



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

Report

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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.

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 IDEAL activity.

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Acronyms

AOR	Agreement Officer’s Representative
BHA	Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
CSI	Country Specific Information
DFSA	Development Food Security Activity
FANTA	Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project
FFP	Office of Food for Peace
IP	Implementing Partner
KII	Key Informant Interview
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OFDA	Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
PCS	Program Cycle Support
PREP	Pipeline and Resource Estimate Proposal
PSP	Private Sector Provider
RFA	Request for Application
RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
SBC	Social and Behavior Change
TOC	Theory of Change
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

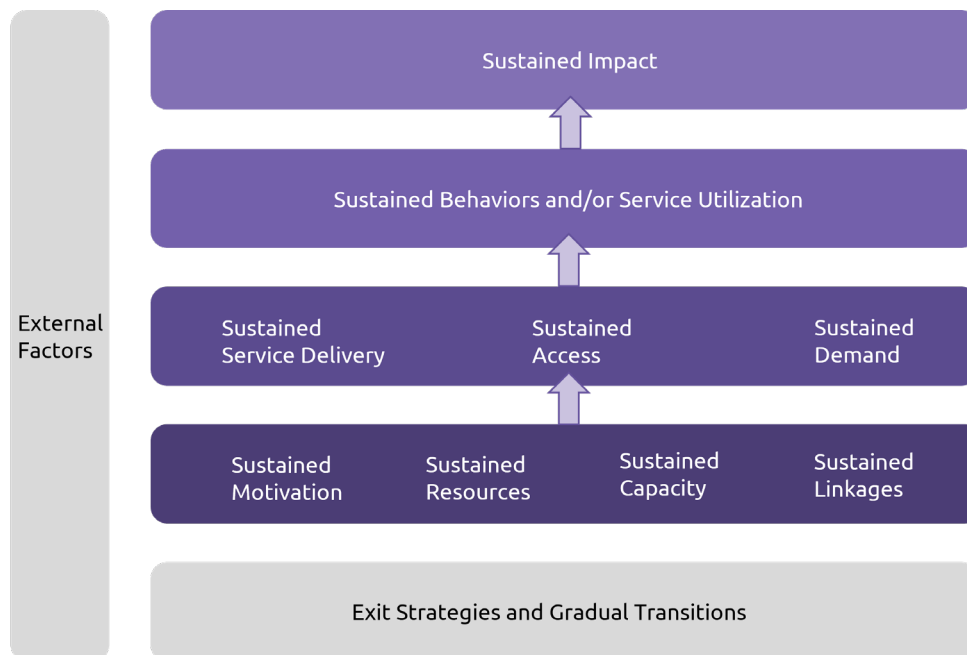
Executive Summary

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.¹

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.² After closely examining 12 activities, the study team developed a conceptual framework for sustainability and exit strategies³ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sustainability and Exit Strategies Conceptual Framework



Adapted from the Tufts/FANTA sustainability study

The Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁴ 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,

* 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.

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

² Rogers, B. I. & 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

³ 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.

⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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 (RFSAs).^{**} To support the development of these sustainability plans, BHA provided implementing partners with guidance and format instructions, substantially based on this work.⁵

Since the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁶ there has been no systematic examination of how BHA and its implementing partners perceive they have fared in translating BHA guidance into RFSAs 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. 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 RFSAAs 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 RFSAAs 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.

^{**} Formerly called development food security activity (DFSA). For simplicity, this document refers to RFSAAs throughout.

⁵ USAID Office of Food for Peace, 2016; USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, 2021.

⁶ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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 study⁷ 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 RFA-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,⁸ 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 study⁹ was published, all the RFAs referred applicants to this document. However, the RFA text often

⁷ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁸ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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 study¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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 2015 study.¹¹ 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 factors¹² 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,¹³ 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

¹¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

¹² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

¹³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

resources, though these models were not clear on how capacity would be maintained or expanded to new service providers. In early awards, many RFSAs 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 RFSAs 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 factors¹⁴ 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 RFSAs 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

¹⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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.¹⁵

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

¹⁵ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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

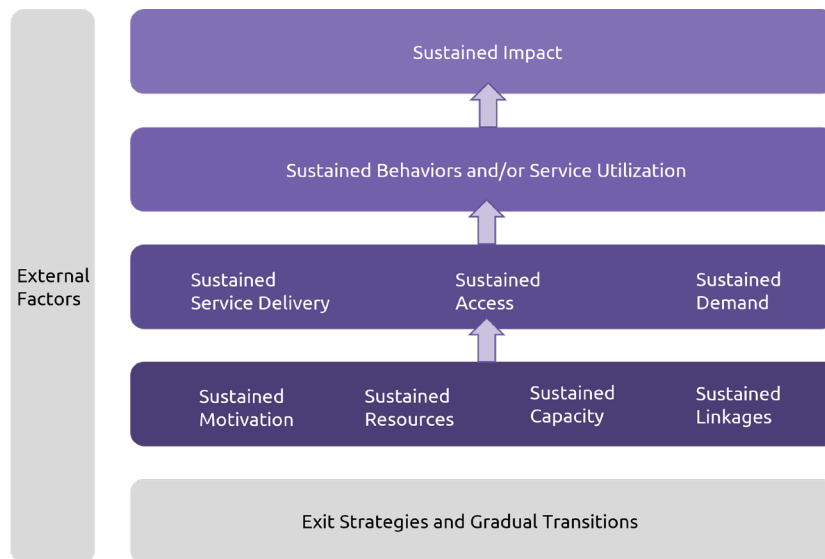
From these findings, the PAST-Forward team makes the following recommendations for follow-up actions that BHA, IPs, and the wider humanitarian and development community can take to improve sustainability planning during RFSA application and implementation processes:

- 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.

I. Background

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is committed to supporting the sustainable benefits of its investments, that is, ensuring those benefits persist after activities shut down and resource provision ends.¹⁶ As early as 2003, BHA* began requesting implementing partners (IPs) to describe their exit strategies (the plan for gradual handover that is one element of a sustainability plan) for extending the impact of their activities beyond their life cycles.¹⁷ However, a review of 64 development activities undertaken between 2002 and 2009¹⁸ found that most of these activities lacked a coherent strategy for promoting sustainability; only 34 mentioned sustainability or exit, and only two had explicit sustainability plans. To address this, BHA supported a multi-country, multi-year study of the factors promoting sustainability post exit, drawing from the experiences of 12 awards. Performed by Tufts University Friedman Nutrition School under the FANTA Project, the study¹⁹ resulted in an explicit, evidence-based framework of factors contributing to sustainability²⁰ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sustainability and Exit Strategies Conceptual Framework



Adapted from Rogers and Coates (2015).

* In 2020, the USAID Office of Food for Peace (FFP) merged with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to become BHA. For simplicity, this document refers to BHA throughout.

¹⁶ [USAID Office of Food for Peace \(FFP\) Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy, 2016–2025](#); USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. (May 2021). [Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Resilience Food Security Activities v2.0](#).

¹⁷ Rogers, B. L. & Macías, K. E. (2004). *Program Graduation and Exit Strategies: Title II Program Experiences and Related Research*. Washington D.C.: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) Project, Academy for Educational Development AED.

¹⁸ Koo, L. (2009). *Review of Exit Strategies in USAID Title II Development Food Aid Programs*. Boston: Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, unpublished paper.

¹⁹ Rogers, B. L. and 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).

²⁰ 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.

The Tufts/FANTA 2015 study²¹ 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 BHA-supported toward locally implemented activities greatly contributed to sustainability. It concluded that approaches should be tailored to the sector and operating context, both local and national, while hedging against external factors that could affect sustainability. In 2015, when the work was completed, USAID adopted these recommendations and began requiring IPs to include explicit sustainability plans in their applications in 2016. A key element of the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study²² framework was the importance of gradual transition away from award-funded implementation toward local responsibility, which has received increased emphasis over the years; in addition, evolving circumstances have underscored that sustainability plans must account for external factors, including shocks, that may threaten the sustainment of services, behaviors, and outcomes.

In 2016, along with requiring plans, BHA began providing IPs with guidance and format instructions for the design and integration of sustainability plans into development activity applications, substantially based on this work.²³ At its most basic, each Request for Application (RFA) directed applicants to identify the motivation, capacity, resources, and linkages critical to sustaining service delivery, access, and demand post-activity as well as benchmarks and timelines for transitioning activity-funded interventions to other entities. Additionally, each RFA issued by BHA since 2016 has included evaluation criteria that scored applicants' sustainability and exit plans. Sustainability plans intended to ensure—for both beneficiaries and service providers—continued service provision and uptake of practices after the phase-out of direct implementation support. The guidance, content, and format for the required sustainability plans have evolved since 2016 and differed across the 26 resilience food security activities (RFSAs)** funded through Fiscal Year 2021 and included in this study.

Since the end of the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,²⁴ a number of post-program evaluations have assessed sustained outcomes among sectors and approaches common to RFSAs.^{25, 26, 27, 28} However, there has been no systematic examination of the processes RFSAs used to design explicit sustainability activities, nor which elements of sustainability plans were ultimately included in the design. Such a systematic examination would yield valuable recommendations for continuing to strengthen guidance and implementation of sustainability principles.

** Formerly called development food security activity (DFSA). For simplicity, this document refers to RFSAs throughout.

²¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

²² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

²³ USAID Office of Food for Peace, 2016; USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, 2021.

²⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

²⁵ ECODIT LCC and Social Impact. (2018). Evaluation Report. [Ethiopia Millennium Water Alliance \(MWA-EP\) Activity Ex-Post Evaluation](#). Washington, DC: Water Communications and Knowledge Management Project, United States Agency for International Development.

²⁶ RTI International. (2019). [Millennium water and sanitation program \(PEPAM/USAID\) ex-post evaluation](#). Washington, DC: Water Communications and Knowledge Management Project, United States Agency for International Development.

²⁷ Valuing Voices. (2018). [Grape Value Chain and Food Security in Dodoma, Tanzania. Ex-post project sustainability and impact evaluation summary](#). Baltimore, MD: Lutheran World Relief.

²⁸ Valuing Voices, 2019.

Post-Award Adaptations

Following an award, there are several common, major inflection points at which sustainability and exit plans (along with other implementation plans) may be revisited and adapted.

Most RFSA awards are now structured to provide for an initial period, called the refinement period, during which interventions are often modified in response to experience on the ground. In practice, the refinement period may last beyond a full year. To date, BHA has typically introduced its expectations for sustainability and exit planning at the end of the refinement period, during the Culmination Workshop. Awardees respond with a cursory presentation of what might be necessary to sustain key outcomes, but formal, detailed modifications to the sustainability and exit plans do not occur at this point.

Another inflection point typically occurs at the mid-term evaluation, which includes an appraisal of RFSA efforts to plan and implement activity components toward sustainability. However, a 2020 review of recommendations provided across 16 mid-term evaluations from RFSA implemented between 2015 and 2020 revealed, among other things, that sustainability and exit plans were poorly understood among RFSA staff and rarely affected implementation.

Awardees summarize their sustainability plans in the annual Pipeline and Resource Estimate Proposal (PREP). The approved sustainability plans undergo a major formal review again around Year 3, although this practice has varied across awards. Most recently, sustainability-focused workshops have emerged as a way for BHA to support implementers midway through implementation.

Additionally, BHA has begun to fund 1–3-year extensions of RFSA, focusing primarily on facilitative approaches that enhance sustainability and transition, rather than direct implementation of existing or new interventions. An evaluation at the end of this extension period is expected to focus more on sustainability than impact, which is more traditionally the subject of the final evaluation at the end of Year 5.

II. Study Objectives and Questions

The objective of this study is to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the sustainability guidance provided to IPs and to generate evidence-based recommendations on how the sustainability guidance provided to RFSA applicants and implementers may be improved in terms of completeness, clarity, and feasibility. Specifically, this research explores the practicality and effectiveness of BHA's guidance by documenting awardees' experiences in developing and implementing sustainability plans. As a secondary output, the study notes specific strategy design approaches, contextual factors, and practical activity implementation elements that appear most likely to be sustained. Verifying the sustainability of these RFSAs is outside the scope of this exercise, although it would be a natural follow-on to this study. Overall, this study is intended to support BHA, IPs, and beneficiary communities in realizing lasting benefits from development initiatives, in partnership with the individuals, households, communities, socio-political entities, and other stakeholders targeted by USAID investments. Key research questions include:

- How have the RFA sustainability and exit guidance and application requirements 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 report provides a summary of the research. Section III describes the research methods used and study limitations. Section IV presents the findings from a review of USAID RFAs, including external documents to which applicants were referred. Section V presents results from the review of RFSA applications and revised activity implementation plans and synthesizes findings from key informant interviews (KIIs) with current and former implementing IP and BHA staff. This is followed by Sections VI and VII, conclusions and recommendations emerging from this work.

III. Research Methods and Study Limitations

The study used a mixed methods approach that began with document reviews, followed by KIIs with selected awardee staff and BHA staff to elucidate and expand on the findings of the document reviews. The documents reviewed included BHA RFAs, awarded applications, revised RFSA documents, and other USAID and external documents related to sustainability and exit planning. The study team triangulated these data sources to analyze how the sustainability guidance and requirements of the RFAs changed over time and how IPs responded in their applications and refined activity plans during implementation. The study protocol was approved by the Tufts University Institutional Review Board.

Document Acquisition and Screening

Requests for Application. The study team chose a 2015–2021 study timeframe to capture RFSA that were awarded following BHA’s 2016 requirement for applicants to include explicit sustainability plans in their applications, while allowing all the RFSA sufficient time to complete their refinement periods, as relevant. Although 2015 predated BHA’s detailed guidance, mandatory format, and explicit scoring for sustainability and exit planning, the study period was extended for several reasons. One particular RFA in 2015 provided some sustainability guidance based on the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study²⁹ sustainability framework, and two of the RFSA awarded in Bangladesh under that RFA subsequently piloted a BHA-developed, market-based approach to sustaining behaviors and services led by local service providers.

The study team assessed 11 RFAs issued by BHA between 2015–2021, including any Country Specific Information (CSI) documents accompanying the relevant RFAs. All these RFAs are publicly available documents. The list of RFAs reviewed and their issue dates appear in Table 1.

Table 1. RFAs reviewed and RFSA eligible for study inclusion

RFA	Issue Date	# RFSA Eligible for Study Inclusion
Bangladesh and Mali	April 2015	Bangladesh: 2
DRC, Ethiopia, and Liberia ³⁰	April 2016	DRC: 3 Ethiopia: 4
Uganda	February 2017	Uganda: 2
Uganda (Graduation Pilot)	March 2017	Uganda: 1
Niger and Burkina Faso	May 2018	Niger: 3 Burkina Faso: 1
Madagascar and Malawi	March 2019	Madagascar: 2 Malawi: 1
Kenya	April 2019	Kenya: 2
Mali	December 2019	Mali: 1
Zimbabwe	January 2020	Zimbabwe: 2
Ethiopia	July 2020	Ethiopia: 3
Haiti	April 2021	Haiti: 1

²⁹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

³⁰ No awards were issued for Liberia from this RFA.

External Documents. All RFAs and CSIs were screened for references to other “external” documents that could contain sustainability planning and exit strategies or guidance. Approximately 60 external documents were screened, including policies, guidance, strategies, evidence, other repositories, templates, reports, and influential studies, the vast majority of which were referenced in the RFAs or were references within references. The screening assessed whether the RFA/CSI mandated applicants to use the reference document and whether keyword searches (search terms include sustain, sustainability, sustained, lasting change, long-term, and resilience) returned content. Eight of these documents were eligible for in-depth review, including two sets of documents with multiple versions and three other unique documents. In fact, one of those sets included two versions that lacked any differences in their sustainability-related content, so effectively only seven documents were further analyzed. See Annex 1 for a list of reference documents reviewed.

RFSAs Application and Implementation Documents. The study team contacted the prime IP for 28 RFSAAs awarded under the 11 reviewed RFAs to request their participation and assistance in providing documentation of their successful applications and revised implementation plans, excluding budget information. To improve the consistency of the document review between RFSAAs while addressing the study questions, the review was limited to the early stages of each activity: pre-award and through the Culmination Workshop (for those that had a refinement period). All RFSAAs included in the study had at least entered their second year.

