



# Executive Summary

## Assessment of USAID/BHA Sustainability Guidance for Food Security Activities (2015–2021)

September  
2023

### OVERVIEW

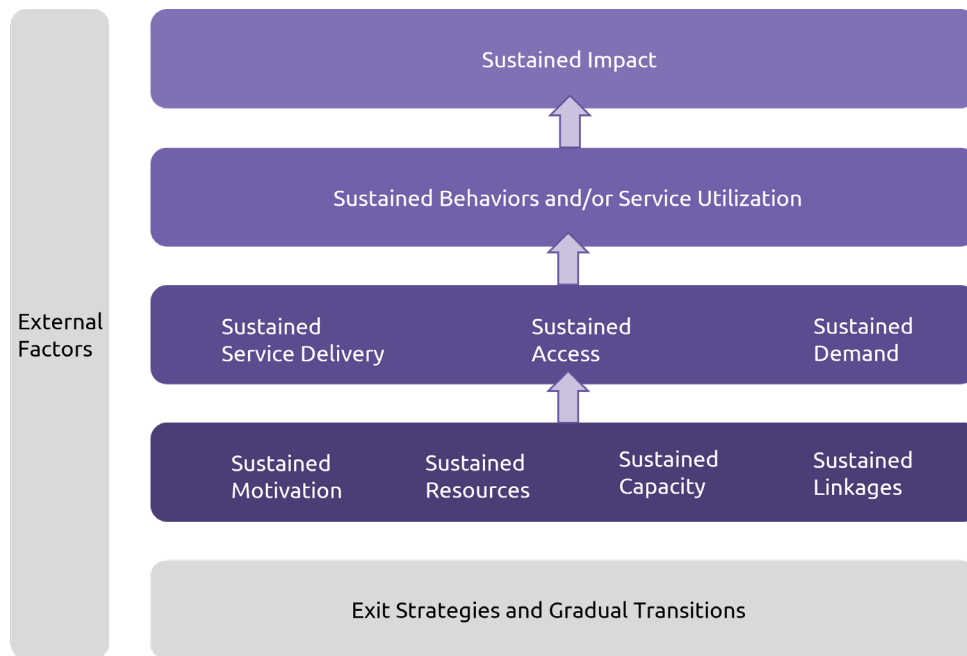
Sustainability plans and exit strategies are critical to long-term activity success. While the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) has bolstered sustainability guidance in recent years, no new studies have evaluated the clarity, comprehensiveness, and feasibility of this guidance. It's also unclear how resilience food security activities (RFSAs) have applied the latest guidance and what pitfalls they face when doing so. This brief summarizes findings from the *Assessment of USAID/BHA Sustainability Guidance for Food Security Activities (2015-2021)* report by the PAST-Forward Project at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University. This study follows up on learnings from a 2015 multi-country, multi-year study of the factors promoting sustainability post-exit, performed by Tufts University Friedman Nutrition School under the FANTA Project. Through extensive document reviews and key informant interviews (KIIs) the PAST-Forward study identified untapped opportunities to focus on sustainability and exit planning, outlining a variety of actions that BHA and RFSAs can take to enhance sustainability and exit planning and implementation.

## BACKGROUND

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)\* is committed to supporting the sustainable benefits of its investments, that is, benefits that persist once the activities themselves shut down and resources are no longer provided.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, the USAID Office for Food for Peace (FFP) supported a four-country, multi-year study of the factors promoting sustainability post exit, performed by Tufts University Friedman Nutrition School under the FANTA Project.<sup>2</sup> After closely examining 12 activities, the study team developed a conceptual framework for sustainability and exit strategies (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. Sustainability and Exit Strategies Conceptual Framework**



The Tufts/FANTA 2015 study<sup>4</sup> found that three factors—resources, capacity, and motivation—must all be in place prior to activity closure for any service or behavior to be sustained ex-post. Linkages, particularly vertical linkages, were often critical. The study also found that a gradual transition away from activity-supported toward locally implemented services or practices was also critical to achieving sustainability. It concluded that approaches should be tailored to the sector and operating context, while taking into account external factors that could affect sustainability.

