To access the full collaborative document that includes contributions from participants from both consultations, [click here](#).

- **Challenges with achieving the multi-agency coordination BHA recommends in its SSSA guidance.** Programs hesitate to include SSSAs in applications as it can be difficult during application development phases to identify agencies with a shared interest in conducting an SSSA, particularly those willing to invest time and financial resources in carrying one out.
- **Limited expertise/capacity of staff in understanding the purpose of the tools/methods for an SSSA.** This often reduces the ability of programs to know when and how to effectively conduct SSSAs or properly articulate the elements of SSSAs in applications.
- **Potential strain on resources.** Programs are often wary of taking on SSSAs as they are perceived as extensive and time-consuming, requiring primary data collection and significant financial and staff resources beyond their available budgets, especially for short-term emergency programs. It is rare for applications to reference earlier seed system assessments or studies in the same country and geographical zone. Competing demands on staff time limit programs' ability to identify, research, and apply the findings from earlier SSSAs covering similar crops and/or agro-ecological areas.
- **Difficulties assessing informal seed market systems and program bias toward promoting formal market activities.** This leads many programs to focus on the formal seed sector, thus overlooking the significant informal sector.
- **Limited awareness and/or availability of tools, resources, and research related to the analysis of data.** While implementing partners may be aware of multiple tools for data collection (see Annex A for a list of tools IPs reported using), partners are often less experienced with analyzing data and translating findings into pragmatic recommendations to inform seed interventions. Awareness of existing analytical tools, such as the Seed Security Conceptual Framework, is low.

<sup>3</sup> <https://seedsystem.org/field-assessments-action-plans/>



For a more detailed accounting of the IPs' reflections, including notes on existing resources that IPs shared during the consultations, please see Annex A.

## Analysis and recommendations

Based on the insights shared by BHA and the feedback gathered from the IPs, a few key areas have emerged when it comes to addressing barriers to SSSA uptake.

### Clarify the BHA guidelines and expectations for assessments in ongoing programs

- The SSSA is intended to serve as a tool for ongoing programs to better understand seed systems and design more thoughtful, impactful programs through successive funding cycles. The three consecutive year expectation in BHA's emergency application guidelines has created confusion about how to interpret and apply it during application development and frames the SSSA as an administrative hurdle rather than a useful tool for effective program design.
- The SSSA tools are lengthy, detailed, and multi-part; many IPs feel overwhelmed by it. There is a lack of clear understanding on how or whether programs might use parts of it or limit its scope if time and resources are tight during the application development phase.
- For those programs with ongoing funding cycles, integrating SSSAs into the program cycle in anticipation of the upcoming application stage may go a long way to addressing these issues. For example, programs could be expected to include an SSSA in their workplan after three consecutive years of programming, in all areas where they are implementing seed interventions, and submit it with the next cycle's application.
- Making SSSAs part of ongoing program' workplans could also make it easier for programs to coordinate and share SSSA findings and ensure SSSAs are properly completed. This is one step in ensuring that SSSAs are conducted within a systems framework with multiple stakeholders providing valuable information and services (such as national agricultural research and extension actors, local NGOs, international NGOs, among others). This approach also reduces disincentives for competing IPs to share information and efforts, making it more likely that the resulting SSSA report will be shared publicly.
- Clarification of SSSA guidelines and expectations through additional consultations, such as round tables and webinars, with implementing partners could improve uptake and usage. This could include additional clarification/discussion with IPs on the timing of when an SSSA is expected, what is the criteria for which an SSSA is expected, and what an application assessment must contain to meet BHA's expectations.



## Support more socialization on information and resources

- Although guidance, sample reports, tools, digital formats, and e-training on SSSAs have all been made available through [seedsystem.org](https://seedsystem.org), IPs are still not fully aware of these resources. While existing resources were mentioned during the consultations, it is clear that more can be done around socialization, familiarization, and outreach. This includes revisiting earlier SSSA and other seed sector/seed system diagnostic studies and reports.
- This could include the co-creation of additional trainings or lighter touch support to help partners access, navigate, and use the tools and e-training available on SSSA/SSAs. For instance, an explainer video could help walk IPs through the resources available to them and include quick tips on how, when, and why to use SSSAs.
- One important aspect of socialization may be clarifying what IPs can and cannot do when it comes to modifying the scale or scope of the SSSA, either using only parts of the SSSA tool or focusing its use on specific geographic areas, while ensuring that the Minimum Technical Standards for Seed System Assessment (SSA) in Emergencies are upheld.<sup>4</sup>
- Since there is limited evidence that IPs regularly access or reference past SSSA reports - or other seed sector assessments or studies - relevant to their areas of operation, supporting partners to familiarize themselves with relevant secondary seed system research and studies could help to fill this gap.

