Local Governance and Informal Institutions Qualitative Monitoring Module – Final Report

Qualitative M&E Program Improvement Award (QPIA)

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 the extent of their relevance, the mechanisms through which they influence food security outcomes, and where they matter most, requires qualitative inquiry.

In order to enable implementing partners (IPs) to assess the presence and role of informal institutions in communities, Causal Design created a Qualitative Local Governance Module to assist USAID/BHA Resilience and Food Security activity (RFSA) IP Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) teams, and Title II food security program partners, to more effectively probe for informal institutions and local governance processes, whether at baseline or as part of routine monitoring.

Food security—especially in the contexts where USAID/BHA RFSAs operate—is a function of overlapping contextual variables including "remoteness," gender norms, community participation, and local conflict dynamics.[1] In this context, "local governance" refers both to formal government institutions and "governance" as a function of local norms, perceptions of authority, and informal institutions. Taken together, these factors can and do enhance or hinder the effectiveness of well-designed, context- and complexity-aware food security interventions.

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[1] See USAID (2020). Policy and Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting For Development Food Security Activities V2.0. Washington, D.C.: The Office of Food for Peace.

The Module is designed to enable MEAL teams to identify influential, contextual factors that would otherwise have gone unobserved. By incorporating these observations into adaptive management, IPs can then deliver more effective food security programming.

The project was organized into four milestones, each of which is detailed further below:

- Phase I. Discovery
- Phase II. Piloting
- Phase III. Revisions to Finalization
- Phase IV. Knowledge Sharing and Dissemination

Project Activities

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODULE

In Phase I of the project, Causal Design produced a Module to assess the role of informal institutions and their potential to affect RFSA outcomes. Causal Design developed a beta version of the 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. Rationale and design details can be found in Milestone 1. The Module consists of mostly open-ended questions, including prompts to assist enumerators in capturing crucial contextual details. It is organized into sub-modules focused on i) *Legitimacy and Credibility*; ii)*Trust and Social Capital*; *Governance*; iv) *Resource/Food Sharing*; and v) *COVID-19*.

See Annex I for the full Qualitative Local Governance Module.

PILOTING THE MODULE

In Phase II, the Module was piloted in Malawi and Ethiopia, after which Causal Design assessed the performance of the Module through enumerator feedback and examination of collected data. Results indicate that the Module can be used to identify contextual variables unlikely to be captured by quantitative means alone. The pilot results indicate that the Module can be used to successfully identify local-level, contextual variables that are unlikely to be captured by livelihood and baseline/midline surveys alone.

In both countries, enumerators used either phones or tablets to administer survey questions and record responses. Audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English by the local data collection partners.

Ethiopia Pilot

In Ethiopia, the Module was piloted as part of baseline data collection for the BHA-funded Poverty Reduced Sustainably in an Environment of Resilient and Vibrant Economy (PReSERVE) activity implemented by Food for the Hungry. Enumerators received a nine-day training in advance of baseline data collection, with one day dedicated to the Module.

Causal Design randomly selected 25 kebeles across four woredas in the Amhara region of Ethiopia. Two households per kebele were then selected to be surveyed, for a total of 50 responses. Because of logistical and personnel constraints, Causal Design's data collection partner Frontieri conducted the Module pilot as a stand-alone exercise, separate from the concurrent baseline survey, which meant that some respondents to the Module had recently been part of the baseline survey. In response to budget constraints and to mitigate possible

respondent fatigue, Causal Design chose to administer three of the Module's five components, namely, the Legitimacy and Credibility, Trust and Social Capital, and Resource/Food Sharing sub-modules. This adaptation could be used in future contexts in which resources, including respondents' patience, are limited.

Malawi Pilot

In Malawi, respondents included in the Module pilot were beneficiaries of the USAID Feed the Future-funded Agricultural Diversification (AgDiv) activity. Enumerators were recruited from a pool of community data collection officers (CDCOs) who assist with recurring monitoring.

Respondents were evenly distributed across four districts of southern Malawi: Chikwawa, Mulanje, Nsanje, and Thyolo (for 60 total interviews), which also allowed for variation across lowland and highland communities. Two separate day-long enumerator trainings were held both to familiarize them with the tool and as a consultative process by which Causal Design sought out any necessary changes to the translation, phrasing, and other context-specific edits to the tool, which were then incorporated in Phase III.

In response to budgetary and time constraints, enumerators deployed the Trust and Social Capital sub-module and two other randomized sub-modules. This led to a total of three sub-modules per enumerator, with all five sub-modules piloted in aggregate.

