

# Southern Africa Community Visioning Learning Summit

## Lessons and Recommendations from the Field | May 2023

### Overview of Event

USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) has been encouraging more deliberate community engagement within the lifecycle of its resilience food security activities (RFSAs), particularly as part of the refinement period of the Refine and Implement (R&I) model. By giving communities an opportunity to discuss their challenges and aspirations and how USAID and implementing partners (IPs) can support them to achieve their development objectives, this approach is one of the ways that BHA is advancing on the agency-wide localization and sustainability priorities. Within this community engagement process, RFSAs are moving towards a community visioning approach, which empowers community members to express their vision for the future of their community and take a lead in implementation of that vision.

In March 2023, USAID Zimbabwe, BHA Office of Technical and Program Quality (TPQ), and geographic teams, with support from the BHA-funded Program Cycle Support (PCS) Associate Award, hosted the three-day Southern Africa Community Visioning Learning Summit. The summit brought together 45 participants representing six RFSAs in four countries—Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and

Country	RFSA	Duration
Madagascar	FIOVANA	2019-2024
	Maharo	2019-2024
Malawi	Titukulane	2019-2024
Mozambique	Okhokelamo ni Solha	2022-2027
Zimbabwe	Amalima Loko	2020-2025
	Takunda	2020-2025

Zimbabwe—as well as USAID staff from corresponding Missions, the Southern Africa Regional Office, and BHA teams in Washington, DC. BHA and RFSA participants shared their experiences with community visioning, exchanged successes and challenges, and discussed key themes and questions to consider to inform the implementation of current and future RFSAs (see [agenda](#)). During a field visit on day 2 of the event, participants visited four communities

who participated in community visioning with one of the Zimbabwe RFSAs, Amalima Loko. The field visit was an opportunity to hear directly from participants about their experience with the visioning process, make observations about perceived successes and challenges with the process, and note areas for discussion and follow-up.

This brief provides a summary of the key themes discussed, lessons shared, and additional questions and considerations for moving forward with effective community visioning.

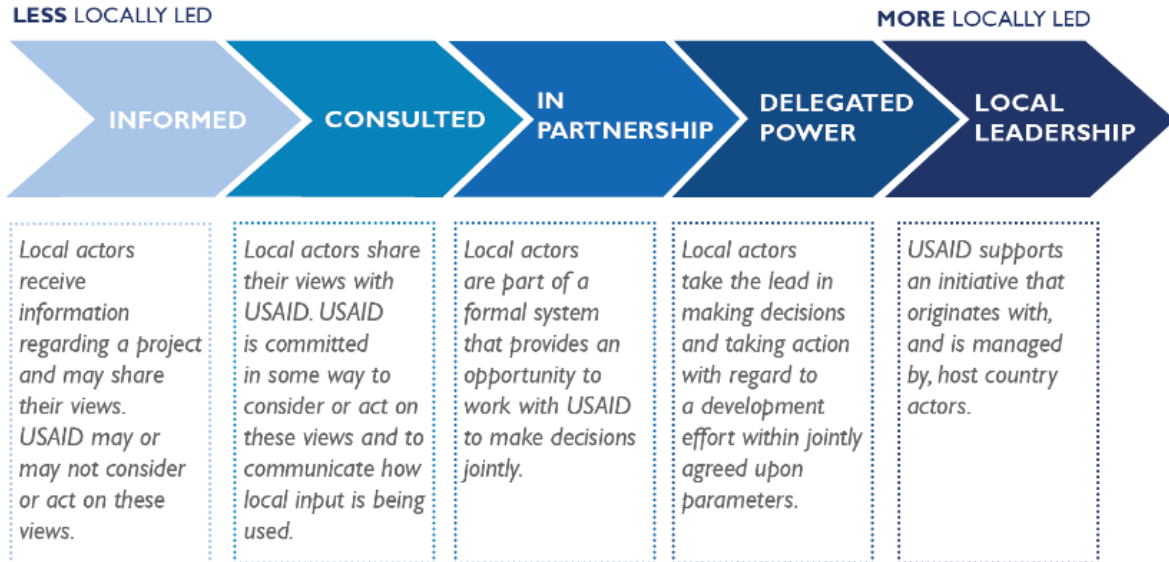
### Prioritizing Community Visioning

One objective of the Community Visioning Learning Summit was to reach a shared understanding among participants of why community visioning should be prioritized in RFSA programming. In a presentation on the Bureau’s latest thinking on the topic, BHA underscored the role of community visioning in protecting and enhancing social capital and in drawing out and building on people’s aspirations. It is a process that builds on communities’ abilities, knowledge, aspirations, and accountability and is foundational to resilience efforts and to ensuring sustainability of