USAID adopted these recommendations and, starting in 2016, began requiring implementing partners to include explicit sustainability plans in their applications for each resilience food security activity (RFSA).\*\* To support the development of these sustainability plans, BHA provided implementing partners with guidance and format instructions, substantially based on this work.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,<sup>6</sup> there has been no systematic examination of how BHA and its implementing partners perceive they have fared in translating BHA guidance into RFSA applications and activity designs, nor what types of barriers and facilitators they report in operationalizing sustainability throughout the life of their activities. The objective of this study is to assess perceptions of the clarity, comprehensiveness, and feasibility of BHA's sustainability guidance and the evolution of the guidance over time, and to generate evidence-based recommendations on how this guidance may be improved.

\* In 2020, FFP merged with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to become BHA. For simplicity, this document refers to BHA throughout  
\*\* Formerly called development food security activity (DFSA). For simplicity, this document refers to RFSA's throughout.

Key research questions include:

- How have the sustainability and exit guidance and application requirements in the requests for application (RFAs) changed since they were first implemented in 2016?
- To what extent have the sustainability and exit plans in awarded applications and post-refinement period implementation plans met the criteria for assuring sustainability? How and why did changes occur to these plans across time?
- What has been the experience of RFSAs as they seek to implement their sustainability and exit plans?
- How can BHA processes and guidance be improved to support sustainability planning and decision-making?

This study documents the evolution of BHA's guidance over time and BHA's and partners' experiences in developing and implementing sustainability plans. This systematic examination yields recommendations for continuing to integrate sustainability considerations into activity design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It is also expected to serve as a basis for future research into the effectiveness of these plans in achieving long-term sustainability, an effort requiring field assessment for some years post-exit.

The study used a mixed methods approach that began with document reviews, followed by key informant interviews (KIIs) with selected implementing partner (IP) staff and BHA staff to elucidate and expand on the findings of the document reviews.

To document the evolution of BHA guidance and awardee responses to that guidance in applications and implementation documents, the study team assessed 11 RFAs issued by BHA between 2015–2021, including any Country Specific Information (CSI) documents accompanying the relevant RFAs. Of the 28 RFSAs awarded under the 11 reviewed RFAs, 27 agreed to share their applications and implementation plans for the study team's review. Additionally, eight "external" documents referenced in RFAs and CSIs that contained sustainability plans and exit strategies or guidance were identified and reviewed in-depth.

To identify field-level challenges and opportunities in applying the BHA sustainability programming guidance to sustainability plan design and implementation, the research team conducted 23 KIIs with current and former staff from six RFSAs and technical support awardee IPs, as well as 9 with BHA current and former staff deeply familiar with RFA scoring, the procurement process, or implementation of RFSAs. The RFSAs sampled for KIIs included activities in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the PAST-Forward study found that RFA guidance and requirements for sustainability and exit planning increased over the period studied, growing more detailed, more prescriptive, and with context-specific variation across RFAs. While every RFA directed applicants to the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study<sup>7</sup> and mentioned that motivation, capacity, resources, and linkages were critical for sustainability, the RFAs did not emphasize that all the sustainability elements had to be in place at the level of individual services or behaviors for sustainability to be achieved. Most application sustainability plans mirrored the concepts suggested in their RFA but did not fully meet the criteria for assuring sustainability, because the sustainability plans did not articulate their plans to sustain motivation, capacity, resources, and linkages at the level of each individual service or behavior that was intended to be sustained. The PAST-Forward study identified untapped opportunities to focus on sustainability and exit planning, potentially modifying it in response to experience, during the refinement period (a co-creation period post-award) and beyond. A variety of recommended actions could be taken by BHA and awardees to enhance sustainability and exit planning and implementation.

## DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE RFA REVIEW

**From 2016 onward, RFAs increasingly emphasized sustainability and exit planning, reflecting BHA's learning from previous research and its growing commitment to achieving sustainable benefits.** This emphasis was reflected in the maximum scores available for sustainability-related content, the number and types of locations within the application where sustainability content was to be incorporated, and the increase in specificity required in the submissions. BHA requested sustainability plans from 2003 on, but starting in 2016, explicit sustainability and exit plans became required. BHA provided guidance as to content and awarded points for these plans when scoring applications. The maximum scores varied, but the guidance has been consistent, including (a) strategies that identify the resources, linkages, capacity, and motivation required to sustain interventions and their outcomes; and, in most cases, (b) timelines and benchmarks for transitioning from RFSA-based financing to a public or market-based service delivery system. The specificity and detail required has increased over time, with a major modification in 2019, when applicants were required to submit a tabular and narrative Sustainability Transition Plan (called Annex 18 at that time) with detailed, specific questions.

**Among the critical sustainability factors identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,<sup>8</sup> the RFAs increasingly emphasized the importance of building and maintaining capacity and establishing linkages over motivation and resources rather than underscoring the mutually reinforcing need for all four factors.** CSIs variably emphasized the sustainability factors. After the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study<sup>9</sup> was published, all the RFAs referred applicants to this document. However, the RFA text often treated the sustainability factors as separate and independent as opposed to critical and mutually reinforcing components of a sustainability plan. Beginning in 2019, RFA guidance increasingly emphasized capacity building and linkages, with limited attention to resources and motivation. Further, the RFAs and accompanying CSIs offer detailed guidance and examples to promote impact during the life of the activity but less frequently flagged specific sectors or interventions as demanding explicit sustainability consideration.

**Guidance relating to the process of exit increased substantially in the Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs, focusing on the need for gradual transitions by Year 4 of the award.** All the RFAs under study directed applicants to address activity exit and requested applicants to provide timelines and benchmarks for any interventions transitioning to market-based or public service delivery. The more recent RFAs gave greater attention to the exit process and offered more definitive timelines, including mandatory transition to local providers or actors during Year 4, with the implementing partners assuming a facilitator role in Years 4 and 5.

**In more recent RFAs, BHA discouraged certain interventions due to their perceived low likelihood of sustainability.** The RFAs released between 2015 and 2019 generally lacked warnings to applicants about specific interventions that were distinctly discouraged due to their low likelihood of sustainability, but more recent RFAs (Zimbabwe 2020, Ethiopia 2020, and Haiti 2021) specified that certain interventions were not likely to be sustainable and, thus, unlikely to be approved for funding. The RFAs did not stipulate the basis on which these interventions were identified.

**The RFAs highlighted many factors beyond those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study<sup>10</sup> while evidence for the relevance of these other factors for sustainability was not always explicit.** There was also wide diversity at the country level (even within multi-country RFAs) in the number of sustainability factors presented and the degree to which those factors reflected the specific country context (or the local context in the RFSA's zone of influence). These other sustainability factors commonly included (among others) community participation and/or ownership; layering, sequencing, and integrating; and population-wide adoption and adaptation of models. RFAs less commonly mentioned factors such as improved governance, conflict sensitivity, and trust building. One factor that appeared prominently in more recent RFAs was the recommended use of market-based and private sector approaches, indicating a shift within BHA toward promoting this model.

**The RFA guidance pertaining to the provision of free goods or resource transfers acknowledged the unique challenges these pose for sustainability.** All the RFAs under study allowed or mandated resource transfers (e.g., direct

commodity distribution or input provision and conditional or unconditional cash transfers or food vouchers), including Title II food assistance. While the RFAs universally stressed their timebound use, many specified that sustainability considerations must be incorporated for tangible resource transfers. There was some variability regarding their potential to motivate beneficiary participation or behavior change. For example, one RFA warned applicants against using “unsustainable” resource transfers as incentives, while another promoted the use of conditional resource transfers for their transformative potential.