## Consider a more centralized approach to conducting SSSAs/SSAs

- To ensure that SSSAs are undertaken at regular intervals with more consistent coverage/scope to understand and analyze seed systems, donors could consider supporting the development of pluralistic, multi-stakeholder platforms (consumers of seed, producers of seed, INGOs, government, etc.) at a country level. These stakeholders could implement holistic seed system assessments, with insight from both formal and informal markets, to inform seed-related interventions.
- Multi-stakeholder platforms can provide a central mechanism for examining seed systems and generating recommendations for different crops/seed systems that are relevant to the different stakeholders. These platforms can support the inclusion of other methods and approaches used to assess seed systems and can socialize, strengthen, and promote a wider community of practice.
- In addition to the IP socialization and training efforts recommended in this section, donors may want to fund (or co-fund with other donors and interested implementers) subject matter experts who have an in-depth understanding of seed systems to support IPs' SSSAs in high-priority countries (e.g., BHA/RFSA and IPC 3+ Countries) at a consistent frequency (e.g., every X number of years). Donors could plan to cost share and implementers could get expert assistance in developing their own SSSA capacities. These subject matter experts could also provide technical support to multi-stakeholder seed systems platforms at a country level.

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<sup>4</sup> [Minimum Technical Standards for Seed System Assessment \(SSA\) in Emergencies](#) | USAID/OFDA, SeedSystem and UN/FAO consultations



## Next Steps

Thank you to all partners and BHA staff who contributed to these consultations and discussions. SCALE will continue exploring ways to support implementing partners to better navigate and utilize SSSA tools and guidance. If you're interested in staying engaged on seed-related topics, email [scale@mercycorps.org](mailto:scale@mercycorps.org) and sign up for the [FSN newsletter](#) to stay informed of future seed-related events and resources.



## Annex A

### Approaches to inform seed-related interventions

IP consultation participants were first asked which tools or approaches they're currently using, have used, or intend to use to inform their seed-related interventions (for both BHA- and non-BHA-funded activities).

**This activity and discussion reflected that most participants are using tools other than SSSAs to inform their seed-related activities.** These tools are listed in no particular order:

- **Community Seed Systems Assessment:** to contribute to an intended community-based seed multiplication pilot. Assessment goes beyond seeds, and includes other inputs such as fertilizers, grains protectants, and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in seed systems.
- **Input Supply Assessment:** with input vendors and government stakeholders, including focus group discussion and key informant interviews (KIIs).
- **Multi-stakeholder Participatory Platform:** focused on seed certification; includes meetings with various stakeholders to understand challenges (e.g., delivery, seed access, cost, etc.) before the season, and identify potential interventions.
- **Stakeholder Discussions:** discussions with individual seed producers aimed at understanding the challenges to access markets and quality seeds, which prompt further discussions with government stakeholders and market centers to address challenges.
- **Rapid Seed Systems Security Assessment (RSSSA) Pilots:** provides more remote options because tools are usable on a phone and/or in-person; this has been particularly important to adapt to the limitations of COVID-19.
- **Digitized Seed System Security Assessment:** data collection tool digitized to allow for faster and more remote data collection, enhanced quality of data, and rapid, automated data analysis that can be integrated into M&E systems. Especially useful for emergency contexts where timely decision-making is necessary.
- **Community Pasture and Fodder Seed System Assessment:** secondary literature review/small-scale consultative case study analyzing existing fodder and pasture seed systems in preparation for pasture production and preservation activities.
- **Rapid Market Assessment** (for formal markets): prior to a market fair and voucher activity which provided food, seed and other agricultural inputs for farmers affected by flooding.
- **Seed Systems Security Assessment:** at varying scales, sometimes alongside other assessments, such as markets (e.g., to inform cash programming). Emphasis on system-level governance and strategic opportunities for the transition from humanitarian to development.
- **Tools/Assessments that incorporate aspects of SSSA:** incorporate elements of seed assessments into broader Livelihood/Market Assessments, Agricultural Questionnaire (e.g., questions related to various preferences, seed sources, availability issues, and procurement), Seasonal Food Security Assessment (e.g., questions on seed access built into national survey), etc. This is less of a systems approach.



## Challenges, gaps, and recommendations from IPs in implementing SSSAs

SCALE then asked partners about the key challenges to using SSSAs and led a brainstorming session on what is needed to address them. Participants shared their thoughts and recommendations on what can be done in the short, medium, and long term to address these challenges. In some cases, participants and SCALE facilitators were able to flag resources that already exist to help address identified gaps.