Enumerator Feedback: Ethiopia

Causal Design gathered in-depth feedback from the Ethiopian enumerators on their experiences with the tool, any complications in the field related to the tool, and perceptions of respondents' experience.

The main challenge cited by the Ethiopian enumerators was that many of the respondents felt that they were insufficiently familiar with the topics of the Module's questions and were thus unable to give informed responses, even though the Module requires no specialized knowledge or experience but rather inquires as to the respondent's perceptions and personal experience. This resulted in a significant variance in the quality and length of responses.

It is more likely that the scant responses were the result of discomfort (discussed further in the following section) rather than lack of knowledge. The local data collection team lead suggested the need for greater familiarity with the Module's format and its objectives. The feedback also underscored the need to review the Module and its deployment mechanisms for any elements that may discourage frank responses.

Enumerators noted that some respondents were more comfortable answering questions with a preselected list of responses. This may be because some respondents had recently participated in the RFSA baseline survey and were familiar with that format.

Some participants struggled with question comprehension and needed further clarification or prompting from the enumerators to be able to respond. This may reflect a suboptimal sampling strategy. Given that participants were randomly sampled from the household roster, for example, some respondents included those with special needs, including elderly with hearing challenges, for instance, which created some difficulties in effective participation. Future deployments should take into account whether randomization is appropriate for a project's operating context.

Other challenges that enumerators raised were issues stemming from cultural and contextual sensitivity. For example, enumerators reported that female respondents were consistently reluctant to speak and express their opinion openly due to traditional gender roles and expectations present in local culture. All genders struggled, however, to answer questions regarding local security and conflict. The question, "*If you had a conflict with a neighbor, spouse, police…"* was cited as particularly problematic, with many participants unwilling or unable to answer due to discomfort with discussing local conflict and authorities. This points to a need to deploy the module in a manner that ensures privacy, security, and confidentiality, in addition to gender balance among enumerators.

Enumerators suggested rewording the question into a hypothetical scenario, which would enable participants to more meaningfully interact with the question. Given the sensitive political climate of Ethiopia, questions related to the local political and security apparatuses were similarly hard for participants to engage with. Respondents found such questions "frustrating," according to enumerators, and were cautious in their responses. This line of questioning caused some participants to assume that the survey was being carried out on behalf of the local government (despite sensitization and informed consent language). The request to record their responses further compounded this fear and suspicion, despite assurances of anonymity. This would indicate that, given the necessary resources, it would be more suitable in this context to have a notetaker record responses rather than an electronic device.

During debriefing, enumerators agreed that *additional training* to prepare them for the uniqueness of the PIA Module component would be *"really helpful."* Additional training would enable enumerators to gain increased familiarity with the objective of the Module, the tool and questions themselves, and accompanying prompts, as well as how to reassure and prompt participants, helping them to more meaningfully understand and engage with the module, and to provide more thorough responses.

Enumerator Feedback: Malawi

In contrast to Ethiopia, enumerators in Malawi stated that the limiting factor in eliciting thorough responses from participants was comprehension of the questions. One enumerator noted, "Explaining the questions that have not been understood has been a key factor in the success of administering this module." This feedback led to some necessary changes to the Module, detailed in the following section.

Enumerators reported that participant engagement was generally high, and most gave their responses freely and enthusiastically. As many of the respondents had grown up in the same village, it was noted that, *"They were aware of the issues and the systems in their village, hence the questions were very simple according to their knowledge and they gave honest answers."* It is unclear why this observation diverges from the Ethiopia enumerator feedback so dramatically.

Several respondents did complain, however, about having to answer additional questions after an already lengthy monthly survey. Enumerators subsequently recommended that the participants chosen for the Module be different from those interviewed for the rest of the monthly monitoring survey. This points to the need to consider, on a case-by-case basis, whether the Module should be deployed either in part or in its entirety alongside data collection processes that are particularly lengthy, or whether its deployment should be interspersed during survey data collection such that respondents do not overlap each time.

Notably, as the monthly quantitative survey does not require audio recording, being recorded was a novel experience for many of the participants. Some respondents enjoyed being recorded, as it gave them extra assurance and confidence that their responses were being accurately captured. For others, the prospect of having their answers recorded made them fearful and unable to freely express their opinion, similar to participants in Ethiopia.

Application of Results and Learning

Broadly, the most consistent challenge in both countries encountered during the Module piloting was a combination of respondents being unwilling or unable to answer some specific questions, mostly relating to sensitivities around formal authorities (police specifically), interpersonal or intra-household conflict, and enumerator discomfort with probing and follow-through. Enumerators reported that women were especially reluctant to answer questions freely (especially noted in Ethiopia), and that audio recording—despite informed consent, an explanation of its purpose (transcription accuracy) and data security measures—dissuaded more open responses. The Table below summarizes the revisions made to the Module in Phase III, based on the Phase II piloting.