**The RFAs inconsistently described the purpose and basis for a potential RFSA implementation extension.** Several of the RFAs described the conditions on which an IP could receive a 3–5-year implementation extension following the initial 5-year award, which may not have been entirely congruent with a focus on sustainability. In contrast, the criteria for a potential ‘sustainability extension’—during which awardees would facilitate the transition to local responsibility—were not made explicit in any of the RFAs.

**Sustainability concepts emerged in other portions of the RFAs—signifying a shift by BHA toward greater integration of sustainability considerations—offering applicants additional avenues to incorporate sustainability and exit planning into their programmatic approach.** All RFAs required an explicit sustainability plan; some also addressed sustainability concerns in other sections of the application. Five RFAs required applicants to designate key personnel whose responsibilities incorporated sustainability factors, including ones outside of those identified in the Tufts/FANTA sustainability study.<sup>11</sup> Two RFAs (Uganda 2017 and Mali 2020) stood out for directly including sustainability in the collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) sections. The Uganda RFA recommended sharing CLA results with local partners and government to ensure sustained impact while the Mali RFA requested applicants to address challenges of measuring sustainability in the activity’s conflict-affected implementation area.

## DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE APPLICATION REVIEWS AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

**Sustainability plans in the applications became increasingly detailed over time in response to the increased specificity of RFA requirements, particularly once BHA introduced Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan.** Most applications included a sustainability section that provided an orientation to the sustainability and transition approach; six applications included their sustainability plan within each Purpose. These sections typically lacked sufficient detail to evaluate the plans. Some applications also included a sustainability-focused table in the theory of change (TOC) narrative, reiterating content found elsewhere in the application. The inclusion of Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan (required in the Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs) facilitated a clearer organization of content. However, the requirement presented a heavy burden for awardees; some informants said it was premature to request remedial and contingency plans for every listed input and service at the application stage. Despite IP concerns, some BHA staff responsible for reviewing the annex suggested that the plans did not provide sufficient detail for an accurate assessment.

**Few sustainability and exit plans in awarded applications completely met the criteria for assuring sustainability, suggesting a superficial (or mis-) understanding of how factors could be combined into a successful sustainability approach.** It was rare for all four Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors to be present for every individual service or behavior intended to be sustained. As with the RFAs, the applications tended to focus on identifying capacity and linkages; motivation and resources were less frequently included. Even when the factors were ostensibly present, applications showed misunderstanding of the sustainability factors and vague presentation of the approaches. Other sustainability factors were included if mentioned in the RFA. Regardless of the year of award, few applications described the detailed timing, benchmarks, and approaches to exit and handover of responsibility.

**Many of the sustainability strategies presented in the applications were similar to those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,<sup>12</sup> but awardees evolved their approaches in response to changes in the RFAs.** Over time, applications increasingly used private-sector service models to sustain service provision in many sectors, per RFA guidance, as a means of ensuring motivation and resources, though these models were not clear on how capacity would be maintained or expanded to new service providers. In early awards, many RFSA still used volunteer-based models, especially for nutrition activities, with prestige, certification, and community feedback expected to sustain motivation; many later awards, for which the RFA discouraged the use of volunteers in place of paid staff without a critical defense for their use post-RFSA, sought to maintain volunteers' motivation through secondary income generating activities. As RFAs shifted emphasis on individual sustainability factors, applications became less clear on strategies to maintain motivation for continued services and behaviors, particularly if short-term stipends or incentives would be given and then later withdrawn at exit.

**RFSA TOCs provide an opportunity to incorporate sustainability strategies within activity design, but without clear guidance, awardees approached this variably.** As a result, sustainability logic was not consistently conveyed in the TOC, assumptions underpinning post-award sustainability remained unaddressed, and few RFSA included strategies to monitor progress towards sustainable outcomes in their M&E plan. Many TOC graphics implicitly integrated sustainability-related concepts within existing pathways by including sustainability factor keywords (i.e., linkages, capacity, motivation, resources), but these were not explicitly linked to sustainability outcomes. Six TOCs integrated the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors at limited points in existing pathways. One TOC articulated separate pathways in which post-exit sustainability itself was the outcome or goal, though the plan did not include essential sustainability factors for all the planned interventions. Many TOC narratives did include assumptions underlying sustainability activities, though most lacked evidence to support the assumptions. Plans to monitor progress toward sustainability were largely absent; key informants cited challenges related to the timing of introducing sustainability-focused M&E during the RFSA lifecycle, including late initiation of that planning and abrupt shifts in M&E focus.