Table 2 lists the requested documentation in order of priority to answer the study questions. Some RFSAAs provided more implementation documents than the study requested, including Detailed Implementation Plans, PREPs, and various other documents from later years of the award. Because these were not systematically requested and received, these other documents were not formally reviewed.

Of the 11 IPs contacted, 10 agreed to share documents for a total of 27 RFSAAs. One IP declined due to ongoing host-country conflict. The documents received from RFSAs teams varied; some shared all earlier versions of the full technical application submitted to BHA prior to the award, while others shared only the final awarded technical application. Some of the earliest RFSAAs under study occurred before USAID instituted the Refine & Implement approach, a post-award co-creation process.

Table 2. Documents requested of RFSAs teams

Document Type	Priority Level
Final, full technical application and technical appendices, such as the theory of change (TOC) and narrative, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan, and activity learning plan, on which the award was made.	High
Revised implementation plan, including the TOC, M&E plan, activity learning plan, etc. following the refinement period (if the activity had a refinement period).	High
Earlier versions of the full technical application and technical appendices such as TOC and narrative, M&E plan, and CLA plan which were submitted to BHA, such as the initial submission, submission following co-creation (if applicable), etc.	Medium
Written questions (i.e., Issues Letters) from BHA responding to various versions of the technical application, especially those related to sustainability and exit planning.	Medium
Written answers/responses submitted to BHA in response to the Issues Letters, especially those related to sustainability and exit planning	Medium

Note: Priority level refers to the importance given to the document in our review.

Document Analysis

Using review tools containing open- and closed-ended questions and a qualitative coding framework developed for this study, the study team reviewed each RFA and the RFSAs documents awardees provided. The RFA document review assessed the sustainability and exit guidance provided in the context of the entire RFA, the sustainability plan requirements and evaluation criteria, and the extent to which the sustainability guidance was consistent with the other terms of the RFA. The RFSAs documents were assessed for the characteristics of their sustainability and exit plans:

- The extent to which they incorporated the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors³¹ and other sustainability factors, by sector, service, or behavior;
- Whether and how sustainability and exit considerations were incorporated into sections such as the M&E plan, the CLA approach, and the TOC;
- Whether BHA identified sustainability and exit planning concerns in their Issues Letters; and
- How the sustainability and exit plans changed over time prior to award and during the refinement period.

The documents were analyzed and coded into NVivo 20 (QSR International). Two members of the study team independently coded every RFA. A single reviewer coded most other documents, with a subset reviewed by two members of the study team for quality control purposes. The study team compared their review findings and NVivo coding to synthesize learning within and across RFAs and RFSAs. When codes differed substantially between study team members, they discussed these differences to align the coding. However, the study team did not force this harmonization in all cases. Rather, these differences in interpretation were reportable findings.

Key Informant Interviews

In addition to document reviews, the research team conducted KIIs with a sample of RFSAs IPs and BHA staff. The objective of these interviews was to identify field-level challenges and opportunities encountered when translating the BHA sustainability programming guidance into sustainability plans and their implementation. See Annex 2 for the interview guides for BHA and awardee staff key informants, respectively.

Awardee staff eligibility. A subset of six RFSAs were selected for in-depth analysis using KIIs. To select these six, the study team developed criteria that sought to balance the following considerations:

- Different years of implementation over the full span available, to analyze the evolution of applicants' responses to the RFA sustainability guidance and requirements over time;
- Different countries of implementation, allowing multiple country reference points;
- Multiple RFSAs from an individual RFA, to examine multiple interpretations of specific guidance;
- Historical knowledge about particular activities, such as the sustainability pilot test sites in Bangladesh;
- USAID funding focus, given that many of the awards under study were in Ethiopia, and USAID has allocated a significant amount of funding to Ethiopia as well; and

³¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

- Representation/breadth of IPs, such that selection would explore many perspectives and organizational approaches while not overburdening a particular entity.

The final set of RFSAs selected for KIIs included activities in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Among the subset of six RFSAs, the study team conducted KIIs with IP staff who planned and drafted the application submission and who participated in implementation activities, including the refinement period. Respondents included current and former international and local staff at the main awardee organization and the consortium partner organizations.

Through other awards, USAID engages other third-party awardees who provide facilitation and technical support to USAID and the RFSAs. The study team also sought their perspectives on the sustainability and exit guidance and implementation experience of RFSAs awardees.

BHA staff eligibility. The study team conducted KIIs with current and former BHA staff who were familiar with RFSAs RFA development, procurement processes, and/or provided management support or technical input to their implementation. These BHA staff were aware of or had experience with the six RFSAs selected for KIIs as well as familiar with the broader set of RFAs and RFSAs under study in the document review.

Sample Selection. To identify potential key informants from the six RFSAs and BHA, the study team asked the main points of contact at each institution to help identify a list of potential key informants that met the criteria described above. With the initial pool of potential informants, the study team contacted each potential key informant up to two times via email to invite them to complete an online form, capturing information about the informant’s RFSAs-related sustainability and exit planning and implementation experience. The purpose of the online form was to help identify which interview topics would be most relevant to each informant. Other potential key informants were identified by respondents during interviews, often in response to an interview question seeking additional potential respondents.

Among those who submitted the screening form and those who were referred by other key informants, the study team sought to conduct key informant interviews via Zoom or telephone. In total, the study team conducted 23 interviews with RFSAs implementing partner staff, and nine BHA staff (Table 3). In cases where two members facilitated the interview, one served as lead facilitator and the other as notetaker, while in cases where a single team member conducted the interview, the discussion was recorded and auto transcribed by Zoom for notetaking purposes. The study team coded and analyzed the qualitative data using NVivo 20 (QSR International) by theme.

Table 3. KII sample

	# Individuals Contacted	# Interviewed
BHA staff	15	9
Awardees	40	23

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study.

Inconsistency in documents received. All participating RFSAs provided at least one version of their application technical narrative, but the extent to which RFSAs provided additional documentation varied widely, such as the application’s supporting annexes, multiple versions of the application (earlier submissions versus the final awarded version), or refined implementation plans. Because the types of documents provided by RFSAs varied by activity, the full scope of the review conducted per activity also varied. For example, where pre-award questions and answers between USAID and applicants were provided, the study team could examine the evolution arc in the sustainability and exit plan pre-award. For the five RFSAs that provided updated TOCs following the refinement period, the study team examined how sustainability and exit content may have been modified based on local context and additional rounds of interaction between the RFSAs partners, local stakeholders, and USAID. By restricting the RFSAs document review to select pre-award and refinement period documents, any recommendations pertaining to the events or processes beyond the refinement period derive from findings from the KIIs only. At the same time, the RFSAs application documents were voluminous overall, with distinct variations in the way sustainability-related content was organized and labeled within the technical applications prepared across IPs and RFSAs. The latter is perhaps a finding in itself, but this source of variability in the sample also shaped how the document reviews themselves could be conducted to produce meaningful results across RFSAs.

Informant sample. Study resources and informant availability determined the number of key informants and the amount of time for interviews. While the initial lists of recommended informants could have exhibited some selection bias, the study team intentionally sought informant recommendations for others who could offer different perspectives. Some potential key informants were in new roles at different organizations, affecting the ability to locate them and secure their time for interviews. Others did not respond to participation requests or opted out of participation. Thus, it is possible that sample saturation was not achieved within BHA or the participating RFSAs, limiting the range of perspectives captured. The study team strived for flexibility in scheduling for all respondents, sometimes splitting discussions across multiple interviews with an individual respondent to accommodate their schedules and promote participation. Another challenge was that some respondents had experience across RFSAs, which was helpful for uncovering broad trends. However, this may have limited the study team’s ability to identify specific decision-making processes on a particular RFA or RFSAs due to conflation across activities. Recall may have been a particular issue among key informants selected for their insights into RFSAs sustainability planning and implementation for RFAs issued at the front end of the period under study (i.e., RFAs issued and RFSAs awarded from 2015 to 2018). To help ground respondents, the interview invitations provided a broad overview of the types of topics to be discussed and, in the case of specific RFSAs selected for case study, the study team sent the RFA document to respondents at the time of scheduling and encouraged them to review their historical activity documents if available to them.

IV. Summary of RFA Findings

The RFAs' increasing emphasis on sustainability and exit planning was reflected in the maximum scores available for sustainability-related content, the application locations where sustainability content was to be incorporated, and the degree of specificity required in the submissions.

All RFAs included in this study requested applicants to incorporate sustainability and exit content into their Project Description or Activity Design section. However, the earliest RFA (Bangladesh and Mali 2015) awarded no points explicitly for sustainability and exit planning. The inaugural scores for sustainability and exit planning occurred in 2016, whereby the 15 points previously allowed for Past Performance were reassigned to Sustainability and Exit Strategies (eliminating the Past Performance section), out of 100 points maximum (Table 4).

All the RFAs after 2015 contained consistent scoring guidance text related to sustainability and exit planning. In brief language that redirected applicants to earlier portions of the RFA, the scoring guidance specifically requested a strategy that identified the resources, linkages, capacity, and motivation required to sustain interventions and their outcomes post-activity. Additionally, almost all the RFAs after 2015 sought timelines and benchmarks for interventions transitioning from award-based financing to a public or market-based service delivery system. The Ethiopia 2020 RFA did not include this requirement.

From 2019 onward, most of the RFAs combined the concept of sustainability planning with institutional and local system strengthening in the scoring guidance, while varying the maximum score available for that component. Concurrently, sustainability concepts emerged in another scoring category in three of the RFAs. Within the Management and Staffing Approach section, 10 out of 30 points were designated for local engagement and capacity building activities with local civil society and private sector partners. The result of this addition was to expand the maximum points available for sustainability-related content to 25 points in these three RFAs: Madagascar and Malawi (2019), Mali (2019), and Zimbabwe (2020). While these were the points available for sustainability and exit components, the actual awarding of points requires a consensus view across many sectors. Thus, the actual scores awarded may obscure weak sustainability plans in specific sectors.

The last major modification to the submission requirements occurred in Zimbabwe (2020) and Haiti (2021). Applicants were not only expected to integrate their sustainability and exit plan into the Program Description section but were also required to submit a tabular and narrative Sustainability Transition Plan (Annex 18) with unlimited pages. The guidance for Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan directed applicants to capture outcomes intended to be sustained, inputs and services required for outcome sustainability, a sustainability approach for each outcome, challenges/risks, remedial plans, and contingency plans.

Table 4. RFA Scoring guidance related to sustainability

RFA	Issue Date	Sustainability-Related Maximum Score (out of 100)	Sustainability Score Details	Required Location of Sustainability-Related Content
Bangladesh and Mali	April 2015	None	None	Project Description
DRC, Ethiopia, and Liberia	April 2016	15	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 pts	Project Description
Uganda	February 2017	15	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 pts	Program Description
Uganda (Graduation Pilot)	March 2017	15	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 pts	Program Description
Niger and Burkina Faso	May 2018	15	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 pts out of 60 awarded for Technical Approach	Program Description
Madagascar and Malawi	March 2019	25	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 pts out of 70 awarded for Activity Design	Activity Design
			Local Capacity Engagement: 10 merit pts out of 30 awarded for Management & Staffing	Management & Staffing
Kenya	April 2019	20	Institutional and Local System Strengthening and Sustainability Strategies: 20 pts out of 75 awarded for Activity Design	Activity Design
Mali	December 2019	25	Local Systems Strengthening and Sustainability: 15 pts out of 70 awarded for Activity Design	Activity Design
			Local Partner Inclusion and Capacity Strengthening: 10 points out of 30 awarded for Adaptive Management & Staffing	Adaptive Management & Staffing
Zimbabwe	January 2020	25	Sustainability and Exit Strategies: 15 points out of 70 awarded for Activity Design	Activity Design
			Local Capacity Engagement: 10 points out of 30 awarded for Management & Staffing	Management & Staffing Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan

RFA	Issue Date	Sustainability-Related Maximum Score (out of 100)	Sustainability Score Details	Required Location of Sustainability-Related Content
Ethiopia	July 2020	10	Sustainability and Local Systems Strengthening: 10 points out of 70 awarded for Technical Approach	Activity Design
Haiti	April 2021	20	Institutional and Local Systems Strengthening, Community Engagement, and Sustainability: 20 points out of 75 awarded for Activity Design	Activity Design Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan

Over time, among the critical sustainability factors identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,³² the RFAs increasingly emphasized capacity building and linkages in contrast to motivation and resources, while the CSIs variably emphasized the sustainability factors.

After the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study³³ was published in 2015, all the RFSA RFAs consistently referred applicants to this document. Even the 2015 RFA, which predated the study, contained early study findings in the Technical References, including an articulation of the study's four sustainability factors (capacity, resources, motivation, and linkages). All the subsequent RFAs listed these factors in the main body of the text.

The RFA text often treated the sustainability factors as separate rather than mutually reinforcing components, all of which should be considered together to sustain service provision, service use, and behavior change post-activity. This was borne out in the varying degrees to which each was emphasized, as well as in the sector- and intervention-specific examples provided.

Beginning in 2019, there was a notable expansion in the RFA guidance related to capacity building and linkages, corresponding to an increased focus overall on local systems strengthening and complementarity with other actors and programs. Capacity building in the context of local system strengthening was explicitly tied to sustainability. In contrast, the RFAs' discussion of linkages and coordination often blurred the concept of linkages for impact during the life of the activity versus purposeful linkages for the maintenance of interventions and their outcomes after activity closure.

The RFA guidance on resources and motivation for sustainability was generally limited. Every RFA urged applicants to use self-financing and self-transferring interventions because of their presumed sustainability and their ability to proliferate during and after the activity. Beginning in 2019, the RFAs all contained a disclaimer in the Sustainability and Exit Strategy section pertaining to the use of volunteers and particularly the need to consider their motivation *during the activity*. In response to growing evidence, in 2020 the text was revised to indicate that any sustainability strategy that relied on volunteers post-program should be critically examined and defended in the application.

The RFAs and accompanying CSIs offer detailed guidance and numerous examples to promote good implementation for impact during the life of the activity. They less frequently flagged specific sectors or interventions as demanding special sustainability considerations. There were few examples of how

³² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

³³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors³⁴ should or could be manifested within particular sectors or interventions for the specific goal of post-RFSA continuation (Table 5). These examples often focused on the application of a single factor, as opposed to considerations and guidance combining all the factors, and they varied considerably in terms of their specificity. The DRC and Ethiopia CSIs (2016) offer the only concrete examples wherein the guidance provided sectoral- or intervention-level suggestions for all three core sustainability factors—capacity, resources, and motivation—for the purpose of continuation after the RFSA exited. The RFAs did not provide the sources for any of the examples given.

The USAID Technical References for DFSAs (2015, 2017) were also major potential sources of RFA sustainability and exit guidance, although they are not considered official guidance, and applicants are not required to use them. Both documents contained a dedicated section on sustainability, which heavily drew from the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study³⁵ and was structured along the four sustainability factors from that study (motivation, capacity, resources, and linkages). Under each sustainability factor, the Technical References listed a small set of subtopics, with links to additional studies or reports. For example, under “motivation”, the Technical References listed three subtopics—economic incentives, environment of investment not entitlement, and facilitating private sector involvement—and linked to three related reports. Each sustainability factor received equivalent emphasis in the Technical References, with a similar number of subtopics and supporting resources per factor. The most notable sustainability-related changes between the two editions (2015, 2017) were that the newest edition included links to all the USAID/FANTA-Tufts sustainability study reports (not only the synthesis) and an additional resource related to capacity.^{36, 37}

Table 5. Sector- and intervention-specific sustainability guidance

RFA	Sector/Intervention (Source)	Sustainability guidance
DRC, Ethiopia, and Liberia (2016)	Livelihoods/Agriculture (DRC CSI)	Establish linkages between researchers and farmers (Linkages)
	Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) (DRC CSI)	Use demand-driven WASH campaigns (Motivation) Develop an Operations & Maintenance plan for infrastructure (Capacity) Carefully plan cost-recovery models (Resources)
	Agriculture (Ethiopia CSI)	Push-pull market-based approach incorporating value addition, training, and linkages for resources (Motivation, Capacity, Resources, Linkages)
Madagascar and Malawi (2019)	Agriculture marketing (Madagascar CSI)	Consider effect of remoteness on sustaining market linkages (Linkages)
Ethiopia (2020)	WASH (RFA)	Make private sector linkages to support operation, repairs, technical capacity of users and government to maintain the potable water system (Linkages)

³⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

³⁵ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

³⁶ USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Food for Peace. (2015). [Technical References for FFP Development Food Security Activities](#)

³⁷ USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Food for Peace. (2017). [Technical References for FFP Development and Food Security Activities](#)

RFA	Sector/Intervention (Source)	Sustainability guidance
Haiti (2020)	Infrastructure (RFA)	Engage community capacity in infrastructure operations and maintenance after handover (Capacity)

Exit guidance increased substantially in the Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs, with a focus on gradual transitions by Year 4 of the award.