### Challenging to coordinate across multiple agencies and/or inform other stakeholders of results, as recommended by BHA

- **Short-term:** Develop a comprehensive SSSA guide or template that is acceptable across most organizations and contexts
- **Medium-term:** Multi-stakeholder platforms at a country-level that use a participatory approach at different levels of the seed system (consumers of seed, producers of seed, government, etc.) to build buy-in and enable stakeholders' input, including bringing together multiple organizations implementing seed interventions to support the whole seed system value chain, rather than continuing to operate in silos
- **Long-term:** Donors fund assessments across various countries (e.g., all FTF, BHA/RFSA, and IPC 3+ Countries) approximately every 5 years (similar to Demographic and Health Surveys, but seed systems-focused)
- **Resources that exist:** Multi-stakeholder platform used in Syria

### Limited expertise/skills/capacity of program staff and partners to complete SSSAs

- **Short-term:** Share assessment tools and a model/template SSSA report; facilitate cross-organization collaboration with experts or experienced staff who have used the tool(s)
- **Medium-term:** Basic training for program staff on seed systems as part of an assessment; build capacity and sensitize programs to information, tools, and resources; provide online (asynchronous, self-paced) training for prospective SSSA assessors that offers a review of tools and practical experience implementing tools
- **Long-term:** Programs hire subject matter experts (SMEs) who have an in-depth understanding of seed systems (e.g., knowledge of informal and formal markets, knowledge of the difference between variety and seed, etc.), and of what is required for SSSAs, to carry out SSSAs and/or donors fund SMEs to conduct SSSAs outside a single program.
- **Resources that exist:** [Seed System Security Assessment e-Course](#), however, the learning quality from the e-Course could be enhanced with a 'learning by doing' approach or mentoring program, which can strengthen the motivation of participants and build their confidence in skills.

### SSSAs are extensive, time-consuming, and require significant financial resources, particularly for emergency programs that follow a single agricultural season and/or single-year funding

- **Short-term:** Narrow sample size; modify tools or adapt minimum standards to different contexts and types of programs; allow for one organization to assess one program area
- **Medium-term:** Integrate seed assessment questions that are critical to understanding the seed system into other assessments (e.g., wider market assessment tool, initial needs assessment, etc.)
- **Long-term:** Develop Rapid SSSAs and pilot through the Food Security Cluster. Many organizations are already very interested in rapid assessments, particularly emergency

programs and disaster response practitioners who are less equipped to handle markets/systems approaches; digitize SSSA process to enhance the quality of data, and allow rapid, automated data analysis that can be integrated into M&E systems

- **Resources that exist:**
  - Digitized version of SSSA tool by Seedsystem.org
  - Rapid SSSA Methodology
  - Food Security Cluster [Minimum Technical Standards for Seed System Assessments in Emergencies](#)

Limited understanding of SSSA requirements, including criteria for when they are required, timing/sequencing of assessments (related to program cycle, funding-cycle, agricultural season), and ability/motivation to change the design based on assessment results

- **Short-term:** Clarity on when BHA requires SSSAs (e.g., programs over a certain number of years, all new programs, etc.), the frequency/timing/sequencing requirements for SSSAs, and the funding available for assessments
  - *Comment:* BHA requires assessments before programs are funded, but sometimes by the time funding arrives the season is already over. Funds are needed to conduct assessments outside of proposal processes; if SSSAs are part of the program, rather than the proposal, they would be public and could be used as a baseline for future assessments that are done by other organizations
- **Medium-term:** Increase donor flexibility to adapt programs and change activities based on assessment results

SSSAs are static (making them less useful for intertemporal comparison) and do not address root causes or shifting shocks/stresses (such as climate change and population growth)

- **Short-term:** Build more resilience-focused questions and approaches into tools or adopt a Seed Systems Resilience Assessment; then have the results validated by key stakeholders over time to ensure they remain relevant
- **Medium-term:** Prioritize developing a strong understanding of local seed systems; then the static nature of assessments is irrelevant (e.g., if you know the system, you can predict possible outcomes, and make more informed decisions)

Difficult to assess informal seed market systems (e.g., seed availability in communities) and translate them to formal market activities, so there is a bias towards formal systems

- **Short-term:** Use other tools to periodically collect seed availability and market pricing data (e.g., for inclusion in Measurement Indicators for Resilience Analysis [MIRA])
- **Long-term:** Train local partners to conduct SSSAs, including the Ministry of Agriculture, who may have a better understanding of the informal market
- **Resources that exist:** Digitized version of SSSA tool

*This brief was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the SCALE Award and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*



SCALE is an initiative funded by USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) to enhance the impact, sustainability, and scalability of BHA-funded agriculture, natural resource management and alternative livelihood activities in emergency and non-emergency contexts. SCALE is implemented by Mercy Corps in collaboration with Save the Children.