Local Governance and Informal Institutions Qualitative Monitoring Module – Brief

Background

Informal institutions—the norms, customs, and traditional organizations that shape and influence daily life—have a direct influence on development and food security outcomes. However, the inherent variability and uncertainty of informal institutions make them difficult to incorporate into theories of change or implementation plans. Furthermore, while quantitative tools can probe for the presence or participation of such informal institutions, unpacking how and the extent to which they influence food security outcomes requires qualitative inquiry.

To this end, under a grant from the Qualitative Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Program Improvement Award (QPIA), Causal Design created a qualitative monitoring module to assess the presence and role of local governance and informal institutions in communities. The Qualitative Local Governance Module is designed to uncover context-specific insights into informal actors, institutions, and local governance dynamics, including both opportunities and potential challenges. Findings from the Module's deployment can be used to inform intervention implementation, effectiveness, sustainability, and design, as well as guide future research and Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) efforts for development programming. The Module may also identify informal institutions that warrant further investigation to fully understand how they may influence anticipated program outcomes, such as customary food sharing.

The format as a qualitative module leverages the benefits and efficiency of quantitative approaches, as it can be digitized and incorporated into survey tools and softwares. It thus can be rolled out in conjunction with baseline/endline surveys or regular routine monitoring surveys, posing an economical way to reach a broad number of respondents.

This brief provides further details of the development of the Module, Causal Design's experience piloting the Module in two locations (Ethiopia and Malawi), and subsequent recommendations and lessons learned for the Module's future use.

Development of the Qualitative Local Governance Module

Causal Design developed a beta-version of the Qualitative Local Governance Module, based on an in-depth literature review and review of program documents to map the demonstrated pathways through which informal institutions and local governance have affected food security programs. The Qualitative Local Governance Module, consisting of open-ended questions with prompts to assist enumerators to capture crucial contextual details of informal institutions and local governance processes, is divided into five thematic sub-modules: 1. *Legitimacy and Credibility*; 2. *Trust and Social Capital*; 3. *Governance*; 4. *Resource/Food Sharing*; and 5. *COVID-19*. Sub-modules 3.

Governance and 4. *Food Sharing* also probes local systems of reciprocity, authority, and decision-making.

Causal Design also developed a draft *a priori* codebook to facilitate initial analysis of data collected through the Qualitative Local Governance Module, incorporating known and anticipated key topics addressed in the Module's questions. The benefits of having *a priori* codebook include saving time for analysts during the codebook design phase and ensuring that known themes of interest are captured in the analysis. However, future analysts utilizing the *a priori* codebook should view the codebook flexibly and be open to adjustments, particularly code additions, to avoid missing out on key idiosyncratic insights from their data. They should also consider how the codebook applies to their CAQDAS program of choice and make adjustments to structure and syntax as necessary.

Piloting the Qualitative Local Governance Module

The Qualitative Local Governance Module was piloted in two countries to assess its performance, strengths, and weaknesses. The Module was deployed as part of two wider quantitative surveys Causal Design was conducting in southern Malawi (for the Feed the Future Agriculture Diversification Activity) and the Amhara region in Ethiopia (for a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) to assess the suitability of integrating the module into parallel M&E survey efforts.

Enumerator training focused on a review of the Module's questions, translation, comprehension, and data collection objectives. In Ethiopia, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions which prevented Causal Design being able to conduct an in-person training, Causal Design held a remote training-of-trainers model with the data collection team supervisor, who then led a one-day training for the enumerators. For Malawi, Causal Design personnel based in Malawi conducted two separate one-day trainings in two field locations (Mulanje and Chikwawa) with enumerators. In both countries, enumerators were selected who had experience with and some skills in qualitative data collection, and efforts were made to ensure that enumeration teams consisted of both men and women (though due to availability, there were more men than women enumerators).

Pilot data collection included individual key informant interviews with 110 respondents (60 from Malawi, 50 from Ethiopia), randomly selected from the pool of survey respondents. The Qualitative Local Governance Module was digitized on SurveyCTO in Ethiopia, and CommCare in Malawi. In both countries, enumerators used phones or tablets to both deploy the tool and record responses. Audio recordings were translated into English-language transcripts for coding and analysis.

Analysis of the pilot data suggests that, while rarely conclusive, community members ascribe and expect different roles from informal/traditional and formal authorities, and that in places they interact in instrumental ways, if subtly. For example, pilot data revealed that, in both Malawi and Ethiopia, interactions between trusted individuals (chiefs) and NGOs are critical to how resources and benefits are distributed, at least as described by respondents. Chiefs are thus elevated to a critical role that serves the broader community, and any development actor should consider its relationship with local chiefs, and how their programs either promote or undercut this system.

Similarly, a range of food and resource sharing customs were reported to varying degrees across contexts. These traditions can play an important role in food security, but risks being upended, or

simply overlooked, by food security programming that envisions more technocratic fixes to food emergencies. For example, where high levels of food and resource sharing are customary, these customs may dilute the potential effects or outcomes that development programming may anticipate if targeting is concentrated on specific individuals.

Though high-level findings are evident from the pilot data, overall, the piloting exercise concludes that the Qualitative Local Governance Module alone is insufficient to fully gauge full dynamics of local governance and informal institutions, and how they might interact with development interventions. Thus, the Module is best deployed as a scoping or recurrent monitoring exercise and used to inform further qualitative inquiry (discussed further under Conclusions and Takeaways).

Lessons Learned

An examination of the primary data collected and enumerator feedback from the piloting exercise raised a number of recommendations and lessons learned for the deployment and design of the Qualitative Local Governance Module. These lessons and recommendations were subsequently incorporated into a revised version of the Qualitative Local Governance Module and analysis codebook.