All the RFAs under study directed applicants to address the activity's exit in relation to sustainability, including the Bangladesh and Mali RFA (2015) which referred applicants to the Technical References for insights. In both editions of the Technical References (2015 and 2017), exit strategies were considered a subtopic under Resources, along with fee-for-service models, transferring functions, and self-financing mechanisms—a placement that may have implied that exit strategies were only relevant to sustained resources.

Across RFAs, applicants were consistently requested to provide timelines and benchmarks for any interventions transitioning to market-based or public service delivery. However, most of the RFAs lacked clarification about exactly when this progressive handover should occur and the expected role of the implementing partner, if any, after the handover.

The Kenya 2017 RFA emphasized planning for gradual handover and exit as an objective during implementation Years 3–5 but did not specify an exact timeline for this transition. The Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs devoted multiple paragraphs to this topic and offered more definitive timelines for the mandatory transition to local providers. The Zimbabwe RFA indicated that the transition should have been completed during Year 4 of the award, whereas the Haiti RFA aspired to transition only some interventions during Year 4, reflecting differences in the two countries' economic, governance, and stability situation and their differing challenges to achieving sustainability.

Accompanying the Year 4 transition, these two RFAs described the facilitator role that IPs could assume in Years 4 and 5. As facilitators, the IPs would no longer provide direct service implementation but could support capacity-building efforts for local providers or facilitate linkages between local actors. The concept of IPs transitioning away from direct implementation to a facilitator role during the life of the activity emerged as early as the DRC, Ethiopia, Liberia RFA (2016), specifically in the Ethiopia CSI. However, the facilitator guidance only appeared again in the Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs.

Certain interventions were specifically discouraged due to their low perceived likelihood of sustainability, particularly in the most recent RFAs.

The RFAs included in the present study and released between 2015 and 2019 generally lacked warnings to applicants about specific interventions that were distinctly discouraged due to their low likelihood of sustainability, with few exceptions. For example, the Bangladesh CSI (2015) warned against using imported, ready-to-use therapeutic foods, while the Liberia CSI (2016) advised that agricultural extension interventions supplied by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the life of the activity were typically unsustainable. The more recent RFAs and CSIs also included one-off warnings, such as the Haiti RFA 2020, which flagged traditional soil conservation activities lacking economic opportunities for rural communities as unsustainable. However, the final three RFAs under study (Zimbabwe 2020, Ethiopia 2020, and Haiti 2021) all included a call-out box detailing discouraged interventions—all unlikely to be sustained or approved for funding. Table 6 displays this list. None of the RFAs provided citations to indicate how (on what basis) these particular interventions were identified.

Table 6. Discouraged interventions unlikely to be funded by BHA for low likelihood of sustainability, by RFA

RFA	Discouraged Interventions
Zimbabwe (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weather-based index insurance Energy efficient or improved cook stoves
Ethiopia (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free or highly subsidized agricultural inputs, including seed, fertilizer, implements, tools, and animals (Zimbabwe 2020)
Haiti (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without a clear strategy for the eventual full purchase of these items by households (Ethiopia 2020 and Haiti 2021) Volunteers in place of staff as frontline change agents or animators Exclusive reliance on point-of-use water treatment for provision of safe water <p>Community-based early warning systems that rely on data collection and analysis by the communities or project staff</p>
Haiti (2021)	Keyhole or tower gardens

Applicants were directed to many other sustainability factors beyond those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,³⁸ and there was wide diversity at the country level (even within multi-country RFAs) in terms of the number of other sustainability factors presented and their degree of specificity to the country and local context.

The RFAs and their supporting CSIs contained an abundance of factors beyond those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,³⁹ that were presented as important or necessary for sustainability or long-term change. Examples of such guidance include:

- “These strategies should ensure that host country partners, the private sector, local government, and participants take ownership of their development processes to sustain the critical services and programmatic outcomes.” (Niger and Burkina Faso RFA, 2018)
- “The various participant types (e.g., extremely poor, chronically vulnerable, and vulnerable women and children) must be factored into how interventions will be designed, integrated, and sequenced to ensure full and sustainable uptake.” (Malawi and Madagascar RFA, 2019)
- “The underlying assumption for resilience within the DO1 program is that by deliberately layering, sequencing, and integrating efforts, the collective activities will produce greater and more sustainable results than any single activity could do in isolation.” (Haiti RFA, 2021)

Every RFA or CSI contained its own distinctive mix of these other sustainability factors (i.e., those not included in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁴⁰). In many cases, factors that were deemed important for sustainability in at least one RFA were described without the explicit link to sustainability in other RFAs. Table 7 contains a tally of the total number of other sustainability factors per country, calculated by summing the factors in an RFA with any unique factors listed in a relevant CSI. A cluster of RFAs issued in 2019 and 2020 contained more of these sustainability factors than did other RFAs, in addition to Liberia in 2016. In contrast, the Uganda Graduation Pilot RFA (2017) was the only RFA that lacked any other sustainability factors. This RFA was uniquely focused on testing activities as part of the “graduation into sustainable livelihoods approach”.

³⁸ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

³⁹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁴⁰ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Table 7. Total number of other sustainability factors, by country

RFA #	Issue Date	Country	# Other Sustainability Factors
1	April 2015	Bangladesh	1
		Mali	2
2	April 2016	DRC	6
		Ethiopia	1
		Liberia	8
3	February 2017	Uganda	3
4	March 2017	Uganda Graduation Pilot	0
5	May 2018	Niger	4
		Burkina Faso	4
6	March 2019	Madagascar	11
		Malawi	10
7	April 2019	Kenya	7
8	December 2019	Mali	6
9	January 2020	Zimbabwe	6
10	July 2020	Ethiopia	7
11	April 2021	Haiti	5

Notably, these other sustainability factors appeared in diverse ways in the multi-country RFAs, with wide variations among the RFAs and CSIs. For example, the Bangladesh and Mali RFA (2015) lacked other sustainability factors, while the Mali CSI contained two and the Bangladesh CSI contained its own one. The DRC, Ethiopia, and Liberia RFA (2016) detailed one sustainability factor, while the Ethiopia CSI had none. In contrast, the DRC and Liberia CSIs contained a variety of other sustainability factors, some which were present in each of the two CSIs and others that were exclusive. Beyond what was shared in their 2018 RFA, the Niger and Burkina Faso CSIs had similar content to one another. Finally, the numerous other factors for Malawi and Madagascar (2019) derived primarily from the RFA.

Several of these other sustainability factors were quite common across the documentation, although none of these factors was explicitly tied to sustainability in every country. Appearing in 10 out of 16 countries, the most frequently cited factor was community ownership of the development process or community participation, often as a prerequisite on the pathway to ownership. Wide, population-level adoption and adaptation of models, especially those that were “self-financing and self-transferring,” was cited for eight countries. Joint planning, coordination, and complementarity among different organizations, actors, and programs (which is not entirely the same as linkages in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁴¹) was a sustainability factor for seven countries. Layering, sequencing, and integrating packages of interventions, both within the RFSA interventions but also those implemented by other organizations (and therefore, overlapping somewhat with joint planning, coordination, and complementarity), was also cited for seven countries. However, the mix of seven countries was different. Finally, women’s empowerment and gender equity were listed as other sustainability factors for five countries. Table 8 displays these most frequently cited sustainability factors by country.

⁴¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Table 8. Most frequently cited other sustainability factors, by country

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Community Participation /Ownership	Wide Population-level Adoption & Adaption of Models	Joint Planning / Coordination/ Complementarity	Layering, Sequencing, Integrating	Women's Empowerment/ Gender Equity
1	2015	Bangladesh					
		Mali			X		
2	2016	DRC	X	X	X		
		Ethiopia		X			
		Liberia	X	X			X
3	2017	Uganda Karamoja					
4	2017	Uganda Graduation Pilot					
5	2018	Niger	X	X		X	
		Burkina Faso	X	X		X	
6	2019	Madagascar	X		X	X	X
		Malawi	X		X	X	X
7	2019	Kenya		X		X	
8	2019	Mali	X	X	X		
9	2020	Zimbabwe	X		X	X	X
10	2020	Ethiopia	X	X	X		
11	2021	Haiti	X			X	X

Many of the above factors may be mentioned in other RFAs besides those marked above. However, they were only listed in Table 8 if they were explicitly described as an approach to ensuring sustainability.

In addition to the frequently cited factors, there were numerous factors that appeared less frequently. Table 9 displays these less frequently cited sustainability factors by country. A generic factor, described as context-specific and tailored programming, appeared among several countries. This suggestion corresponds to learning from the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁴² about the importance of considering the local environment, as did a different factor that called for programming that anticipated and responded to shocks and stressors.

There were additional factors that were highly specific to the local context. For example, decentralization was a factor unique to Kenya (2019). The guidance for Madagascar (2019) advised that improved governance would increase sustainability in the livelihood sector, while there was no such mention of improved governance for Malawi (2019). Trust building was found in DRC and Liberia (2016), while conflict sensitivity was tied to sustainability in Ethiopia (2020). See Annex 3 for the full list of other sustainability factors by country.

One factor, market-based approaches using a private sector business model, appeared infrequently but prominently when mentioned. The guidance recommended market-based approaches for their sustainability potential in Mali (2015) and Liberia (2016). The Haiti 2020 RFA was unique for its mandate

⁴² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

(as opposed to recommendation) that applicants use private sector business models for sustainability among livelihood activities.

The Technical Reference documents also detailed numerous references related to other sustainability factors. It appears that some of the additional sustainability factors encountered in the RFAs, CSIs, and Technical References are rooted in documents that predate the BHA Strategy, while others stem from studies commissioned by BHA after the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study.⁴³ For example, the Social and Behavior Change (SBC) FANTA Study (2018) unpacks how SBC can enhance sustainability when embedded well into RFSAs.⁴⁴

Table 9. Other infrequently cited sustainability factors, by country

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Additional Sustainability Factors
1	2015	Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved governance and civil society engagement
		Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market-based approaches
2	2016	DRC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust building Learning activities and innovative approaches Transformation of the citizen-state relationship
		Ethiopia	n/a
		Liberia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust building Build on existing strengths Integrated management (within an activity and with other non-BHA programs or projects) Work within existing structures Market-based approaches
3	2017	Uganda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program learning Build on existing strengths Supporting legitimacy and accountability of government institutions
4	2017	Uganda Graduation Pilot	n/a
5	2018	Niger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population-targeted social and behavioral change strategies
		Burkina Faso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population-targeted social and behavioral change strategies
6	2019	Madagascar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved governance Context specific and tailored programming Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors Innovative approaches that engage community members Targeting of specific populations in need Selective investment in sectors/prioritized technical interventions SBC strategies

⁴³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁴⁴ Packard, M. (2018). *Report on a Review of Social and Behavior Change Methods and Approaches within Food for Peace Development Food Security Activities*. Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA)/FHI 360.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Additional Sustainability Factors
		Malawi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Context specific and tailored programming Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors Innovative approaches that engage community members Targeting of specific populations in need Selective investment in sectors/prioritized technical interventions SBC strategies
7	2019	Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align program design to local government priorities Cross-sectoral collaboration Targeting of specific populations in need Decentralization Systems-driven, shock-responsive approaches
8	2019	Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bridge humanitarian and development assistance Working with youth People-centered approaches
9	2020	Zimbabwe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Context specific and tailored programming Targeting of specific populations in need
10	2020	Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors Working with youth Conflict sensitivity Innovative approaches implemented within government framework or local systems
11	2021	Haiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Context-specific and tailored programming Private sector engagement and private sector business models

Many of the above factors may be mentioned in other RFAs not included here. However, they were only listed in Table 9 if they were explicitly described as an approach to ensuring sustainability.

The RFA guidance pertaining to the provision of free goods or resource transfers acknowledged the unique challenges these pose for sustainability.

Resource transfers (e.g., direct distribution of commodities or inputs and conditional or unconditional cash transfers or food vouchers), including Title II food assistance, were allowed or mandated by all of the RFAs under study. Due to congressional requirements, some of these funding types are inflexible regarding the types of transfers and the amounts of budgets directed to them, which can affect sustainability planning. The RFAs universally stressed their timebound use, and many specified that sustainability considerations must be incorporated for tangible resource transfers. However, some variability appeared in the RFAs vis-a-vis their potential use as a motivator for beneficiary participation or behavior change. For example, the DRC CSI (2016) advised applicants to carefully consider the use of “unsustainable” resource transfers as incentives, because once the resources transfers ceased the service delivery model would potentially lack user motivation to demand the service—one of the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁴⁵ In contrast, the Uganda Karamoja 2017 RFA promoted using resource transfers for their transformative potential, while suggesting that these should be conditional transfers (i.e., that they should be incentives for some other action). Annex 4 provides more detail on how each of the reviewed RFAs framed use of commodities.

The RFAs were inconsistent in describing the purpose and basis for a potential RFSA implementation extension.

⁴⁵ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Several of the RFAs described conditions for IPs to 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. For example, the Niger and Burkina Faso 2018 RFA indicated that extensions would be likely among exceptionally performing activities. Among the performance areas to be considered was “substantial progress in...systems to promote social accountability and sustainability”⁴⁶). This may appear to create a tension between making substantial progress toward sustainability during an initial award and being awarded a follow-on for additional direct implementation. This could potentially create a perverse incentive for IPs to achieve a certain level of progress towards sustainability or transition to be eligible for the extension while not entirely working themselves out of their jobs (though we heard no concrete evidence of this). This possible inconsistency of incentives raises broader issues of policy for both BHA and the IPs regarding the criteria for continuing to implement in a given location.

In contrast to the descriptions in some RFAs of the possibility of an implementation extension, no RFAs gave criteria for a possible sustainability extension—a period during which the awardee would facilitate gradual handover of responsibility for the services and practices promoted during the life of the activity, but without engaging in implementation of current or new interventions.

Sustainability concepts emerged in other portions of the RFAs, offering applicants additional avenues to incorporate sustainability and exit planning into their programmatic approach.

Personnel. The RFA key personnel requirements for technical specialists or leads offer another example of evolving emphasis on sustainability and exit planning requirements. 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. These included a local systems expert in Liberia 2016, a system strengthening and institutionalization lead in Kenya 2019, an SBC lead in Malawi and Madagascar 2019, a government resilience coordinator in Malawi 2019, and a community visioning lead in Zimbabwe 2020. The Haiti 2020 RFA was the only RFA that explicitly required “sustainability” staff—a resilience and sustainability senior advisor, to provide overall leadership and accountability for all aspects of the activity’s resilience and sustainability approach.

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA). Capacity building appeared in the CLA guidance of most RFAs but was rarely linked to sustainability and exit planning in this section. For CLA plans, RFAs required applicants to articulate plans for identifying community capacities, as well as the capacity gaps of local partners. The CLA plans also needed to incorporate learning activities to strengthen the capacities of partners and communities based on best practices. The Technical References (2017) suggested that these learning activities should build sustained knowledge. The Uganda 2017 RFA explicitly connected CLA and sustainability when it advised applicants to share learning with local partners and government because “learning is critical to the sustained impact of activities”.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E). RFSA applicants are required to produce an abridged version of their M&E plan, describing their monitoring approach. While the RFAs’ M&E guidance lacked reference to sustainability, one RFA (Mali 2020) specifically requested applicants to identify modalities for measuring sustainability that would be feasible in the activity’s conflict-affected implementation area.

Out of the three guidance documents reviewed, only the USAID [Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Resilience Food Security Activities](#)⁴⁷ provided concrete examples to guide applicants in leveraging M&E processes and products to mainstream sustainability planning and

⁴⁶ [Niger and Burkina Faso RFA](#), 2018, pg 50.