**All informants understood the importance of sustainability planning from the outset of activity design, but awardees experienced challenges operationalizing the BHA guidelines and requirements at different stages of activity planning.** These challenges derive from the number and degree of details required in the applications, the separation between writing and implementing teams, and a disconnect between forms and formats required for sustainability planning in the application and at other implementation stages. Numerous awardees expressed difficulty meeting BHA's technical narrative requirements as application requirements for sustainability and exit plans and other portions of the technical narrative have grown in specificity and comprehensiveness from 2015–2021. The separation between the awardee personnel who typically lead the application preparation and those who lead the activity implementation (external consultants and/or prime awardee headquarters staff versus local staff, respectively), frequently leads to discontinuity between the sustainability and exit planning documents prepared at application and those used and/or required during implementation. A number of BHA and awardee informants raised questions about the practicality and efficiency of offering highly detailed sustainability plans at the time of application, while also acknowledging that sustainability considerations should be incorporated into activity planning from the very beginning.

**The refinement period is potentially useful for sustainability and exit planning, but its influence on the sustainability plans was not apparent in the revised activity documentation submitted at culmination.** Applications described refinement period learning activities oriented toward achieving life-of-activity outcomes, as opposed to sustainability planning. Though some RFSA proposed sustainability-centered learning activities during the refinement period, of the five post-refinement TOCs reviewed, most did not reflect substantive changes to sustainability and exit planning. But note that TOCs generally do not demonstrate sustainability and exit focus. The primary changes to RFSA TOCs following the refinement period included re-organizing impact pathways and dropping or adding outcomes or outputs, changes that were based on achieving impact in the operating context, as opposed to achieving post-award sustainability. One positive example of the use of the refinement period was an intensive community visioning process to

determine what local communities wanted to sustain and felt capable of sustaining; in this case the TOC was revised to include the addition of outcomes with key terminology related to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.

**During implementation, two prominent issues challenge the achievement of RFSA sustainability goals: the implementation timeline and the external operating environment.** Interviews with BHA and awardee stakeholders identified challenges in implementing a sustainability and exit plan within a 5-year timeframe, particularly in shock-prone contexts. The tight timeline requires initiating implementation early in the period of performance to allow time to sequence interventions, achieve impact, and hand over to local partners. The timeline affects choice of activity interventions. Uncertainty around the potential for an extension period, which some but not all RFSA have been granted, also affects choice of interventions. Concern for external shocks was reflected in RFSA documents as caveats in the assumptions built into the TOC and in the 'resilience-focused' interventions—those that plan for adapting to possible shocks and stressors—in RFSA implementation plans. Awardees voiced the need for more national level advocacy to enhance the enabling environment, and key informants suggested BHA itself could play a bigger role in such efforts.

**Despite efforts to build capacity and cohesion around sustainability and exit planning, awardee and BHA capacity gaps remain, and informants offered numerous suggestions for improvement.** Awardees requested more clarity on the level at which sustainability guidance should be applied (i.e., intervention versus intermediate outcome) and on prioritizing outcomes during sustainability transition. They also desire concrete examples, promising or problematic sustainability and transition models, and sustainability indicators, as well as tips and tools for incorporating sustainability and exit planning into the activity TOC.

**BHA informants cited the need for a more institutionalized approach to sustainability and exit, including what is included in RFAs, how applications are evaluated for their sustainability plans, and decisions about sustainability-focused extensions.** BHA presently lacks a process of continuous capacity building for reviewing RFSA sustainability and exit plans. While RFSA-related staff (in BHA and awardee organizations) should possess some capacity vis-a-vis sustainability and exit planning, some BHA informants expressed that the treatment of sustainability and exit planning as a crosscutting theme may warrant designating a sustainability focal point or advisor role within BHA or via contractual support. BHA also suggested that awardee organizations themselves should build on their extensive implementation experience to develop and systematize this expertise. Awardee informants also called for a stronger synergy between BHA's approaches to sustainability and exit planning and those of other USAID and non-USAID development activities.