*“For us to have sustained development we have to put community visioning at the top.”*

– IP Participant

development outcomes.<sup>1</sup> BHA presented the Locally Led Development Spectrum,<sup>2</sup> which categorizes different types of community engagement from less locally led—such as informing communities/providing information about a project—to more locally led—such as supporting an initiative that originates with, and is managed by, the community. Summit participants discussed where they felt their current activities were on the spectrum and agreed that they were striving to reach for more locally led activities.



It is difficult to calculate the dollar return on investment of the community visioning process; nevertheless, the community ownership and stakeholder engagement it creates is essential to the sustainability of the project's food security outcomes.

– IP Participant

Implementing partners elaborated on this effort for local leadership, explaining that to succeed in development initiatives, participating communities must be motivated to drive the processes. This requires the RFSAs to build on the existing hope, talents, and skills that community members have to lead the required processes. Participants also discussed the direct link between community visioning and the sustainability of RFSAs' intended outcomes. The momentum and social cohesion built by the community visioning process is necessary to maintain the collective action and behavior change—at individual, household, institutional, and society levels—that leads to more lasting results.

## Community Visioning Successes and Challenges

Three RFSAs—Maharo in Madagascar, and Amalima Loko and Takunda in Zimbabwe—presented successes and challenges their teams faced conducting community visioning exercises in their implementation areas. Participants also touched on examples and lessons learned during panel discussions. Further, challenges and success were observed and discussed following the field visits on day 2 of the summit.

<sup>1</sup> Rogers, Beatrice Lorge and Coates, Jennifer. 2015. [Sustaining Development: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects](#). Washington, DC: FHI 360/Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA).

<sup>2</sup> This spectrum was adapted for USAID use from Oxfam America and Save the Children's [Local Engagement Assessment Framework](#) (LEAF).

## Successes

### Trust Building

Maharo built trust by **including the whole village in the community consultation process**. They facilitated a shift in participant mindset, **empowering communities to communicate their priorities** openly and **fostering ownership over the food security activities**. Maharo focused on only a few priorities at once, recognizing that people cannot change too many elements or behaviors in their lives at one time.

### Inclusiveness

Amalima Loko and Maharo **adapted their tools for low literacy contexts** which enabled all community members to participate, helped avoid elite capture, and promoted ownership of the resulting plans by all community members.

Maharo **incorporated visioning into community celebrations** and included dancing and eating together as a way of building trust and including all.

Takunda **engaged young people** by mobilizing them through their parents, village leaders, and public youth officers, as well as meeting them where they already gather, such as shopping centers. They also highlighted the richness brought to the process by **including pensioners and retired teachers who now reside in the communities**.

### Motivation

Amalima Loko **facilitated linkages and built on existing motivation and/or resources**. For example, Amalima Loko linked a community with a partner who could support construction of a dip tank, an aspiration that was beyond the scope of the RFSA. This approach reinforced the communities' agency and served to grow their investment and motivation, contributing to the sustainability of the interventions.

Takunda **harnessed the aspirations of youth** to facilitate the design of vocational training programs. The RFSA is working closely with communities on animal health and production and multi-purpose water provision, areas that surfaced as key priorities during the visioning exercises.

## Challenges

### Varied Local Needs

Takunda shared the **highly localized** approach needed to conduct community visioning with the Apostolic sect within their participant community. This required increased time spent on community visioning and hiring staff from this group.

Maharo adapted to focus first on communities' urgent needs when a drought impacted their implementation areas in Southern Madagascar. The RFSA managed **shifts in community priorities** given an acute food security crisis.