⁴⁷ USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance., 2021.

measurement throughout an activity's life cycle. This most recent guidance specifically addresses how applicants should embed sustainability in TOCs during the design phase, subsequently refine the TOC, and measure sustainability throughout implementation via routine program monitoring, Implementation Quality Reviews (IQR), mid-term evaluations, and final evaluations. However, there is no discussion of how to position an activity for ex post measurement. The guidance is confined to the use of qualitative methods to measure progress to sustainability. It does not include sustainability indicators or suggestions for benchmarking criteria on which to judge progress or success. Rather, it advises applicants to use custom indicators by adopting and/or adapting indicators from other U.S. government-funded programs, United Nations indicators, or from other donors or organizations.

V. Summary of Findings from RFSA Documents and Key Informant Interviews

The presentation of sustainability information in the applications reflected the RFAs' terms and guidance. The level of detail available for appraising the sustainability plans grew over time, particularly once BHA required Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan.

Awardees handled the sustainability and exit planning requirements differently across each application, in part driven by the specific requirements and guidance set forth in the RFAs and in part steered by their unique approaches to structuring their applications. Most (23 of 27) applications included a general, overarching sustainability section; some embedded an abbreviated sustainability section at the purpose, sector, or intervention level; and others offered an extensive plan in the mandatory Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan. It was possible for applications to present their sustainability plans in more than one location in the application.

The overarching sustainability section provided an orientation to the sustainability and transition approach. Ranging from a paragraph to a couple of pages in length, the overarching plans typically provided a topline characterization of sustainability strategies, often (but not always) including references to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁴⁸ However, this section typically did not provide sufficient detail to evaluate whether the plans met the criteria for assuring sustainability (i.e., whether all four of the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁴⁹ were identified for any service or behavior that was intended to be sustained and whether a plan was in place for gradual handover based on intervention-specific benchmarks and timelines). BHA issue letters that listed questions and identified issues while scoring the applications prompted a small subset of applicants to add significantly more detail to their overarching sustainability sections in a table. However, the format and content of the suggested table was left completely to the applicants. The majority of overarching sustainability sections presented strategies to sustain broad interventions, behaviors, or activity outcomes; however, only a few applications provided strategies to sustain local actors or collaborative platforms.

Three applications embedded an abbreviated sustainability section under each Purpose. Three others integrated individual components of sustainability approaches within the activity narrative. All the applications that took this approach were funded from 2018 onward. In these abbreviated sustainability plan descriptions, the level of detail often was insufficient to determine whether applicants had identified the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁵⁰ for each service or behavior to be sustained.

Additionally, some applications included a sustainability-focused table in the TOC narrative, providing awardees another opportunity to reiterate their sustainability strategy. Sometimes, this table directly mirrored the overarching section included in the technical narrative. At other times, the TOC table presented sustainability strategies for interventions within each purpose of the TOC, which more closely reflected the structure of the abbreviated sustainability plan.

The inclusion of Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan—a requirement in the Zimbabwe 2020 and Haiti 2021 RFAs—enabled the PAST-Forward team to more efficiently and thoroughly review the RFSA sustainability and exit plans. For example, apart from those 2020 and 2021 RFAs that used Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan, the majority of applications did not explicitly define specific services or

⁴⁸ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁴⁹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁵⁰ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

behaviors intended to be sustained beyond the grant cycle. This step is a necessary precursor to determine whether the sustainability plans met the criteria for sustainability (that is, whether the four sustainability factors were in place for each service or behavior intended to be sustained). In applications lacking these specifics, the PAST-Forward team inferred possible services or behaviors to be sustained based on the sustainability strategies provided.

The sustainability planning tended to be better organized in Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan. The three applications containing Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan *appeared* to have more comprehensive plans for RFSA interventions, because the content was centralized and classified into different categories of information. One application stood out for labeling its sustainability approaches according to the Tufts factors, which greatly facilitated the PAST-Forward team review. It should be noted, however, that Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan did not prompt applicants to detail the specific timing and benchmarks on which gradual transition would be based, despite being labeled as a Sustainability Transition Plan in the RFA.

At the same time, Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan presented a heavy burden for awardees at the application stage. One reason is that the RFA requested applicants identify remedial and contingency plans for every listed input and service—an issue that arose in KIIs with RFSA staff. These staff thought that the Refine and Implement approach should provide the RFSA staff with the opportunity to develop realistic alternative plans based on the actual local context and experience. RFSA staff also perceived Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan as inconsistent with other language within the same RFAs that indicated that “Applicants are requested to integrate the sustainability strategy with the technical approach instead of presenting a separate, stand-alone strategy.”

Few sustainability and exit plans in awarded applications completely met the criteria for assuring sustainability.

Rarely were all four Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁵¹ present for every individual service or behavior intended to be sustained, even among applications from 2020 and 2021 that afforded substantially more space for applicants to describe their sustainability plans. This occurred despite the BHA issue letters, containing clarifying questions developed during the application scoring, frequently citing sustainability considerations as threshold and non-threshold issues. The issues letters highlighted sustainability and exit plan issues across a spectrum, ranging from totally insufficient sustainability plans to those lacking details for sustainability of specific sectoral interventions.

Sustaining Watershed Management

Watershed management stood out for its comprehensive sustainability plans in select applications. This perhaps reflected the detailed guidance and specific focus given to the sustainability of watershed management in the accompanying RFAs.

⁵¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Social and Behavioral Change Interventions

None of the reviewed applications clearly addressed how SBC interventions would be sustained, unless SBC was a feature of an intervention for which a sustainability plan was offered (e.g., if SBC approaches were part of a Care Group approach and a detailed sustainability plan was presented for the Care Groups). Rather, the applications tended to imply that SBC interventions were inherently sustainable or would inherently lead to sustainable behavior change. The latter was particularly noteworthy because several RFAs had identified SBC as an “other sustainability factor” that applicants should consider. In the Tufts/FANTA framework, sustainable behavior change among individuals reached by the program requires continued motivation, capacity, resources and (often) linkages that should be planned for accordingly.

Applications tended to heavily focus on identifying the capacity and linkages that would help to sustain project interventions and their outcomes; motivation and resources were less frequently included although all RFAs developed market-based delivery models for at least some services whereby the motivation and resources are implicit. In many ways, this mirrored the emphasis placed in the RFAs on individual Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁵² (especially capacity and linkages), as opposed to uniformly emphasizing the importance of including all the factors. The applications’ focus on capacity and linkages also may reflect the difficulty with securing lasting motivation and resources in the RFA operational contexts, particularly in certain technical sectors (such as health) or a lack of guidance (such as documented best or promising practices) for ensuring motivation and resources.

Even when the factors were ostensibly present, a deep interrogation of the plans revealed issues such as misunderstanding the sustainability factors and vague presentation of the approaches. For example, one recent application seemed to conflate repeatedly the Resources sustainability factor with the Capacity sustainability factor. Another recent application used generic descriptions such as “build the motivation of health care providers”, without offering any details on the means and considerations for doing so.

Sometimes the applications did not clearly indicate that the purpose of the motivation, capacity, linkages, or resources was for sustainment post-exit. For example, one application described efforts to motivate service providers during the life of the activity, but nowhere did the application unpack how motivation would continue after exit to sustain service provision. This same deficit frequently arose in relation to capacity efforts, with applications lacking detail about how capacity would be maintained or scaled to new stakeholders after exit. In other cases, the PAST-Forward study team identified elements of interventions that the applicants themselves did not appear to recognize as being a component of the sustainability approach, but which were clearly related to one of the four Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁵³ and which the study team believed to potentially support sustainability.

The study team also reviewed applications for the inclusion of plans for gradual withdrawal of direct support in the activity sites. Most, but not all, applications mentioned a transition period. Regardless of the year of award, exit plans were often vague in terms of timing, benchmarks, and approaches to transition. For example, many only contained a general description of the year during which a blanket transition was expected to occur (most commonly, around Year 4), as opposed to distinguishing different timelines for different interventions. Others gave no timelines. The best exit plans identified the types of decision factors or assessments that would be used to appraise readiness for transition

⁵² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁵³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

and described the role of IPs, if any. A “facilitation” period is described in the most recently submitted applications, corresponding to guidance provided in the relevant RFAs issued in 2020 and 2021.

- Example of vague exit language: “By year 4... it will be possible to pull back most support so that platforms and participants act more autonomously, or local systems take over interventions.”
- Example of more complete exit language: “A significant feature of [RFSAs] to sustain outcomes includes a process in which support is provided to participants over a specific period, then [RFSAs] disengages from them, monitors changes that occur, and takes remedial action where necessary to ensure that outcomes are sustained. This concept of engagement-disengagement-monitoring-remedial activities will be applied to all types of participants and groups over the life of [RFSAs]...Periodic sustainability assessments will be conducted ... to determine when a group has met the threshold requiring remedial support.”

Consistent with findings from the RFA document review, the applications also contained a number of other sustainability factors beyond those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁵⁴ such as targeting; community ownership and participation; and sequencing, layering, and integrating. The presence of these other sustainability factors in the applications varied over time in tandem with the guidance provided in specific RFAs. That is, when the RFAs requested applicants to address other sustainability factors, the applicants attempted to do so by weaving these concepts into their sustainability discussions.

Many of the sustainability strategies presented in the applications were similar to those identified in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁵⁵ but awardees expanded and evolved certain sustainability approaches though they continued to wrestle with some common challenges, most notably related to sustained motivation.

Motivation. In document reviews and KIs, a variety of considerations emerged regarding sustained motivation for service provision and service use.

Applications mirrored the RFAs and other USAID guidance in their growing emphasis on private-sector service delivery models, which featured heavily in the sustainability plans across most sectors. Some activities had advanced their approaches to reinforce providers’ motivation. For example, one RFSAs worked on facilitating the organization of local service providers into professional networks to help them motivate each other and share information resources through the network. Another benefit of their organization was that the network had a greater demand power, for example to receive capacity-building services, than the providers would have as individuals.

Nevertheless, many RFSA still used volunteer-based models, especially in the health and nutrition sector. The motivation of volunteers was another area in which there appeared to be some evolution in sustainability thinking. When volunteer motivation factors were described in the early awards, applicants tended to describe motivations such as prestige, certification, and community appreciation. More recently, the RFSA explored other approaches that maintain the spirit of volunteerism for the specific RFSAs intervention but provide a secondary financial incentive. For example, one RFSAs described an approach whereby volunteer community health workers would represent pharmacies to sell basic non-prescription drugs as a source of revenue while the volunteers are in the community doing their volunteer work. Another RFSAs identified that the volunteer Mother Leaders who continued volunteering following the previous award cycle were much more likely to be leveraging their volunteer activities as a platform for other income generating activities (e.g., selling items to the

⁵⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁵⁵ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

women they interacted with when providing health and nutrition guidance as Mother Leaders). When used effectively, such an approach can also support last-mile delivery of key items to support household nutrition, healthcare, and WASH. However, rarely did sustainability plans explicitly address replenishment of volunteers (or other service providers, for that matter). They try to address the motivation of the present cohort with a focus on retention, but they rarely if ever address replacement.

A common issue that continues to emerge in the RFSA documents and in KIIs relates to building motivation for the continuation of services and behaviors following a history of using short-term stipends or incentives. For example, one application described a cohort of volunteers whose term was anticipated to last approximately 3 years, during which these volunteers would receive a stipend for the initial year. The application posited that leadership opportunities, strengthened technical skills, and “market-based” rewards would supplant the stipend as motivation. No rationale was offered for these durations, and no evidence was provided that these other factors would be sufficient to replace the motivation created by the stipend. While the application anticipated using the refinement period to better understand the motivations and inform the selection of volunteers, the application lacked a discussion of how scale-up/replacement of volunteers would occur after the initial cohort’s term ended.

Another application described how incentives would be given to service providers during the life of the award to promote their continued participation in capacity-building trainings, but the implementation plan lacked an explicit recognition that withdrawing that incentive might threaten continued motivation post-award. In other implementation plans, RFSA would provide point-in-time subsidies or matching grants for various new private sector service providers. Another example included providing childcare services to increase women’s ability to participate in livelihood-related activities. The implementation plan did not address how the childcare services would continue post-exit or how a lack of childcare post-exit might affect the engagement of future participants. This is not to suggest that these interventions lacked value or were inherently misguided, but that their inclusion warranted specific consideration for how motivation would be replaced following their withdrawal.

Differing aid organization policies for per diems and allowances for local government staff created similar issues related to the motivation of government staff, essentially creating “a false competition” that negatively affected local government’s motivation to engage with those paying lower per diem rates (or no per diems) during the award, with implications for post-award engagement. In one country, informants described challenges maintaining local government engagement in an environment where other non-USAID-funded awards offered allowances to government staff while it was impermissible for USAID-funded activities to do so. The RFSA was relying on social capital and networking opportunities to keep local government engaged to the best of its ability. RFSA located in another country had a different problem: they paid per diems to local government officials for participation in events or site visits, per local expectations, but believed they were contributing to an unsustainable model with one of their primary partners for co-creation, implementation, and handover. In both cases, interviewees requested USAID’s support in higher level advocacy to create an enabling environment responsive to the particular per diem-related issues in a given context.

Other Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁵⁶ The document review and KIIs also identified new thinking and continuing challenges regarding capacity, resources, linkages, and handover.

Capacity: RFSA frequently included capacity building interventions at individual, group, and system levels in their applications. While the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁵⁷ found that knowledge was largely

⁵⁶ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁵⁷ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

retained in the years following an activity's exit, the sustainability of these capacity-building and knowledge-sharing interventions (especially for individuals and groups) was largely unaddressed in the reviewed applications, both in terms of whether and how trainees would retain or refresh their knowledge and whether and how new cohorts would be trained in the future. In instances where the activity planned to host trainings-of-trainers or facilitate mentorship between established community groups and newer groups, the applications typically lacked considerations for motivation or resources to continue capacity-building efforts post-award. Capacity building at institutional levels received growing emphasis in the applications, mirroring the evolving RFA focus on systems strengthening and local capacity engagement. One of the most recent applications stood out for its detailed plan to prepare a major local partner to potentially lead future development activities.

“The space for sustainability discussions is with private sector and civil society and community-based organizations because we have some impact on strengthening those. It's hard to have a serious discussion on the government side because it's just an iterative new 5-year project once every 5 years since 2005. And so what does that strategy look like if we fully expect another round of (funding) after this?” - Grantee

Resources: As in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁵⁸ fee-for-service and business profit models were the approaches employed to sustain resources (as well as motivation) for service provision. One challenge that emerged in KIIs pertained to the availability of resources for government-led service provision (see text box below). Tangentially related to this—and unresolved in discussions with awardees—was how possible future cycles of RFSA funding or funding for other development initiatives in the same operational areas affected sustainability planning with respect to resources.

Sustainability Planning for Local Government Services

Sustainability planning for local government services was a particular challenge. In some cases, grantees were clear that local government motivation to support the sustainment of activities existed, but the resources to do so were not. Shifts to fee-for-service modalities were deemed problematic because users were not motivated to pay for services that the government (or others) previously provided for free. But some potential exceptions may be emerging. It may be possible to implement and sustain a previously free service successfully under a fee-for-service model if the new service is superior in quality to the previous service. One RFSA, for example, described success implementing fee-for-service desalinated water.

Linkages: Linkages featured prominently in application sustainability plans throughout the period under study. As one awardee stated, however, “Making linkages is relatively easy. Making linkages that retain their utility long term is hard.” The most comprehensive sustainability plans were those that addressed the role of various linkages, and what interventions or processes would be achieved by the linkage, as well as having given thought to what would motivate a continued linkage.

⁵⁸ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

WASH Linkages for Sustainability

The Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁶⁰ found that linkages of water committees to municipal governments were detrimental to sustainability because the local governments redirected user fees away from water source maintenance. The PAST-Forward study team identified at least one sustainability plan that included a provision to “build the linkages between community and community committees with government WASH offices at ward and district levels”, which perhaps may allow for additional study in a different operating context. Applications also described other linkages for WASH-related activities including, for example, linkages between local waterpoint service maintenance providers and parts suppliers.

Handover: While many applications described programs that began with direct delivery by grantees and then a period of disengagement followed by monitoring and targeted troubleshooting, others offered expanded thoughts on promising approaches for successful handover. One described an evolution in thinking about the extent to which grantees ever should provide direct delivery. Various applications and interviews described how handover considerations have emerged much earlier in the community engagement process, including at site selection for various interventions.