**In-person workshops are perceived as being among the most useful forms of support that BHA provides, and further enhancing them can better support sustainability and exit planning.** Workshops that brought together multiple RFSA promoted the sharing of tools, promising practices, and strategies for addressing challenges and, for RFSA sharing the same country of operation, an opportunity to coordinate their approaches. Informant suggestions for how to further enhance the value of workshops for sustainability and exit planning included: (a) updating and expanding the discussion of sustainability during the inception and culmination workshops; (b) making greater use of contextual data and examples to enhance sustainability strategy discussions during workshops; (c) devoting more dedicated time to work through sustainability and exit plan assumptions during the culmination workshop; and (d) timing the sustainability-focused workshop for maximum utility.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From these findings, the PAST-Forward team makes the following recommendations for follow-up actions that BHA, IPs, and the wider humanitarian and development community can take to improve sustainability planning during RFSA application and implementation processes:

- Provide detailed guidance to address persistent gaps in applicant and awardee understanding of sustainability requirements. Explicitly state that all sustainability factors (motivation, capacity, and resources and, often, linkages) as well as a gradual exit should be considered together, and at the level of individual services and behaviors. Sustainability transition plans should be updated regularly. BHA should provide examples with the level of detail they expect to see at different stages of RFSA planning and implementation.
- Allow flexibility in the selection of sustainability strategies based on evidence of successful models in different contexts rather than explicitly suggesting, requiring, or discouraging specific approaches.
- Institutionalize the process surrounding a sustainability-focused extension period by standardizing criteria for the extension award and clarifying its purpose, in order to improve its effectiveness.
- Extend theories of change beyond impact to include sustainability thinking and ensure activity modifications (including those resulting from the refinement period and from subsequent modifications throughout the life of the activity) address implications for sustainability.
- Ensure a common and consistent understanding of sustainability concepts among both BHA and awardee staff involved in RFSA design, application scoring, and implementation, as relevant.
- Assess progress toward sustainability as part of routine monitoring, including clear benchmarks for gradual transition to local responsibility for services and behaviors.
- Encourage the sharing of best practices and lessons learned through in-person workshops and meetings to foster real-time exchange of experiences.
- Build an evidence base around sustainability strategies and models through: (a) a desk review to synthesize promising models and approaches from scientific published and grey literature across sectors and geographic settings; and (b) exploring and empirically evaluating alternative approaches in different contexts.
- Expand learning and dissemination of sustainability approaches more broadly among humanitarian and development stakeholders.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> USAID Office of Food for Peace. (2016). [2016–2025 Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy](#); USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. (2021). [Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Resilience Food Security Activities v2.0](#), May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, B. L., & Coates, J. (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>3</sup> Sustainability is “the degree to which services or processes continue once inputs (funding, materials, training, etc.) provided by the original source(s) decreases or discontinues.” from *Glossary of Evaluation Terms*. (2009). United States Agency for International Development Planning and Performance Management Unit.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> USAID Office of Food for Peace, 2016; USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers & Coates, 2015.



## ABOUT PAST-FORWARD

Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy has collaborated with the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) for nearly 20 years to provide empirical evidence and guidance on post-program sustainability. The most recent phase of this work, the PAST-Forward study, explores the extent to which this guidance has proven feasible and useful for implementing partners. PAST-Forward was funded by USAID through the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity.

## ABOUT IDEAL

IDEAL is an activity funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) that works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL addresses knowledge and capacity gaps expressed by the food and nutrition security implementing community to support them in the design and implementation of effective emergency and non-emergency food security activities.

## COVER PHOTO

Fredrik Lerneryd / Save the Children (2019).

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

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