### Community Expectations

Community visioning is forward looking and difficulties can arise when challenging vulnerable communities to **plan beyond meeting their immediate needs**. RFSAs must help participants see the value in the longer-term process and also mitigate their own expectations if a community's vision is not quite as ambitious as hoped.

On the flip side, RFSAs must, at times, help communities **balance their “ideal” visions with what is manageable and within the scope of RFSa support**.

### Knowledge Gaps

Takunda noted challenges with RFSa staff and other **stakeholders understanding the community visioning process and its impact** on development activities.

Multiple teams emphasized the need to **sensitize at all levels that this is not “business as usual”** and **ensure that staff have the skills** to carry out the process effectively.

### Monitoring & Evaluation

Collecting and analyzing information can be difficult for programs and even more so for communities. For example, farmers need **information in a language and form that is easy to use**.

How should RFSAs hold themselves **accountable to learning from the data** collected?

## Community Visioning Opportunities

Throughout the summit sessions, participants reflected on opportunities to reinforce community visioning principles. RFSa and BHA staff also brainstormed recommendations in response to key questions and challenges raised during the presentations and panel discussions. Further, each RFSa shared practical tools and techniques during a marketplace exchange session on day 3 and continued to trade ideas on implementation questions.

### Tools and Techniques

In preparation for the learning summit, PCS worked with the RFSAs to create a library of tools and resources on community visioning. During the event RFSa staff showcased these resources, including sample completed community plans; tables for data collection and action planning; local guides for doing seasonal calendaring, historical timelines, and resource mapping; and infographics and briefs summarizing individual RFSAs' community visioning processes.

Specific tools that partners shared include:

- **Community Action Cycle**: Shared by Save the Children (and implemented in the Okhokelamo ni Solha RFSa), the community action cycle approach promotes community capacity strengthening for collective action and enables communities to identify and prioritize their core issues (and



Photo Credit: Stephanie Lux

determinants) and co-create solutions centered in social and behavior change and collective action.

- **Community Visioning Exercises:** Shared by CNFA, the package contains five tools that Amalima Loko, a RFSA in Zimbabwe, used to conduct its community visioning process across its implementation areas.
- **Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis Handbook:** Shared by CARE, the handbook enables programs to develop participatory community adaptation action plans. The guidance ensures that plans are flexible and relevant and that participants—including women, men, boys and girls—own the process.

## Key Considerations and Recommendations

In the final session of the learning summit, RFSA and BHA participants worked in small groups to discuss and agree on short lists of considerations and recommendations for community visioning in response to key questions that had emerged during the previous days’ discussions.

Question	Considerations/Recommendations
<b>RFSA’s Role in Community Visioning</b>	
Should we limit community visioning to a food security vision? What is the RFSA’s role in making linkages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep the vision broad but prepare communities for the process while avoiding setting expectations.</li> <li>• The RFSA should train communities and their leaders on making linkages. It is the RFSA’s responsibility to initiate public and private linkages; it should be a facilitating platform.</li> <li>• Build on existing plans.</li> <li>• Communication to communities must be clear on the RFSA’s scope and what is feasible for the RFSA versus what may require linkages to other stakeholders.</li> </ul>
What is the RFSA’s role in guiding the community to outline the plan to achieve their vision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides the platform to share the vision and attract resources.</li> <li>• Encourages self-efficacy (reinforces motivation, pride, agency) and guides communities to do smaller, attainable actions while they plan for efforts that may take years to realize.</li> <li>• Builds community capacity, particularly around assessing and learning, and provides customized sectoral technical assistance for specific activities.</li> <li>• Cultivates community ownership of the vision and plan.</li> </ul>
In communities with higher dependency levels—potential for lost agency—what are some of the foundational interventions we need before a community is ready to have one unifying vision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with a mindset shift. It’s about motivating individuals to provide for themselves and recognize their own agency.</li> <li>• Begin by meeting basic needs first, as with the Maharo example of conducting tailored community visioning within the context of a drought.</li> <li>• Examine the community’s interpretation of policies and practices to promote mobilization and engagement. Amalima Loko used this approach effectively regarding borehole repair.</li> <li>• Engage leaders but their participation must be managed; they cannot be the facilitators but instead, part of the discussions.</li> <li>• Stress the community resource mapping exercise. In communities that have become dependent on aid, they might not be readily identifying resources available in their communities.</li> <li>• Identify the influencers, champions, and community capacities and look for complementarity in activities. Prepare champions for facilitation role.</li> </ul>