**“You’re working against yourself by introducing models delivered by staff.”
- Grantee**

RFSAs theories of change provide an opportunity to centralize sustainability strategies within activity design, but without clear guidance, awardees approached this variably. As a result, sustainability logic was not consistently conveyed, assumptions underpinning post-award sustainability remained unaddressed, and few RFSAs included strategies to monitor progress towards sustainable outcomes in their M&E plans.

In response to RFA guidance to build upon BHA’s conceptual framework in RFSAs TOCs, “sustainability” of activity outcomes featured prominently within RFSAs Goal, Purpose, and Sub-Purpose statements. Beyond these levels, however, applicants’ TOCs varied considerably in the extent to which they defined sustainability pathways and where RFSAs placed sustainability factors within TOC narratives and graphics. This suggested a lack of shared understanding of how “TOC diagrams should show not only how the Outcomes will be achieved but also how they will be sustained”.⁵⁹

The incorporation of sustainability content in the TOC graphics could be qualitatively described along three common typologies. Table 10 summarizes how frequently different approaches were used within TOC graphics.

1. Many TOC graphics implicitly integrated sustainability-related concepts within existing pathways by including keyword terminology, without specifically drawing the link to sustainability. That is, a keyword search for the sustainability factors would have flagged these cases, but nothing else in the TOC graphic or narrative explicitly spoke to these concepts being related to post-activity sustainment. Similarly, concepts such as systems-level strengthening, which was paired with sustainability and exit planning in four RFAs’ evaluation criteria, featured

⁵⁹ USAID Office of Food for Peace. (December 2016). *Policy and Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Development Food Security Activities*.

prominently in the TOCs for the RFSAs awarded under those RFAs—even if not explicitly presented as such.

Example of sustainability factor terminology used in TOCs

Application TOCs often included outputs or outcomes such as “Increased demand for and motivation to attend health care centers” or “Improved community capacity and partnerships for water point management”, without making a clear link to post-award sustainability.

2. Applicants also integrated sustainability content at limited points in existing pathways focused on reducing malnutrition. In most of the six applications that used this approach, awardees tagged outputs according to the four Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁶⁰ While the coding of sustainability-related outputs could have been bolstered by an accompanying narrative to explain the output’s role in achieving sustainable outcomes, the overall attempt to label each output according to its sustainability factor was useful for trying to understand the implementation and sustainability plan logic.

Example of integrating sustainability factor terminology within other TOC pathways

Applications used call-out boxes or color-coding for each individual output in the TOC that was considered relevant to one of the four Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁶² (capacities, resources, linkages, and motivation).

3. Another typology, used in only one application, consisted of dedicated sustainability pathways. While all reviewed TOCs clearly outlined causal pathways by which RFA interventions would achieve sub-purposes and purposes, only one TOC articulated separate, detailed pathways in which post-program sustainability was the outcome or goal and a causal pathway captured how specific interventions would connect to and support sustainability. However, even in that TOC, the plan was incomplete—missing essential sustainability factors or not articulated for all of the planned interventions to be sustained.

Example of dedicated sustainability pathways in TOCs

One application that included sustainability pathways embedded “Improved sustainability of community groups” as an outcome directly into the logic for achieving a related intermediate objective. Connected to this were other outcomes, intermediate outcomes, precondition outcomes, and preconditions from other purposes that related to various sustainability factors, including most of the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁶³ and others deemed important in the RFA (e.g., improved social cohesion, increased inclusivity, and representation, etc.).

⁶⁰ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁶¹ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁶² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Table 10. Consideration of Sustainability Concepts within Application TOCs

	Number of RFSAs
Explicit sustainability strategies	7
Dedicated sustainability pathways	1
Integration within other pathways	6
Implicit sustainability strategies only	12

TOC narratives frequently included assumptions about how sustainability activities would lead to actual sustainment of behaviors, service delivery, or uptake. Some applications referenced other programs or literature to support their assumptions. However, such evidence was the exception rather than the norm, and the PAST-Forward study team found numerous examples where it seemed unlikely that the assumptions would hold at scale. For example, one application suggested that trained farmers would share their training with others, and therefore the initial training provided by the activity would be self-sustaining—without providing any evidence or detailing a specific training approach that would support this assumption. Another application included an assumption that corruption would be addressed and controlled at all levels in order for formal institutions to apply new technical capacity and more effectively respond to future shocks and stressors. BHA staff echoed this observation that some assumptions seem more hopeful than realistic: “The assumptions that you see get put into those plans are dramatic sometimes.”

In conjunction with the detailed TOC diagram and narrative, applicants were required to include a Logframe and M&E plan overview. Suggested approaches to monitor sustainability concepts throughout the RFSAs lifecycle were largely absent in these application sections.

A few applications specified certain monitoring indicators that tied to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors,⁶³ although this was rare. Examples included:

- “Percentage of community-based organizations who have a measurable increase on an organizational capacity index” (Capacity)
- “Number of intergroup horizontal (economies of scale) and vertical (to service providers supporting collective activities and more established collectives) linkages created” (Linkages)

One of the challenges that emerged in key informant interviews related to the timing of introducing sustainability-focused M&E during the project cycle, a perspective corroborated by participant input from Program Cycle Support (PCS)-supported events. For example, one respondent suggested that planning for sustainability-focused M&E historically began too late, with little discussion about how to monitor transition benchmarks and progress towards sustainability during the core years of RFSAs implementation followed by an abrupt pivot to sustainability-focused M&E in later RFSAs stages.

Another respondent warned against a bifurcated M&E system, suggesting that M&E for sustainability could be incorporated within the M&E guidance for the entire RFSAs lifecycle, as opposed to creating, ostensibly, two parallel sets of guidance or systems.

“We should not say M&E for sustainability and M&E for DFSAs. It should be one system.”
- Grantee

All informants understood the importance of sustainability planning from the outset of activity design, but awardees experienced challenges operationalizing the BHA guidelines and

⁶³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

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 implementation teams, and a disconnect between forms and formats required for sustainability planning in the application and at other implementation stages.

Key informants from BHA and awardee organizations highlighted the importance of emphasizing sustainability planning from the initial phases of activity design and application development. Awardees acknowledged receiving consistent messaging during pre-award processes about the centrality of sustainable outcomes in potential RFSAs. Furthermore, multiple BHA informants said that including a written sustainability strategy within awards helped provide a foundation for activity accountability.

Some BHA respondents suggested that different implicit and explicit messages about sustainability and exit planning might be conveyed when looking across the RFAs. In particular, these informants were concerned by the variation in (a) other factors explicitly identified as important to the achievement of local sustainability; (b) page limit requirements for various sections including sustainability and exit content; and (c) the relative importance of sustainability and exit planning, as indicated by the differing points awarded to sustainability and exit planning and its pairing with various other evaluation criteria within the point allocation. Multiple BHA informants believed that these mixed messages probably confused awardees but suggested that sustainability and exit requirements changed as plans received in the applications did not meet BHA's expectations in some ways. Additionally, the changes reflected how each design team leads to a different RFA.

Awardee informants were not necessarily confused by the differing point allocations or the presence of other sustainability factors; they did not assign a particular meaning to those differences. Instead, numerous awardees encountered difficulties meeting the full set of BHA's technical narrative requirements, especially within the given page limitations. Awardee application development teams highlighted that BHA's requirements for sustainability and exit plans in the application, as well as other portions of the technical narrative, have grown in specificity and comprehensiveness from 2015–2021, requiring increasingly significant staffing and time investments from applicants pre-award. For instance, among the three RFSAs applications containing the (required) Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan in this study's document review, the annex averaged 27 pages in length.

In response to increasing technical narrative requirements, application developers described making numerous, necessary tradeoffs during the application development which have contributed to a more disjointed application development process involving short-term external support. BHA and awardee informants acknowledged 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 program staff, respectively. As a result, informants reported that there is often some degree of discontinuity between the sustainability and exit planning documents prepared at application and those used and/or required during implementation. Awardee informants found this dynamic challenging, especially in transitioning to the implementation team during Year 1. Furthermore, awardee respondents believed that their RFSAs implementation team was not using Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan in its entirety but had rather revised and repackaged it, in part, into various other reporting requirements arising during RFSAs implementation. These reports include formal submissions to USAID such as the post-award sustainability component of the annual PREP process, as well as the template promoted by PCS (prior to the introduction of Annex 18) to assist awardees in identifying gaps and information needs in preparation for sustainability-focused workshops. (This template was optional, but PCS observed that awardees did not consistently understand this.)

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. BHA informants expressed uncertainty around the extent to which tentative approaches embedded within applications were ultimately realized during implementation, which reportedly affected their confidence in reviewing and scoring initial sustainability strategies. In interviews, awardee application development teams understood the theoretical value of developing these highly detailed plans, but framed their approach as setting intentions and providing the foundation for significant piloting and adapting following CLA activities, refinement period activities, and community stakeholder buy-in.

The refinement period is potentially very useful for sustainability and exit planning, but its influence on the sustainability plans was not apparent in the revised RFSAs submitted at culmination.

The refinement period was seen as valuable by both awardees and BHA counterparts alike. Echoing the major features listed in BHA's *Refine and Implement Overview and FAQ*,⁶⁴ the RFSAs applications described their plans for this period, including administrative start-up (e.g., hiring and establishing internal processes); coordination and partnership building with local stakeholders and community leaders; and learning activities.⁶⁵ Among these, the learning activities and community engagement/stakeholder partnership components had potential relevance for sustainability and exit planning, but sustainability planning was not their emphasis in the applications.

Primarily, the applications described refinement period learning activities that were oriented around how to contextualize interventions to achieve life-of-activity outcomes, often through tailoring interventions to local contexts. Awardee KIs emphasized the importance of conducting localized research (i.e., at the community or sub-group level) to adjust assumptions and refine aspects of project design from the application stage. In interviews, awardee stakeholders indicated that some sustainability-relevant findings might emerge in such cases, but sustainability was not necessarily the learning focus.

Some RFSAs proposed sustainability-centered learning activities during the refinement period. For example, one application planned for a sustainability analysis during the third quarter of the refinement period year as a follow-up to preliminary analysis conducted for application design purposes. Other proposed learning activities were aimed to support sector-specific sustainability strategies, such as the determinants of sustainability (e.g., willingness to pay) for WASH services or pilots of local service provider models with fee-for-service and/or income-generating activity self-financing mechanisms. Examples of sustainability-related learning topics are below; however, note that examples have been drawn from multiple RFSAs applications, and rarely did one RFSAs application contain a variety of learning activities to capture the multi-dimensional nature of sustainability planning.

- Organizational capacity, including capacity building needs assessments for local service providers
- Levels of community health worker remuneration and incentives within a wider health system review
- Motivation factors at individual, group, and organizational levels, to encourage participation in the first place but also to sustain participation over time

⁶⁴ Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. (2017). *Refine and Implement Overview and FAQ*.

⁶⁵ The *Refine and Implement Overview and FAQ* (2017) discouraged substantial implementation prior to the end of the refinement period. A more recent version, released in February 2022, requests awardees to commence implementation of proven, contextualized interventions during the refinement period.

- Feasibility of users to pay for specific services via something other than cash (e.g., in-kind goods, volunteer labor)
- Additional predictors of sustainability

Many other activities broadly applicable to sustainability and exit planning served as a bridge between contextualization and refinement of the planned interventions and their preliminary implementation. Some were explicitly described in the applications and others implicit or mentioned by awardee KIs. Example activities included:

- Retrospective review of earlier activity phases to assess the functionality of groups (e.g., village savings and loan associations, care groups, water management committees) and, crucially, to understand the reasons why some groups remained operational while others did not.
- Environmental scans/mapping of local service providers, groups, and organizations present in the community.
- Identification and formalization of partnerships with potential handover partners/local service providers considered to be more effective.
- Coordination with other partners to minimize duplication and reduce intervention list.
- Community stakeholder consultations and “community visioning” to garner community ownership.

Few RFSAs documents following the refinement period were made available to the PAST-Forward study team, but five refined TOCs were reviewed and compared to the application TOCs. While revisions were observed in all five, from application to culmination stage, they generally did not reflect substantive changes to sustainability and exit planning. Only two made modifications that could reasonably be classified as sustainability related. Examples of sustainability-related changes included the addition of evidence gaps related to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors⁶⁶ and the addition of outcomes that included key terminology related to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁶⁷ More often, the observed changes included consolidating or re-organizing impact pathways (but not sustainability pathways), wording edits, and dropping or adding outcomes or outputs. The latter was a phenomenon discussed by awardee key informants. Generally, the interviews suggested that the addition or excision of outcomes or outputs occurred during the refinement period because the changes were necessary to achieve impact in the operating context, as opposed to changes that were necessary to achieve post-exit sustainability. This is consistent with the overall lack of sustainability and exit focus in the TOCs, as well as statements by numerous key informants who indicated that sustainability and exit planning were largely absent from the refinement period activities and discussions.

“There is confusion in their guidance. We had a session on sustainability [during refinement]. [But] it felt like ‘we’ll come back to it later.’” – Grantee

“In R&I we got so caught up in technical approaches of project activities. We were looking at sustainability of outputs. There wasn’t a serious discussion of larger scope...what does it mean for the larger project impact? The individual technical interventions were the only focus, rather than outcome level.” – Grantee

Awardee informants alluded to intensive TOC review processes during the refinement period, some of which were reportedly sustainability related. Among the documents reviewed, one positive example emerged. A RFSAs that used an intensive community visioning process during the refinement period to,

⁶⁶ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁶⁷ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

among other things, determine what local communities wanted to sustain and felt capable of sustaining, revised their TOC to include the addition of outcomes with key terminology related to the Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors.⁶⁸

During implementation, two prominent issues challenge the achievement of RFSA sustainability goals: the implementation timeline and the external operating environment.

Ambitious and complex in nature, RFSAs are underpinned by multi-sectoral frameworks to “improve and sustain the food and nutrition security of vulnerable populations”⁶⁹ and typically include many interrelated interventions and approaches. Interviews with BHA and awardee stakeholders identified several main challenges as RFSAs seek to implement their sustainability and exit plan within a 5-year timeframe, particularly in shock-prone contexts.

RFSA timelines and scope. Under a 5-year activity, in which approximately 1 year might be spent in the refinement period⁷⁰ and transition to local providers is expected to begin and/or be completed in the fourth year, the compressed timeline for direct implementation presents a major challenge for meeting all outcome goals, according to BHA and RFSA respondents. The challenge is not with the 5-year period of performance, per se, but with creating a right-sized, sustainability-focused implementation plan for the period of performance.

One consideration relates to the extent to which implementation can start early in the period of performance, so that interventions have adequate time to kickstart other sequenced interventions, achieve impact, and sufficiently mature before handover to local partners. Newer guidance encourages beginning some degree of implementation during Year 1,⁷¹ which BHA staff reiterated during interviews. However, informants from multiple RFSAs described how administrative start-up and preparation for intensive formative studies, such as a randomized controlled trial or census-like registration activities, became the focus and consumed vital implementation time. Some RFSAs have faced significant overlap between establishing the foundation for early implementation and responding to requests for updated sustainability plans, including in the PREPs beginning in Year 2 and the actual formal revised sustainability plans tied to the sustainability workshop. This stretches staff resources thin in cases where implementation has been substantially delayed. Similarly, given the close coordination between BHA Agreement Officer’s Representatives (AORs), activity managers, and the RFSAs themselves and the overlap between direct implementation and sustainability planning efforts, RFSA senior management teams struggled to provide timely, thoughtful feedback to both sets of work simultaneously.

Another consideration relates to the choice of interventions and the extent to which they can be both effectively carried out and handed over. BHA respondents suggested that applications often fail to connect proposed interventions and approaches to their likelihood of sustainability—frequently, awardees later determine that certain interventions are not sustainable (e.g., for lack of motivation or resources, etc.). Some BHA respondents believed that this could be resolved through improved pre-award consideration and planning, limiting proposed interventions to those most likely to be sustained. However, some respondents (including BHA) indicated that specific activities can or should be included in implementation plans even when post-RFSA continuation is uncertain, either because their inclusion

⁶⁸ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

⁶⁹ USAID. (2022). [International Food Assistance Report Fiscal Year 2021 Report to Congress](#).