Area of Focus	Recommended Revisions or Objectives
Informed Consent language	In consultation with local data collection teams, review and revise informed consent language to minimize possible discomfort.
Individual Questions	All questions were reviewed for clarity and comprehension. Specific questions were revised to reduce confusion or discomfort. Further details are provided below.
A more consistent enumerator training protocol, and guidelines.	Enumerators received qualitatively different training in Ethiopia and Malawi, with results apparent. Both sets of enumerators struggled, however, to work with respondents who were either uncomfortable or who provided surface-level or "non" answers, compromising data quality. Enumerators, somewhat as expected, were also more familiar and comfortable with survey data collection, and thus required fuller introduction and background in qualitative inquiry, its core differences with survey data, field techniques, and Module objectives.

Area of Focus	Recommended Revisions or Objectives
Data entry, data management, and cleaning	Basic guidance on how audio transcripts should be stored, transferred, and efficiently converted into transcripts.
Analysis	The pilot did not require field teams to analyze data, but the toolkit should include a breakdown of the stylized codebook, tips on quotation selection, and code application.

Table 1. Summary of Module feedback

Recommendations and Next Steps

MODULE REVISIONS
Phase II identified four areas of the Module requiring revisions, which were made as follows:

1. COVID-19 sub-module
Enumerators reflected that the participants may not fully understand the term "COVID-19." The final data overall reveals a robust response to this question, possibly reflecting the enumerator training and encouragement to work with respondents in order to clarify confusing questions.

Future use of the Module should reflect the terminology locally understood to mean "COVID-19," e.g., "*matenda a corona*" in Malawi, where the term "COVID-19" is not used or recognized. In Amharic, "ኮቪድ 19 (kovīdi 19)" is less commonly used and understood than "ኮሮና ቫይረስ (korona vayiresi).

2. References to NGOs in the Governance sub-module
Some respondents were confused on the specific people and organizations to highlight in their response. As one enumerator noted, *"That question is very confusing because people don't really know about NGOs, so it happened that they were talking about companies which are not NGOs, like Msukambizi Tea Estate."* However, the questions worked well among those who understood after being provided additional probes and information.

Future use of the Module should reflect the terminology locally understood to mean "non-governmental organization," accompanied by a brief explanation as to what is meant by this term, if needed. In the Chichewa module, for example, the term "*mabungwe*" was used, which simply means "organization," and was not specific enough for Malawian respondents, who in some cases thought this referred to private companies.

3. Trust and Social Capital sub-module
Questions asking respondents to compare a variety of sources of help (the police, NGO, or employer) caused confusion in both Ethiopia and Malawi as the listed options were not considered appropriate or relevant sources of help during a dispute or conflict.

The revised Module replaces the question *"How does this compare to asking the police, counsellor, TA, DC, NGO, or employer, for help?"* with *"How does this compare to alternative sources of help? If there are alternatives, what are they?"* This will allow the respondent to reflect on actual alternative options, rather than those presupposed, and impart these to the researcher.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS
In addition to modifications to the Module itself, the piloting phase revealed several ways in which the Module could be more effectively deployed in the future.

1. **Deployment timing and frequency**. The Module should be deployed with the intention of providing preliminary findings to guide future implementation and MEAL efforts. Deployment should be followed by in-depth qualitative inquiry to identify the role of institutions and their impact on program effectiveness. In addition, the suitability of including the full module during collection of monitoring data should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis in the interest of avoiding respondent fatigue. It may be more

appropriate in many cases to include a selection of sub-modules, whether on a rotating schedule or chosen based on their relevance, or, in the case of regular surveys that are particularly lengthy, deployment could be interspersed during survey data collection such that respondents do not overlap.

2. **Training**. Teams deploying the Module should provide rigorous training for enumerators. Training should detail the purpose of the research and qualitative data collection, as well as include test interviews and data collection exercises to troubleshoot potential issues (both related to data quality, data entry, and technology). As in the case of the Malawi pilot, 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.

3. **Piloting**. The Module should be piloted prior to integration into a project's data collection plan to identify potential sensitivities around particular questions, accuracy and appropriateness of translations and terminology, and any potential improvements to data collection processes. In addition, future deployments should take into account whether randomization is appropriate for a project's operating context.

4. **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.

Conclusion

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.