Question	Considerations/Recommendations
<b>Operationalizing and Scaling</b>	
How do we adequately staff and resource community visioning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Re)sequence staff recruitment: First hire community visioning staff with local knowledge, then the technical staff; adapt the required BHA key personnel accordingly; and ensure that interview questions include those that support the community visioning strategy.</li> <li>• Train all staff on the community visioning approach.</li> <li>• Key personnel and leadership must buy into community visioning and model the mindset shift for others.</li> <li>• Raise the profile of the following key competencies inside and outside of BHA: community visioning; gender, youth, and social dynamics; resilience; social and behavior change; collaborating, learning and adapting; and governance.</li> </ul>
How do we scale the community visioning process and include larger villages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to locate visioning within national and local institutions that will continue to support communities outside of USAID partners.</li> <li>• Scaling is dependent on the level of complexity of the process and the degree of unity or polarization in the community.</li> <li>• <i>How do you ensure inclusivity?</i></li> <li>• <i>Should all community members be able to speak to the vision with one voice?</i></li> </ul>
How do we integrate community visioning with institutions and government systems?	<p>It is highly context specific.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malawi: The elaborate government structure leads to challenges, including potential dilution of messages, ensuring that all voices are accounted for, and having a clear understanding of which structures to engage. However, the benefit is once community visioning is integrated and there is government ownership it is likely to be sustainable.</li> <li>• Madagascar: Country operates on a legacy of the French system, with a central government and decentralized local territories. There is one committee per village that represents all the sectors. The main challenge is that there is a high level of corruption and heavy administrative red tape.</li> <li>• Zimbabwe: Structures are political and assets are government-owned. There's the challenge of incentivizing government participation and government plans versus participatory plans. In this context each development partner creates a plan. There is a risk of political capture when political elites or structures are central to the development of the plans. When plans are consolidated at various level there can be loss of some prioritized components.</li> </ul>
<b>Community Visioning in the Program Lifecycle</b>	
What does community visioning look like throughout the program cycle?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and implement community-level pause and reflect sessions on a regular basis.</li> <li>• Develop and institutionalize accountability to the community and incorporate a feedback mechanism.</li> <li>• Consider the level of literacy of participants in designing interactive methods.</li> </ul>

Question	Considerations/Recommendations
<p>How do we incorporate community visioning into monitoring and evaluation systems?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners should work together with local leaders to empower them to take ownership to track activities.</li> <li>• Collecting and analyzing information can be difficult. RFSA's need to meet participants where they are and help facilitate processes in a language and mode that speaks to them.</li> <li>• RFSA's need to hold themselves accountable to use the data that is collected.</li> <li>• Explore use of the community score card approach<sup>3</sup> to allow communities to monitor progress and hold various groups and institutions accountable to achieving plans.</li> </ul>
<p>How do we sustain community visioning in the midst of shocks and stresses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build a strong disaster risk reduction plan into the development of a community's development plan.</li> <li>• Ensure inclusion of a crisis modifier into the planning.</li> <li>• Pay attention to the historical timeline and ensure plans consider similar events in the future.</li> </ul>

## Way Forward: Takeaways, Questions, and Next Steps

### Takeaways

Overall, participants were extremely satisfied with the learning summit. Everyone felt they had the opportunity to exchange promising practices, discuss challenges in the community visioning process and potential solutions, and raise questions for BHA and partners to continue to discuss as community visioning continues to be prioritized within the RFSA's implementing model. During the final workshop session, participants summarized their takeaways:



<sup>3</sup> Many of BHA's implementing partners have been using the Community Score Card approach in the health sector for decades. See for example, [CARE's CSC model](#).