⁷⁰ Consisting of partnership building and community engagement, learning activities, contextualization of interventions, and early implementation, the refinement period frequently lasted 15 months. Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (February 2022). [Refine and Implement Overview and FAQ](#).

⁷¹ Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (February 2022). [Refine and Implement Overview and FAQ](#).

adds value as part of a broader approach, or to allow partners the space to pilot and test nuanced approaches in different contexts.

During the latter years of a RFSAs implementation, challenges to sustainability planning include the timing of the mid-term evaluation and decisions about extension periods. The RFSAs mid-term evaluations—which can potentially serve as the basis for many sustainability-related decisions including receiving an extension—have sometimes been delayed past the point of utility for multiple RFSAs, according to interviewees. Additionally, awardees found it particularly challenging to plan for Year 5 of the RFSAs due to the uncertainty around a potential extension, which some but not all RFSAs have been granted. The length of the extension period has varied across RFSAs, ranging from 1 to 3 years, which further adds to RFSAs' challenges in planning for a gradual transition period as a core component of their sustainability approach.

The purpose of the sustainability extension is not universally understood among informants and, correspondingly, awardees reported receiving contradictory messages. One specific aspect with unclear guidance is whether new interventions can be implemented during the extension, and the expected or allowable level of involvement of the awardee organization(s) during the transition period. Additionally, most BHA respondents did not know on what criteria the decisions about whether to provide the extension have been made so far. Due to this lack of clarity, the PAST-Forward study team cannot offer indicators or a proposed timeline to make extension decisions.

External factors. Numerous informants, both BHA and awardees, spoke about the difficult RFSAs operating contexts. BHA made clear in interviews that they understood that not everything would be achieved or sustained following an activity's exit, frequently due to external factors. Indeed, external shocks (e.g., extreme weather events, conflict, etc.) and other disruptions in the enabling environment may buffet these activities during implementation, as was perhaps exemplified by one RFSAs that was unable to participate in this study due to ongoing host country conflict.

Consideration for external factors does appear in many application and refinement period documents. External factors often appear as caveats in the assumptions built into RFSAs theories of change, such as "Flooding and drought levels do not exceed 10-year averages" and "Security situation remains adequate for activity operations." Efforts to hedge for external factors come through in the resilience-focused interventions in RFSAs implementation plans, that is, plans for adaptation to possible shocks and stressors such as a deteriorating security situation.

Awardees found some interventions and approaches helpful in creating a more enabling environment, not only for implementation itself but for sustainability. For example, multiple RFSAs respondents reported aligning interventions or approaches very closely to national or county-level strategic plans as one way of mitigating potential shocks, based on the belief that activities aligned to strategic plans would continue to receive host country prioritization and support in the event of certain external shocks. Yet, awardees voiced the need for more national level advocacy to enhance the enabling environment, and one suggestion arose in interviews that 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.

Awardee respondents indicated, and BHA echoed, that awardees desire more sustainability and exit planning guidance. However, the types of guidance they are requesting do not appear to exist in a standardized form. BHA staff noted that it may not be useful to develop generic guidance that can be used by all sites, because the implementation sites require context specific plans to be effective.

Nevertheless, the awardees and BHA informants identified a variety of areas in which additional clarity, tools, and examples would be helpful for awardees. These included:

- Clarity on the level at which sustainability guidance should be applied (e.g., Is it the activity intervention or the outcome of the intervention that is meant to be sustained? What level of outcomes should be targeted for sustainment: intermediate or lower-level outcomes?)
- An example of a sufficiently detailed Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan.
- Updated examples of promising sustainability or transition models, or models that have not worked in certain contexts.
- Example sustainability indicators for the transition phase or thematic areas that transition phase indicators might cover.
- Guidance on how to prioritize and select outcomes to focus on during the sustainability transition phase, such as reflection questions, decision trees, or types of selection criteria.
- Tips and tools for how to better incorporate sustainability and exit planning into the activity theory of change.

In response to the four RFAs that included a requirement for key staff responsible for factors specifically linked to sustainability, awardees proposed personnel accordingly. Even when sustainability-focused personnel were not required, some RFAs still proposed staff positions with responsibilities related to sustainability components, either focusing on sustainability at large or specific Tufts/FANTA sustainability factors,⁷² or other factors, including community linkages or institutional strengthening. Irrespective of whether the consortium included a sustainability focal point, BHA informants observed that sustainability discussions often required mobilizing the entirety of a consortium's senior management and technical leads, sometimes at the expense of attention to activity deliverables and quality. In instances where there was an informal focal point designated to lead post-award sustainability efforts, the deputy chief of party, learning advisors, or specific sectoral or technical leads filled the role. BHA and awardee informants suggested that additional staffing support could be explored, either at a senior advisor level or at a lower administrative level, in order to centralize the coordination and documentation of sustainability strategies across intersectoral RFA interventions.

BHA also encountered challenges with its organizational enabling environment. Numerous BHA informants suggested that the merger of the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) into BHA in 2020 created an organization predominantly focused on emergency programming and emphasized staff capacities that aligned with traditional humanitarian operations, at the expense of RFAs. There is a perceived disconnect between the multisectoral systems thinking that is required for holistic food security in RFAs and the more straightforward interventions used to alleviate acute food insecurity in humanitarian responses. These divisions were discussed in the context of staff capacities and the "individualist" nature of RFA design, review, and scoring.

Additionally, BHA interviewees cited the need for a more institutionalized approach to certain aspects of sustainability and exit focus, such as those that pertain to what is included in RFAs, how applications are evaluated for their sustainability plans, and decisions about sustainability-focused extensions. Informants expressed concern that the lack of institutionalization could lead to a loss of institutional knowledge and a retrogression if key staff who have been

"Anything that we submit is reviewed by a significant number of technical advisors at BHA. What they focus on differs. That does feel personality or individually driven." - Grantee

⁷² Rogers & Coates, 2015.

instrumental to the focus on sustainability and exit planning were to leave BHA. However, the absence of an institutionalized approach to sustainability planning extends beyond BHA to USAID at large and the development sector in general. Awardee informants described an implementation space without a strong synergy between BHA’s approaches to sustainability and exit planning and those of other USAID and non-USAID funded activities working in the same contexts.

BHA presently lacks a process of continuous capacity building for reviewing RFSA sustainability and exit plans. This is especially pertinent for new USAID staff or missions selected for initial RFSA programming but may also be necessary for longer-term staff and missions with ongoing RFSA programming. The goal would be to ensure an even understanding of sustainability across staff as the application and programming requirements continue to evolve and the knowledge base on promising practices for sustainability and exit planning continues to grow. While various RFSA-related staff (BHA and awardees) should possess some level of essential 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.

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.

Awardee and BHA staff universally valued opportunities for more interpersonal exchanges, especially through convening at workshops to share information and collaboratively plan, including inception and culmination workshops, M&E workshops, knowledge-sharing events, and the sustainability-focused workshop. Awardee informants frequently alluded to these sessions or dedicated events as opportunities to ensure a common vision regarding activity planning, including for sustainability. Generally, informants agreed that the virtual workshops conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic were not as effective as in-person events, which allowed for informal and impromptu discussions.

“During the R&I workshop there was a lot of those conversations as well...of encouraging linkages between [RFSAs] that were doing similar technical interventions or similar research, cross sharing and strengthening together. So, that collaboration has been really healthy.” – Grantee

Workshops that brought together multiple RFSAs promoted the sharing of tools, promising practices, and strategies for addressing challenges and, for RFSAs sharing the same country of operation, an opportunity to coordinate their approaches. In such cases, BHA had an important role of identifying potential areas of alignment across activities. However, multi-RFSA workshops also appeared to highlight perceived inconsistencies in BHA’s approach to different RFSAs. For example, interviewees from one RFSA spoke about how one workshop exposed apparent differences in the guidance that certain RFSAs were receiving about the level at which sustainability planning should be applied (e.g., output versus outcome).

Informants offered many suggestions for how to further enhance the value of workshops for sustainability and exit planning:

- Update and expand the discussion of sustainability during the inception and culmination workshops, which has been perceived as “largely ignored” at these workshops to date. For example, one respondent suggested that the inception workshop presentation on the Bangladesh sustainability pilot could be augmented with discussion of the sustainability

theoretical model and how it might work locally, and this feedback from awardees was further corroborated by participant input from PCS-supported events.

- At the Culmination Workshop, make greater use of contextual data and examples from countries with similar profiles regarding the security context, strength of governance and community institutions, and market dynamics in order to foster more practical and pertinent discussions about sustainability strategies adapted to the setting.
- At the Culmination Workshop, devote more time to work through sustainability and exit plan assumptions.
- Time the sustainability-focused workshop for maximum utility. For instance, hold it prior to Year 4, perhaps timing it in relationship to the mid-term evaluation, and allow adequate time for the actual implementation experience to inform adjustments to the sustainability and exit plan.

VI. Conclusions

BHA is committed to funding programming for sustainable impact, reflected in this review of RFAs issued by BHA, applications from successful awards, and KIIs with BHA and IPs.

The priority given to sustainability and the mechanisms for achieving it have evolved over the period (2015–2021) covered by this report. The mandate to address sustainability explicitly and the addition of scoring to reflect this was implemented in 2016. Over time, the guidance has evolved to become more detailed and specific, but also more prescriptive and to some degree less flexible, from providing general guidance with links to reference documents in 2016 to the requirement to complete a detailed matrix (Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan) listing interventions and outcomes to be sustained, plans for meeting sustainability criteria, and fallback plans (“Plan B”) in case the first plan fails. BHA has also provided support to IPs in developing and implementing effective sustainability strategies within their RFSAs. A series of sustainability workshops have been held where technical staff of the RFSAs can meet with BHA staff to present and discuss their sustainability and exit plans and receive feedback. Additional technical support for sustainability is being provided through other awards to organizations exclusively dedicated to providing facilitation and technical support to RFSAs planning and implementation.

These are positive developments in support of sustainable programming; nonetheless, this review highlighted areas in which there is scope for improvement.

On the BHA side, there is the inconsistency in how sustainability plans are assessed when evaluating RFSAs applications. We heard from both BHA and IP staff that the level of expertise and understanding of the principles of sustainability varies within the bureau. This means the level of evaluation—that is, how carefully sustainability plans are considered and how much feedback may be given to the IPs at the application stage—and the priority given to sustainability among the many criteria for an award also vary widely. Informants said that this has become more challenging since the merger of FFP and OFDA into a single bureau, BHA. Because many BHA staff formerly in OFDA focused on disaster assistance to address immediate needs in the short term, they tend to have more limited experience in developing or assessing plans for long-term sustainable development.

The basis for assigning points in scoring an application also varies, which poses an additional challenge to assessing the soundness of sustainability plans in RFSAs applications. Sustainability is consistently included among scoring criteria, but the points vary, and sustainability is sometimes included with other activity components contributing to a single score. The location of sustainability plans and strategies within a given RFSAs application also varies; while ‘sustainability’ rubrics consistently appear in the activity plan, sustainability may also be addressed in the staffing plan and, starting in 2020, in the required Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan. Reviewers may therefore miss some elements of the sustainability plan and judge it based only on the elements in the activity plan. Certainly, considerations of sustainability should be part of every proposed intervention, but for review and scoring, having a comprehensive plan in a single location (possibly referencing other sections) could help the review process.

Informants consistently reported they would appreciate clearer guidance; one strong conclusion from the review of RFAs and subsequent applications is that the applications closely reflect what is requested in the RFA, so to the extent possible, RFAs should reflect the body of evidence on what works for sustainability. That said, most IPs applying for a new RFSAs have long experience implementing such activities in varied contexts; IPs could build on that experience to systematize the

lessons learned about sustainability and incorporate those lessons explicitly when justifying choices made about interventions to be implemented.

The document provided as the basis for sustainability planning, the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study,⁷³ makes clear that three elements of sustainability—motivation, capacity, and resources—are all essential for a successful sustainability plan, and that gradual transition from IP support to local responsibility is also critical. The fourth element, linkages, needs to be considered in every case, and the motivation, capacity, and resources of linkage partners must be assessed. In both the RFAs as issued and the RFSAs as designed, the need to address all these elements is often missed; emphasis in the plans is given to one or two of these elements rather than including them all. In the RFAs and associated guidance, capacity and linkages are often given greater emphasis than motivation and resources, and the basis and process for gradual handover of responsibility are not always described.

That said, there has been an evolution toward a more prescriptive approach to sustainability in the RFAs, and one aspect of this is a move toward prioritizing private sector provider (PSP) or fee-for-service models over alternatives such as using volunteers to provide services, establishing behaviors or practices on the part of beneficiaries whose benefits will provide continued motivation, capacity (through repeated application) and, possibly, resources. Recent RFAs expressly discouraged using volunteers and their use needs to be justified in the RFSAs, including the source of their motivation post-award. In at least one, using the PSP model is required. The recommended PSP model clearly addresses the elements of motivation and resources (though not how capacity will be maintained or extended to new actors), but this model is applicable to only some of the interventions and outcomes and not to all sectors sought in a RFSAs and may not be applicable in all contexts.

The narrowing of options in sustainability guidance is presumably evidence-based, intending to promote successful models and discourage less successful ones. However, such evidence is limited. Given that there has been no systematic compilation of field experiences, it is unclear which models or approaches have actually helped RFSAs achieve sustainability in which contexts. Limiting the range of options is premature and risks reducing the IP flexibility to adapt their sustainability plans to the local context and the sector of intervention. It would be useful to develop a menu of successful models and approaches that have been implemented in different technical sectors and in varying contexts, paying attention to the specific environmental characteristics that affect the feasibility and effectiveness of the selected model or approach. Such a menu would be based on existing literature, but given the scarcity of empirical ex-post assessments, might also identify areas worthy of further empirical investigation.

This review uncovered several issues relating to timing, both when implementing sustainability-focused activities and handing over responsibility to local actors. Regarding planning and implementation, the issue of timing was raised primarily in terms of adapting sustainability-focused activities over the life of the RFSAs. RFSAs now typically include a refinement period, where they modify their plans in response to experience on the ground. These modifications are presented and discussed at a Culmination Workshop at the end of the refinement period; however, modifications to sustainability plans have not been a focus of the Culmination Workshops, and informants suggested that sustainability should be incorporated into these workshops. Other important opportunities for modification include (a) when submitting sustainability plans with annual PREP documents; (b) after the mid-term evaluation; and (c) when planning for a possible extension. However, RFSAs could adapt their plans at any point in response to continuous learning.

⁷³ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

BHA has begun implementing sustainability workshops that allow RFSAs to present and refine their sustainability plans in discussion with BHA staff. One question that emerged from discussions with informants was the optimum timing of these workshops for maximum benefit. To date, these workshops have occurred as early as Year 2 and as late as Year 4 of a 5-year cycle, when limited time remains to implement any modifications and when the main issue is not the design of sustainability strategies but the mechanism for implementing the transition to local responsibility and management.

To inform iterative modifications to the sustainability plans, informants desired clearer guidance for benchmarks and indicators of progress toward sustainability and suggested handover timelines. In fact, more recent guidance from BHA does describe how sustainability considerations should be incorporated into the initial and modified theory of change as well as included in monitoring and modification throughout the life of the activity, suggesting an evolution in the conceptualization of sustainability from something to be addressed at the point of handover to an integral part of an activity throughout its implementation. One implication is that some of the details included in the new Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan, particularly the need to present contingency plans (“Plan B”) for each outcome, might be shifted to a later stage, when there is experience on which to base these; this modification might reduce some of the burden of preparing that document, which was a concern of many IP informants.

Progress toward sustainability needs to be incorporated into routine monitoring, but both BHA and awardee staff noted that clear indicators, separate from indicators of program implementation, are lacking.