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Annex I: Qualitative Local Governance Module

Sub-module	Name	Question	Probe(s) and Follow-Ups
Legitimacy and Credibility	leg_lead	Who, or what groups, are considered the most important to the leadership and for providing for the wellbeing of your community?	a) Who are they, or how are they referred to locally? b) What makes them effective leaders?
	leg_resp	Within your community, who are the most respected individuals or entities?	a) If different than above, probe for what explains the difference b) Are any of them women? Why/Why not?
	leg_trusted	Within your community, who are the most trusted individuals or entities?	a) If different than either of the above, probe for what explains the difference
	trust_explain	What makes these people/entities so trusted and/or respected?	a) Or possibly: Where does their power or authority come from? (e.g., age, family links, wealth, jobs, traditions?) b) What duties do they perform in your community?
Trust and Social Capital	help	If you or your family is experiencing an emergency or crisis (suggest probes relevant to local context/program), whom would you turn to for help? Why would you turn to these people?	a) Probe for any unofficial, and non-uniformed authorities. b) Allow for individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations
	conflict_res	If you had a conflict (dispute) with your spouse, whom would you look to in order to help resolve such an issue?	
	conflict_res2	If you had a conflict (dispute) with a neighbor, relative, or even police, whom would you look to in order to help resolve such an issue?	
	help_explain	What makes these people/groups/entities so important in a crisis?	a) What can they do that others cannot?
	help_example		a) Explain the situation.

Sub-module	Name	Question	Probe(s) and Follow-Ups
		Can you provide an example of when someone (in your community) was helped through this system, or by this person or group?	b) What was the result?
	help_compare	How does this compare to other potential sources of help, and what might those be, if any?	
	Trust_change	Have the ways or places/people where people typically go to for help and to resolve problems changed in the last 5 or 10 years?	a) How has it changed, specifically? b) Why has it changed?
Governance	gov_decide	How are the most important decisions that affect your community made?	a) Is there a process? b) Who is involved?
	gov_influence	Do you have any influence over these decisions?	(Could be coded _yes _no) a) Who does? How? And why?
	gov_fairness	Do you consider this process fair, just, or equal?	a) Explain your answer if possible
	gov_improve	What would make it better?	
	gov_lacking	Or, Is there someone/something that should be involved, that currently is not?	a) Is this a recent change, or just the way it has worked for a long time?
	gov_relations	How do the leaders or authority figures (that you noted above) work with NGOs in your community?	a) What do they do together? b) Are relations friendly or more complicated? (How so?)
Resource/Food Sharing	food_share	If or when you lack food for your household, is there a system of sharing among neighbors, so that you can obtain enough food?	(Could be coded _yes _no)
			a) Please explain
			b) Is this a new or old system?
			c) Does this system work?

Sub-module	Name	Question	Probe(s) and Follow-Ups
	food_assist	Who or what else might you turn to for assistance with food?	a) Why would you turn to these people/places?
			b) How successful are these actors/entities at providing food-related support?
	food_NGO	How has the presence of NGOs changed how people seek assistance, if at all?	
	food_actors	Are there groups or individuals who either encourage or discourage participation in NGO activities?	(Could be coded _yes _no)
			a) How so? What do they do? Please explain or provide examples.
			b) Why do they encourage/discourage participation with NGOs? What are their motivations for doing so?
	food_decisions	When NGOs conduct activities, such as food or seed distribution or conduct trainings, provide food (or vouchers), are local leaders involved in deciding who receives goods, or who participates in activities?	(Could be coded _yes _no)
			a) If yes: How so? And based on what factors? (Use an example)
			b) If no: Why not?
	food_obstacle	Are there groups or individuals who either encourage or discourage people from accessing emergency food assistance, medical treatment, or participation in NGO activities?	(Could be coded _yes _no)
			a) How so? Please explain or provide examples.
			b) How is the participation of women affected?
Covid-19	covid_gov	How has the prominence, roles, or significance of local leaders (including	a) Were they more or less prominent/significant, for example?

Sub-module	Name	Question	Probe(s) and Follow-Ups
		elders or traditional leaders) in day-to-day affairs been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?	b) Did they let go of any previous roles, or assume additional roles, tasks or responsibilities?
	covid_help	Who or what entity has been the most helpful to your household or community during Covid-19?	a) How so? What actions did they take that were helpful?
	covid_change	What has been the biggest effect of Covid-19 on your community as a whole, and how it makes decisions, or how it operates?	a) Probe for effects on governance and local relations, versus illnesses, masks, restrictions etc.

Table 2. Qualitative Local Governance Module