## Questions

Despite the rich discussions and progress on building a shared understanding of the “why” and some of the “how” of community visioning, participants resoundingly stated they wished the summit was longer to address issues that surfaced. The key questions noted for further discussion include:

- What is the appropriate frequency of the community visioning process?
- How can we keep community visioning as a continuous process throughout the life of a program instead of it “devolving to extractive consultations”?
- What are the indicators for community visioning?
- How do we strategically/appropriately involve government, NGOs, and other stakeholders in the process?
- What do partners do when the community’s vision is outside the scope of the RFSA or is not feasible?

## Next Steps

The Southern Africa Community Visioning Learning Summit concluded with a discussion of recommendations for BHA to take the learning and guidance on community visioning forward.

- The community of practice (workshop participants) needs to further discuss and document guiding principles.
- Host discussions on how to use data collected through community visioning for adaptive management.
- How can BHA capture community plans or other information to capture quality of community visioning and examine impact after the project is closed?
- Host another learning event (beyond current community of practice) to share how community visioning is informing community change and adaptive management at both the community and RFSA level.



## Annex 1: Workshop Agenda

Monday March 27	
Time	Session
8:30-9:15	<b>Workshop opening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welcome remarks from BHA Zimbabwe</li> <li>Introductions</li> <li>Overview of Learning Summit objectives and structure</li> <li>Icebreaker</li> <li>Group expectations for summit outcomes</li> </ul>
9:15-10:00	<b>Overview of BHA's approach to community visioning</b> , and the importance to sustainability and resilience etc., with integrated Q&A from partners
10:00-10:30	<b>BREAK</b>
10:30-11:15	<b>RFSA panel discussion w/ Audience Q&amp;A</b> How do approaches to Community Visioning (CV) differ across RFSA's? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How can approaches be contextualized?</li> <li>How does community visioning link to sustainability planning?</li> </ul>
11:15-12:30	<b>Individual RFSA presentations with Q&amp;A (Takunda, Amalima Loko, Maharo)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share details on distinct approaches. Discuss when and where different approaches are most appropriate.</li> <li>Reflect on alignment of different approaches to BHA vision</li> <li>How do resource &amp; staffing requirements differ for different approaches to CV? What are the implications for the return on investment?</li> <li>Challenges with CV and how RFSA's have overcome them?</li> </ul>
12:30-1:30	<b>LUNCH</b>
1:30-2:15	<b>Mixed RFSA breakout table discussions</b>
2:15-3:00	<b>RFSA panel discussion participant Q&amp;A</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Success stories and challenges with aligning Communities' Visions to the Activity Design/Scope</li> <li>How can CV be effectively scaled?</li> <li>How should CV be incorporated into M&amp;E systems?</li> </ul>
3:00-3:30	<b>BREAK</b>
3:30-4:15	<b>Mixed RFSA breakout table discussions</b>
4:15-5:00	<b>Closing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questions and Clarifications</li> <li>Key takeaways</li> <li>Overview of field visit</li> </ul>
TUESDAY March 28	
8:00	<b>Meet at hotel</b>
	<b>Field Visit</b>
5:00	<b>Return to hotel</b>

WEDNESDAY March 29	
Time	Session
8:30-8:50	<b>Opening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome</li> <li>• Q&amp;A and address feedback</li> <li>• Temperature check</li> </ul>
8:50-10:30	<b>Field Reflections</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual field teams in breakout groups</li> <li>• Plenary consolidation of key themes</li> </ul>
10:30-11:00	<b>BREAK</b>
11:00-12:30	<b>Putting Learning Into Practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge sharing: tips, tools, and techniques</li> </ul>
12:30-1:30	<b>LUNCH</b>
1:30-3:00	<b>Putting Learning Into Practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open discussion</li> <li>• Participant priorities</li> </ul>
3:00-3:30	<b>BREAK</b>
3:30-4:30	<b>Closing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key takeaways</li> <li>• BHA next steps</li> <li>• PCS check-in on workshop expectation achievement</li> <li>• Summit evaluation</li> </ul>