Similarly, one question arising from the review of both RFAs and RFSAs is whether all components of a RFA should be targeted for sustainability, or whether some activity elements may be undertaken while recognizing that sustainability is not a realistic expectation. Relatedly, some respondents mentioned not knowing on what basis to determine which services, behaviors, or outcomes they should strive to sustain and when they should make that decision. The RFAs do not provide clear or consistent guidance on this point. All BHA RFAs require free distribution of food commodities, and many include free distribution of other goods, cash, or vouchers. However, providing free goods is inherently unsustainable once the resource is no longer available. For those whose nutritional wellbeing is improved through the provision of supplementary food, the benefits are likely to persist throughout their lives, but the extension to future beneficiaries is not possible once direct distribution ends. Sustainability of outcomes through other means (behavior change, for example) is addressed in some, but not all RFA documents. The question of whether a sustainability plan is needed for every activity element extends beyond food distribution, however, and begs clarification.

Another timing-related issue is the constrained duration of RFSAs. RFSAs are 5-year awards, with the first year (or more) devoted to the refinement period, and impact evaluations typically occur in Year 4 (or occasionally early in Year 5), allowing limited time to build toward a sustainable handover of responsibility. Adding to this is a lack of clarity about the likelihood of a RFA being approved for an extension (often referred to as a 2-year ‘sustainability extension’), the criteria for an extension, and its purpose. While some informants clearly stated that the purpose of the extension was to allow for handover with no implementation of new interventions, others within BHA were more flexible in allowing for new interventions in an extension period. Further, the basis for an extension was also unclear: some IPs believed the extension was based on a proven record of success, while others said they understood the extension was to allow time for progress to be made where it had been slower than anticipated.

Uncertainty regarding extension criteria and whether an extension will be awarded constrains exit planning and creates the possibility of perverse incentives. For instance, gradual progress toward

sustainability might be rewarded with additional years of funding, while success in achieving handover to local responsibility might result in termination of the RFSAs (where staff might prefer continued employment). We encountered no evidence of RFSAs deliberately slowing progress in order to gain an activity extension, but the prioritization of sustainability and handover to local responsibility does raise a broader question about incentives for the IPs themselves to commit to this goal. This is an issue that needs to be addressed both within BHA in terms of eligibility for RFSAs extensions and within the administration of IPs to determine whether their internal strategic plans reflect a commitment to building capacity (whether in the government at various levels or in other organizations) and establishing self-sustaining systems post-activity. The need for food security activities is unlikely to disappear, and IPs should be able to build on their experience, identifying effective models and strategies that can aid RFSAs implementation in new locations or sectors; at the level of the IP organization, success in one location should only build their own capacity for future interventions.

Informants noted that both the RFAs and RFSAs applications conflated strategies for maximizing impact during the life of the activity and strategies for promoting sustainability. This issue affects planning for implementation, monitoring, and establishing linkages, among other programmatic aspects. Implementation of course affects both impact and sustainability. Activity design in all sectors should have sustainability considerations built in. But (as noted in the Tufts/FANTA 2015 sustainability study⁷⁴), working toward maximum impact at endline may be counterproductive in terms of achieving longer-term sustainable outcomes and impacts. Integrating these two objectives—immediate impact and longer-term sustainability—needs clearer articulation and guidance in the RFAs and in the course of activity modifications over time.

Achieving sustainable outcomes beyond the life of an activity is critical. As a ‘learning organization’, BHA is invested in making long term sustainable impact a reality. This review has identified areas where further evidence is needed regarding what approaches work in various contexts and for specific technical sectors. The following section distills some recommendations for making further progress toward that goal.

⁷⁴ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

VII. Recommendations

The following are some recommendations that emerged from our document review and informant interviews.

Provide detailed guidance to address persistent gaps in applicant and awardee understanding of sustainability requirements. The RFAs currently refer applicants to various documents including the Tufts/FANTA 2015 study⁷⁵ that outlined a set of principles for promoting sustainability. Within the RFA itself, though, it should be made explicit that the factors for sustainability—motivation, capacity, and resources and, often, linkages—should all be part of a sustainability plan. Further, the plan needs to include a process for gradual handover of responsibility that includes specific benchmarks for each stage of handover. RFAs should assess any planned linkages for their expected contribution to sustainability, examining linkage partners' own motivation, capacity, and resources for taking responsibility. These criteria are embedded in the (newly required) matrix for sustainability, Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan, but should be part of the guidance for the sustainability plan included in the Activity Plan of the RFA application. Such guidance would inform subsequent modifications to sustainability and exit plans during implementation (e.g., after refinement or after the mid-term evaluation). Our review found that guidance provided by BHA emphasized some sustainability elements over others rather than communicating the importance of incorporating all of them, and that RFA applications variably included some but not always all these elements. Several of the awardee key informants suggested BHA provide examples of successful models in the various sectors from a wide range of country contexts, making it clear that approaches must be adapted to local, not only national contexts.

Another issue requiring clarity in the RFAs is whether every element of a proposed activity must have a sustainability plan behind it, or if it is acceptable to propose interventions that are not expected to result in sustained outcomes after the award ends. In principle, all activity elements should have the prospect of sustained outcomes, even if not sustained active service delivery. But whether awardees should strive to sustain all activity elements is a matter of BHA policy, and the policy should be explicit in the RFA. BHA should also clarify when, and on what basis, IPs should determine the activity elements they should aim to sustain.

Allow flexibility in the selection of sustainability strategies based on evidence of successful models and approaches in different contexts rather than explicitly suggesting, requiring, or discouraging specific approaches. BHA's requirements concerning sustainability plans have become more prescriptive over time, moving toward a policy of recommending (or even requiring) a particular strategy and discouraging others. Specifically, BHA has promoted the private sector provider model for service provision as the preferred approach. This model has shown some success in some contexts, but it is not feasible in every technical sector, depends on cultural and social norms (such as willingness to pay for maternal and child health and nutrition services), and focuses on sustaining service provision while not emphasizing approaches to sustain demand and equity of access. Other models have also been successful in some contexts. RFAs should allow flexibility in the selection of sustainability strategies, while requiring justification for each model used. As BHA recommends for or against certain models, citations should be added to the Technical References so that applicants and awardees can seek out information to help them understand BHA's recommendations and apply them.

⁷⁵ Rogers & Coates, 2015.

Encourage the sharing of best practices and lessons learned through in-person workshops and meetings to foster real-time exchange of experiences and lessons learned. In-person workshops were perceived as being among the most useful forms of support that BHA provides, and further enhancing them could support a more systematic collection of sustainability strategies being tested under different circumstances. Increased informal reflection and discussion between BHA and awardees would further improve the dialogue around the complex topic of post-award sustainability.

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. BHA recognizes that activity plans may need to be modified based on the experience of implementation. The refinement period is explicitly devoted to trying out planned activities and modifying them, with modifications presented to BHA in the context of a Culmination Workshop. We recommend that sustainability plans be included in this process, so that these strategies are subject to the same process of testing and modification as other elements of the RFSAs. In this way, if an awardee makes changes in its implementation plan during the refinement period, the implications for sustainability will be explicitly addressed. This coordination of implementation and sustainability should occur throughout the life of the activity. The initial TOC should extend beyond impact to longer-term sustainability pathways. This integration is not necessarily needed in the TOC diagram, which is already complex. The TOC assumptions may be an appropriate place to clarify the requirements to achieve each step of the sustainability pathways, so that they can be tested, and the TOC strengthened as RFSAs gather new evidence. Whenever activity modifications are made, the implications for sustainability should be addressed; sustainability plans themselves should be re-evaluated and modified if needed, and the TOC updated.

Assess progress toward sustainability as part of routine monitoring, including clear benchmarks for gradual transition to local responsibility for services and behaviors. Sustainability planning is an iterative process, and key milestones need to be measured so that sustainability plans can be adjusted. Measuring progress toward sustainability should be part of routine program monitoring, and compliance with benchmarks and timelines for gradual transfer of responsibility to local actors should be included in monitoring. BHA is already working toward developing markers of progress toward sustainability, and this work is needed, as markers of progress in implementation may not reflect potential for sustainability. Consideration of progress toward sustainability should be better incorporated into the mid-term evaluation as well. The endline evaluation should examine the extent to which sustainability strategies have been achieved and should gauge whether sustainability factors are suitably in place to allow for service delivery, access, and demand to continue as needed.

Institutionalize the process surrounding a sustainability-focused extension period by standardizing criteria for the award and clarifying its purpose, to improve its effectiveness. At present, some, but not all RFSAs may be eligible for an extension beyond the 5-year life of the activity. This review found a lack of clarity or consistency around extension criteria and purpose—is the focus on promoting the transition to local responsibility, or can RFSAs implement new activities in the extension years? For example, due to emergencies new interventions or continued direct implementation might be necessary during a sustainability-focused extension. Further, awardees are not informed of their eligibility or receipt of an extension award until late in the activity's life cycle, making it difficult to plan. We recommend that BHA clarify the criteria and purpose of extensions and inform RFSAs implementers early in the award. Given the constrained timeline of RFSAs implementation, with a year or more devoted to the refinement period and an impact evaluation early in Year 5 (at the latest), we recommend BHA consider structuring RFSAs awards to allow for a standard sustainability extension as part of the award: 5 years for implementation (including the refinement period), and an

additional period (of perhaps 2 years) to consolidate progress and complete the process of handover to local actors. This would have many potential benefits including eliminating uncertainty and allowing for more effective planning of sustainability and exit strategies.

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.

The current process for BHA’s evaluation of RFSA applications inconsistently prioritizes sustainability plans in the overall evaluation and reflects a highly uneven level of expertise among evaluators relating to principles underlying sustainability planning. This issue was acknowledged by both awardee and BHA representatives. One possible remedy might be to provide training to any BHA staff member involved in application scoring. Another is to develop a cadre of sustainability expertise within the bureau and ensure that each team of evaluators includes a sustainability expert, part of whose remit would be to provide consistent review and assessment of sustainability and exit plans and strategies. In the same vein, the weight of sustainability assessment in the overall scoring of applications could also be made clearer and more consistent across the RFAs. It might be useful to encourage awardees to include sustainability expertise in their staffing plans, such as by listing sustainability expertise in the desired characteristics and tasks of required personnel in the RFA. Third-party awardees provide valuable technical guidance to awarded RFSA, but internal awardee resources could strengthen their capacity to develop strong sustainability plans within their RFSA applications.

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 settings.

BHA has been (both as BHA and legacy FFP) an organization dedicated to developing evidence and learning from experience, demonstrated by evolving sustainability requirements. BHA should consider commissioning a thorough review of successful sustainability models followed by investment in prospectively testing the relative sustainability of promising model variants. In that vein, BHA should also encourage awardees to systematize and draw lessons from their own extensive experience of implementing RFSA in varied contexts. We recommend that BHA allow and encourage RFSA to engage in experimentation and exploration, in partnership with an academic research partner as appropriate, to assess the effectiveness of alternative models of sustainability and exit. Applicants could propose different approaches with a clear plan for rigorously evaluating the process and outcomes of these with respect to sustainability. The RFSA should serve as an opportunity for continuous improvement through evidence; this should be encouraged in the RFA and included in awardee applications (and budgets). To build the evidence base, a set of ex-post evaluations is needed, aimed at identifying how specific activity elements interact with environment characteristics, and in particular shocks and stresses, to achieve post-exit sustainability.

Expand learning and dissemination of sustainability approaches more broadly among humanitarian and development stakeholders.

Finally, many informants reported that the principles of sustainability have application beyond RFSA. As best practices are identified, indicators and benchmarks developed, and successful strategies implemented, these experiences should be shared more widely among development programs within USAID and to other donor organizations engaged in development work, as sustainability should be a goal of any development intervention.

Annex 1. External Documents Reviewed and Coded

	Document Name	Type of Document	Year of Release
1	USAID. (2014). <i>Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development</i>	Framework	2014
2	USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Food for Peace. (2015). <i>Technical References for FFP Development Food Security Activities</i>	Guidance	2015
3	USAID Office of Food for Peace Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. (2016). <i>FFP 2016-2025 Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy</i>	Strategy	2016
4	USAID Office of Food for Peace. (2016). <i>Policy and Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Food Security Activities</i>	Policy and Guidance	2016
5	USAID Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Food for Peace. (2017). <i>Technical References for FFP Development and Food Security Activities</i>	Guidance	2017
6	Packard, M. (2018). <i>Report on a Review of Social and Behavior Change Methods and Approaches within Food for Peace Development Food Security Activities</i> . Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA)/FHI 360	Study	2018
7	USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. (2020). <i>Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Resilience Food Security Activities</i>	Guidance	2020
8	USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. (2021). <i>Technical Guidance for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting for Resilience Food Security Activities V2.0</i>	Guidance	2021

Note: Web links are provided for all documents except those that have been archived.

Annex 2. Key Informant Guides

PAST-Forward: BHA Key Informant Interview Guide (2022-2023)

(Approved Informed Consent Section)

General Information

Respondent Name	
Respondent ID	
Interviewer name	
Respondent title (current)	
Role related to RFA development/scoring/DFSA implementation (while working on RFA(s) if different from current)	
Location (at time of interview)	
Date of interview	
Time interview started	
Time interview ended	

Introduction

We would like to thank you for your support in answering our interview screening questionnaire. We have reviewed your answers and will be using them to better focus our discussion on key elements related to your contributions to RFSAs processes. Before we get into our key questions, for our interview record:

- Please can you take a couple minutes to summarize the general roles you've had related to RFSAs, from RFA planning to implementation?

1. RFA guidance on sustainability and exit

1.1 Since 2016, the RFSAs Requests for Applications have provided detailed guidance for sustainability plans that IPs must include in development activity proposals. To what extent do you think that sustainability planning has value for BHA?

- How valuable is it at the Application stage? Has your opinion on the value evolved, for example from pre-2016 until now? How?

1.2 We know that the RFA guidance on sustainability and exit planning has changed over time. Can you describe the changes? Can you tell us what drove these changes?

- Guidance text – specific to exit and sustainability, woven into Principles and context, specified in Country Specific Information sheets
- What is required – embed in design narrative and TOC, M&E plan, Annex 18: Sustainability Transition Plan
- How it is scored – changes to weight given
- Page length changes – where content could possibly be embedded

1.3 The sustainability guidance has changed over time. To what extent do you think those changes have been improvements? In what ways? Have any of the changes been for the worse?

2. Response from Applicants

2.1 How receptive have the IPs been to the sustainability planning requirements?

- What have been their main concerns? In what ways have those concerns been communicated to BHA? (*Probe on if they can provide specific examples*)

2.2 What do you believe are the biggest challenges that applicants face around sustainability and exit planning during the application phase?

2.3 What do you think applicants need (information, resources, experience) in order to be more responsive/thoughtful during the application phase? Where can they obtain these from? (Should USAID provide it?)

3. Application Scoring

3.1 How would you rate your own confidence in your own level of expertise/experience for assessing the strength of the proposed sustainability and exit plans?

4. Co-creation

4.1 How would you describe the role of USAID during co-creation, especially as it relates to sustainability and exit planning?

4.2 Can you talk us through any examples of RFSA co-creation where the sustainability and exit planning benefited from a co-creation process? What changed and why?

4.3 What are the biggest challenges to sustainability and exit planning during co-creation? What are the qualities or context of programs that use the co-creation period effectively for sustainability and exit planning?

4.4 Broadly, considering the entire Application and selection process, do you have any ideas for making the process more helpful to applicants and reviewer in order to produce a more useful sustainability plan?

5. Refinement

5.1 How would you describe the role of USAID during the refinement period, and with regard to shaping the revised Implementation Plans, especially as it relates to sustainability and exit planning?

5.2 Can you talk us through any examples of RFSA refinement where the sustainability and exit planning benefited from refinement process? What changed and why?

5.3 What are the biggest challenges to sustainability and exit planning during refinement? What are the qualities or context of programs that use the refinement period effectively for sustainability and exit planning?

5.4 Do you have any ideas/suggestions for how the co-creation and/or refinement periods could be better used/structured to support sustainability and exit planning?

5.5 Do you have any suggestions for how USAID might better support sustainability planning during the refinement period?

6. Implementation

6.1 What have been the biggest challenges to the implementation of sustainability and exit activities during the main RFSA implementation period?

6.2 What are the qualities and context of programs that seem to be planning and implementing well for exit and sustainability? (e.g., geographic location, relative stability of local context, quality/quantity of international and local partners, complexity of program {size, scope}, later cycle program, understanding/prioritization of sustainability)

6.3 What are the qualities and context of programs that seem to be struggling with exit and sustainability planning and implementation?

6.4 Do you have any ideas/suggestions for how the RFSA implementation period or awards could be better structured to support exit and sustainability planning?