Among the most prominent lessons learned, based on a range of challenges experienced, was the need for **further enumerator training** on qualitative data quality, collection, and approaches, as well as interview skills and sensitivity. Further details on the challenges and lessons learned, which also provide guidance for future deployment, included:

- **Data Quality**. In some cases, the quality of pilot data was limited, mostly due to short responses lacking sufficient detail, indicating difficulties eliciting details from respondents and interpretation challenges. Quality limitations indicated a need for extensive training, even for enumerators with some experience collecting qualitative data, particularly as many enumerators are more familiar with quantitative than qualitative approaches.

- **Responsiveness**. Enumerators reported challenges with respondents, particularly women in Ethiopia, being unwilling or unable to answer certain questions. Many respondents had never been asked "these types of questions" before, and did not feel that they had personal experience with the topics being discussed. In some cases, responsiveness was affected by sensitivities around formal authorities and interpersonal or intra-household conflict, indicating a need to modify certain questions to clarify their purpose and enhance their approachability. Difficulties with responsiveness are also linked to enumerator training and experience, particularly a discomfort with probing and follow-through on potentially sensitive topics. Enumerators recalled that recording – despite the informed consent process and an explanation of the purpose of recording (transcription accuracy) – also sometimes dissuaded more open responses, suggesting that detailed notetaking rather than recording may be more suitable.

- **Technical and logistical challenges**. The piloting exercise was also affected by a number of technical challenges using SurveyCTO and CommCare (survey programs) to record audio, and subsequent transcriptions. These experiences point to a need to carefully pilot

all data collection and data entry processes and technologies to troubleshoot potential problems before deployment in the field.

- **Survey length and approachability**. The time to complete the module ranged widely, from 15 to 40 minutes. Adding the Module to an already existing survey, in some cases, caused respondent fatigue. Enumerators reflected that the duration of the module was largely dependent on respondents' comprehension of the questions and their confidence speaking about these topics. This points to a need for piloting to ensure the Module does not cause unreasonable time demands on respondents and identify challenging questions that could be simplified to make them more approachable and comprehensible.

Conclusions and Takeaways

Casual Design's experience with developing and piloting the Qualitative Local Governance Module revealed that, though this Qualitative Local Governance Module alone is not able to paint a full picture of village local governance and informal institution and its interactions with development interventions, the Module can nonetheless prove valuable to implementers and MEAL teams. The Qualitative Local Governance Module was designed to be able to cost-effectively probe for contextual phenomena that might influence development intervention outcomes. With redeployment (possibly alongside other regular M&E data collection efforts), the Module can monitor changes over time, as well potential conflict between development interventions and local governance processes, adherence to Do No Harm principles, and progress towards greater localization and sustainability agendas.

The Qualitative Local Governance Module may also be augmented by follow-up, more rigorous qualitative inquiry into local governance and informal institutions, guided by the findings from the Module's deployment. While the Module does not, and was never intended to, supplant more in-depth, rigorous qualitative inquiry, the Qualitative Local Governance Module is a tool to cost-effectively probe for relevant, locally based phenomena (in tandem with a survey or recurrent monitoring, for example) in order to alert MEAL teams to their presence. The Qualitative Local Governance Module findings may spur either a follow-up, more in-depth, targeted inquiry, or inform evaluation questions and methods for other MEAL efforts, such as performance evaluations. Thus, overall, the piloting suggests that the Qualitative Local Governance Module is well designed to tease out local-level, contextual variables that are unlikely to be captured by livelihood and baseline/midline surveys alone. In this regard, the Qualitative Local Governance Module has demonstrated its potential to serve MEAL teams by quickly and efficiently generating a unique data set that can complement baseline metrics to realize a fuller picture of the environment in which development and food security programs are operating.

Recommendations for Deployment

- **Deployment timing and frequency**. The Qualitative Local Governance Module should be deployed with the intention of providing preliminary findings to guide future implementation and MEAL efforts, particularly follow-up in-depth qualitative inquiry around local institutions and their impact on program effectiveness. The Module may also be implemented as part of routine monitoring to provide a high-level longitudinal perspective, though the suitability of should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to assess and avoid the risk of respondent fatigue. It may be more appropriate in many cases to

include a selection of sub-modules, either based on relevance or on a rotating schedule. Alternatively, for regular surveys that are particularly lengthy, the Module deployment could be interspersed during survey data collection such that respondents do not overlap.

- **Training**. Teams deploying the Module should provide rigorous training for enumerators, given that many enumerators are likely to have more quantitative than qualitative experience, and a longer robust training could augment the utility of the Module and the data it yields. Training should detail the purpose of the research and qualitative data collection and include test interviews to troubleshoot potential issues and provide feedback (related to data quality, data entry, and technology) before data collection starts. The training period is also an opportunity to vet the contextual appropriateness of question wording and terminology, as well as any potential areas of sensitivity for which enumerators must accommodate respondents' need for reassurance of safety and anonymity.

- **Piloting**. The Module should be piloted on a small sample of field interviews to identify potential sensitivities around particular questions, translations and terminology, and potential improvements to data collection processes. In addition, piloting would serve as additional enumerator training exercise. These refinements would ensure the Module is a reasonable length, questions are comprehensible and approachable, and enumerators are sufficiently prepared.

- **Recording vs. Note-Taking**. In contexts where respondents hesitate to speak openly with audio recordings, teams deploying the Module should consider replacing recording devices with a dedicated notetaker to capture a detailed account of the interview.

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