6.5 Do you have any suggestions for how USAID might better support sustainability planning during the implementation period? For example, how is the sustainability workshop presently used, and could it be improved?

6.6. Can you talk us through the review process for the applications for 2 year sustainability extensions? How are the 2 year sustainability extensions presently envisioned to be used?

7. CLA & M&E

7.1 What do you see as the role of M&E as it pertains to sustainability and exit planning? What are the qualities and contexts of RFSA programs that use M&E well to support sustainability and exit planning? (e.g., to what extent is sustainability in the results framework; to what extent do they use data for decision making; quality/quantity of international and local partners to collect/analyze/act on sustainability data; size/scope of program to collect/analyze/act on sustainability data)

7.2 What do you see as the role of CLA as it pertains to sustainability and exit planning? What are the qualities and contexts of RFSA programs that use CLA well to support sustainability and exit planning? (e.g., internal and external collaboration for learning; sequencing and schedule allows pause and

reflect; culture {openness, networks}, processes {knowledge management, decision making}, resources {staff skills, budget for CLA})

7.3 To what extent, if at all, could USAID better support grantees toward using CLA and M&E to enhance sustainability planning? How?

8. Conclusion

Thank you for your time and valuable participation in this discussion. Before we conclude, we would like to ask two remaining questions:

8.1 Are there any other relevant thoughts you would like to share related to promoting sustainability and exit strategy within RFSAs?

8.2 Is there anyone else that you believe we should reach out to further discuss RFSAs Application or Implementation stages who might have additional information? (*Prompt: someone who you know worked on stages that might have another perspective?*)

PAST-Forward: Awardee Key Informant Interview Guide (2022-2023)

(Approved Informed Consent Section)

General Information (all respondents)

RFA Name	
RFA ID	
Respondent Name	
Respondent ID	
Interviewer name	
Respondent title (current)	
Respondent title and organization (while on RFA if different from current)	
Location (at time of interview)	
Date of interview	
Time interview started	
Time interview ended	

Introduction

We would like to thank you for your support in answering our interview screening questionnaire. We have reviewed your answers and will be using them to better focus our discussion on key elements related to your participation in the Application and/or Program Implementation processes. Before we get into our key questions, for our interview record:

- Please can you take a couple minutes to summarize the various roles you had while working on the (name) Application and/or (name) DFSA implementation? (*probes: conceptualization, writing, responding to questions from BHA, oral presentation co-creation as applicable; probes for Implementation: program management, technical activities, Refine and Implement {revised activity design}, post-Refine implementation*)

1. Organization and Consortium Relationships

- 1.1 Within your organization, who was responsible for developing the sustainability and exit plan for this Application? To what extent did those who worked on the sustainability and exit plan contribute to other portions of the Application? How did headquarters and field staff interact in preparing the sustainability and exit plan – i.e., what were the respective roles?
- 1.2 Describe the mechanics of how your organization worked with the other consortium partners, both headquarters based and field based, to develop the Application's sustainability and exit plan. What was the role of your organization relative to others? What inputs did different organizations provide to the sustainability and exit plan?

2. Reaction to RFA

I'd like to ask you some questions about your impressions of the sustainability and exit guidance and requirements described in the RFA.

- 2.1 Can you describe in your own words this RFA's guidance on sustainability and exit planning? What were you being asked to do?
- 2.2 What was your opinion of the RFA's requirement to include sustainability and exit planning at the Application stage?
- 2.3 To what extent was the guidance on sustainability and exit planning clear? How well did you understand what was expected of your organization in the initial proposal submission? How well did your organization understand the requirements for proposing a sustainability and exit plan?
- 2.4 To what extent was the sustainability and exit guidance actionable? How actionable/reasonable were the Application requirements related to the sustainability and exit plans?
- 2.5 The RFA describes four sustainability elements (motivation, capacity, linkages, and resources) as well as exit and handover planning. At the time, what was your understanding about what the RFA was asking applicants to do with regard to these elements?
- 2.6 Did the guidance provoke any questions or challenges for you? (*Probe: incomplete information? conflicting information? Conflicting requirements between sustainability and other elements of the plan? Difficulty meeting certain requirements, such as page requirements?*)
- 2.7 To what extent did previous work on other RFSA applications influence your or your organization's reaction to the exit and sustainability guidance and requirements in the RFA?
- 2.8 Did you have any questions or reaction as to how the proposal would be scored on its exit and sustainability content?
- 2.9 As an applicant, was there other information or guidance you would have liked to have in order to prepare your proposed exit and sustainability plans? (*Probe on capacity, linkages, motivation, resources, and gradual handover/transition*)
- 2.10 Do you have any suggestions for how to improve usability of the sustainability and exit planning guidance?

2.11 Is there anything else related to the Request for Application that you would like to share before we move on to the next section?

3. Application Process

3.1 Please talk us through the Application development process for this RFSA, and in particular your efforts to develop a sustainability and exit plan for this activity. *(Reference the RFA requirement about where the sustainability and exit plan should appear)*

Let's start with your initial submission.

- a. Please walk us through the conceptualization, including any strategies you had for developing the sustainability and exit plan. *(Probe further on consortium involvement if not mentioned)*
- b. What materials, sources, and/or organizational expertise did you refer to in order to guide the development of your sustainability and exit plans? (Probes follow, ask only if not mentioned.)
 - i. Did you review the Tufts Sustaining Development report(s) when preparing your proposal? To what extent/how did you use that reference? How useful was it?
 - ii. Did you review the DFSA Technical References when preparing your sustainability and exit plan? To what extent/how did you use that reference? How if at all did you use the Sustainability guidance provided in that document? How useful was it?
 - iii. Were there additional resources or policy documents that supported you/your team when preparing your sustainability and exit plan? What were they? How did you use them? What about individuals you may have consulted? How useful was it?
 - iv. [FOR THOSE WHO ANSWERED HAVING PRIOR EXPERIENCE] To what extent and how did you use the experiences of previous RFSA to develop your sustainability strategies?

3.2 [BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE THE FEEDBACK FROM BHA. ASK THE FOLLOWING ONLY IF THEY DON'T HAVE THE FEEDBACK] What, if anything, do you recall about the feedback you received from BHA vis-a-vis your exit and sustainability plans in the initial submission?

3.3 Tell us about your efforts to respond to BHA questions or modify your exit and sustainability plans in relation to their feedback.

- a. Side by side compare of the initial and revised versions – *ask probing questions about rationale for changes*

3.3 [FOR THOSE WHO WENT THROUGH CO-CREATION] Please describe the co-creation process as it related to the exit and sustainability plans for your RFSA.

- a. To what extent were there points of tension about the exit and sustainability plan? What were they? *(Probe: Disagreement about components of the exit and sustainability plan?)*

- b. Can you please describe any inputs that BHA or the Mission made to your final exit and sustainability plans.
 - c. Side by side compare the initial and revised versions – *ask probing questions about rationale for changes*
- 3.4 At the time, what was your opinion of your sustainability and exit plan in the Application on which the award was made? Was the plan thorough? Was it realistic? Why/why not? What challenges did you anticipate?
- 3.5 Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for making the sustainability and exit portion of the Application more efficient to develop? How? More effective to develop? How?
- 3.6 Since working on the XX RFA, have you been involved in preparing sustainability and exit plans for other RFSA RFAs?
- 3.7 How, if at all, has your experience changed or your impressions changed regarding the application requirements for exit and sustainability planning in the more recent RFAs?
- 3.8 Is there anything else related to the Application process that you would like to share before we move on to the next section?

4. Refine and Implement / Phased Approach (For prime organization and consortium organizations as applicable)

- 4.1 How, if at all, did you use the refinement year to inform your sustainability and exit planning decisions? Please describe any activities you undertook during the refinement year that shaped your thinking about sustainability and exit planning. (*Probe on research, early implementation, local partner engagement, etc.*)
 - a. How did these activities/experiences specifically affect your exit and sustainability plans? [*Consider going sector by sector*]
- 4.2 In retrospect, are there ways that the Refine and Implement process could have supported your sustainability and exit planning better? Would you do anything differently if you could?
- 4.3 Is there anything else related to the Refine and Implement process that you would like to share before we move on to the next section?

5. Post-refinement Implementation

- 5.1 After the R&I, how has the implementation gone with respect to your sustainability and exit plans?
 - a. What challenges have you faced in implementing toward/conforming to your sustainability and exit plans? [Consider going sector by sector, probe on the elements – refer to the TOC or Annex 18 : Sustainability Transition Plan to walk through the plans]
 - b. How have you adapted to these challenges?
- 5.2 BHA has awarded some 2 year 'sustainability' extensions to certain RFSA. If your RFSA has received an extension, when did you receive confirmation? To what extent would your RFSA have done anything differently if you had had confirmation of an extension earlier?

- 5.3 Describe how, if at all, you use your monitoring and evaluation system to inform and manage your sustainability and exit activities.
- a. What indicators do you use to support your exit and sustainability activities? What are the timelines and benchmarks for these indicators? In retrospect, to what extent have the timelines and benchmarks been reasonable?
- 5.4 Describe how, if at all, you use CLA activities to inform and manage your sustainability and exit activities.
- 5.5 What successes have you achieved related to your sustainability and exit plans? *[Consider going by sector]*
- 5.6 Relative to other aspects of your implementation plan, to what extent is your program feeling pressure to meet its sustainability and exit goals? Where is the pressure coming from? USAID? Your own organization? Host country partners?
- 5.7 Is there anything else related to the Implementation process that you would like to share?

6. Conclusion

Thank you for your time and valuable participation in this survey. At this point we have reached the end of our questionnaire. Before we conclude, we would like to ask two remaining questions:

- 6.1 Are there any other relevant thoughts you would like to share related to sustainability and exit strategy within RFSAs?

Is there anyone else that you believe we should reach out to further discuss XX Application or Implementation process who might have additional information? *(Prompt: someone who might have another*

Annex 3. Other Sustainability Factors, by Country

The table below summarizes Table 7, 8, and 9 in the report.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Total number of Other Sustainability Factors	Most Frequent Other Sustainability Factors					Additional and Infrequent Sustainability Factors
				Community Ownership	Wide Population-level Adoption & Adaption of Models	Joint Planning/Coordination/Complementarity	Layering, Sequencing, Integrating	Gender Equity	
1	2015	Bangladesh	1						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved governance and civil society engagement
		Mali	2			X			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market-based approaches
2	2016	DRC	5	X	X	X			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust building Learning activities and innovative approaches Transformation of the citizen-state relationship
		Ethiopia	1		X				
		Liberia	8	X	X			X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust building Build on existing strengths Integrated management (within activity and with other activities) Work within existing structures Market-based approaches
3	2017	Uganda Karamoja	3						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program learning Build on existing strengths Supporting legitimacy and accountability of government institutions
4	2017	Uganda Graduation Pilot	0						

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Total number of Other Sustainability Factors	Most Frequent Other Sustainability Factors					Additional and Infrequent Sustainability Factors
				Community Ownership	Wide Population-level Adoption & Adaption of Models	Joint Planning/Coordination/Complementarity	Layering, Sequencing, Integrating	Gender Equity	
5	2018	Niger	4	X	X		X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population-targeted social and behavioral change strategies
		Burkina Faso	4	X	X		X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population-targeted social and behavioral change strategies
6	2019	Madagascar	11	X		X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved governance Context specific and tailored programming Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors Innovative approaches that engage community members Targeting of specific populations in need Selective investment in sectors/prioritized technical interventions SBC strategies
		Malawi	10	X		X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Context specific and tailored programming Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors Innovative approaches that engage community members Targeting of specific populations in need Selective investment in sectors/prioritized technical interventions SBC strategies
7	2019	Kenya	7		X		X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align program design to local government priorities

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Total number of Other Sustainability Factors	Most Frequent Other Sustainability Factors					Additional and Infrequent Sustainability Factors
				Community Ownership	Wide Population-level Adoption & Adaption of Models	Joint Planning/Coordination/Complementarity	Layering, Sequencing, Integrating	Gender Equity	
									<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-sectoral collaboration • Targeting of specific populations in need • Decentralization • Systems-driven, shock-responsive approaches
8	2019	Mali	6	X	X	X			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge humanitarian and development assistance • Working with youth • People-centered approaches
9	2020	Zimbabwe	6	X		X	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context specific and tailored programming • Targeting of specific populations in need
10	2020	Ethiopia	7	X	X	X			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate and manage shocks and stressors • Working with youth • Conflict sensitivity • Innovative approaches implemented within government framework or local systems
11	2021	Haiti	5	X			X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context-specific and tailored programming • Private sector engagement and private sector business models

Annex 4. RFA Framing of Commodities

The review included a search for RFA and CSI content using the following key words: commodity, commodities, distribution, transfer, cash, voucher, subsidy, and subsidies. Content related to formatting instructions for the applications, such as what budgetary content to include in commodity related annexes, was excluded. The focus of the commodity analysis was on how the RFAs framed the use of commodities and distributions from a technical perspective vis-à-vis sustainability.

In general, the earlier RFAs contained more technical content related to the sustainability of commodities and distributions than did more recent RFAs, with the notable exception of the Ethiopia 2020 RFA. All but one of the RFAs indicated that distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. Many, but not all, RFAs and CSIs offered specific examples of how distributions might be considered to address other outcomes beyond immediate nutrition needs, such as to support WASH infrastructure development and to facilitate market growth. A few of the RFAs flagged considerations about the impact that distributions might have on social cohesion. Some of the RFAs contained language encouraging their creative use with a focus on minimizing their short-lived impact. But, only a subset of the RFAs explicitly described the potential use of distributions as a motivator for activity participation or behavior change and, even then, there was variability in how the RFAs handled this topic. Only one of the documents (the DRC 2016 CSI) requested applicants to consider the phase out of commodities, but none of the RFAs or CSIs explicitly mentioned a gradual transition away from commodities.

The table below highlights key commodity-related text from each RFA and/or CSI.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Key Commodity-Related Guidance
1	2015	Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Building off of a recent WFP and IFPRI two-year research initiative, work activities should combine nutrition education activities with cash, food, or voucher payments to maximize nutrition outcomes. - Where applicable and appropriate, cash for work or food for work mechanisms may be used to build water and sanitation-related infrastructure.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Key Commodity-Related Guidance
		Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Design and use subsidies and/or resource transfers strategically. The vulnerable communities and majority of households served by the Mopti CRP will tend to be labor, income, and asset poor. They are less likely to be able to benefit from agriculture extension and agriculture investments, less likely to be able to keep their children in school, more likely to experience significant consumption gaps, and more likely to require humanitarian assistance on a regular basis. Understanding the role of food assistance as a time-bound resource transfer, and ensuring that it is used creatively and appropriately as a means to enable communities and households to make strategic and transformational choices for themselves, will minimize the possibility of dependence or short-lived impact. - Achieving the goal of significantly improving food, nutrition, and income security in the highly vulnerable districts targeted by the Mopti CRP will require community and household-level analysis to identify opportunities and constraints, determine barriers to access and gaps in availability, and to work with communities to establish a clear understanding of the role and targeting of resource transfers. - Where applicable and appropriate, cash for work or food for work mechanisms may be used to build water and sanitation-related infrastructure.
2	2016	DRC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Use resource transfers and subsidies carefully. FFP supports the strategic use of appropriate resource transfers to enable severely food insecure households to participate in and benefit from activities aimed at building households' assets and improving nutritional outcomes. However, approaches that balance facilitation when possible with direct intervention when necessary will reduce the possibility of dependence and/or need for unrealistic exit strategies. Applicants should weigh carefully the use of unsustainable transfers as incentives, and have a clear vision of how transfers will be phased out prior to the end of the activity in a way that will not negatively impact the sustainability of activities or overall impact of the project. For example, market-based approaches that enhance household and community access to goods and services, without creating redundant and unsustainable delivery systems, are more likely to lead to sustainable strengthening of livelihoods.
		Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Use resource transfers strategically. PSNP 4 includes a cash-first principle and FFP expects the current cash-food mix for PSNP transfers to change over the life of the DFAPs. Applicants may include requests for food, cash, or a food/cash split, where appropriate, for consideration with justification. Understanding the role of food assistance as a time-bound resource transfer, and ensuring that it is used creatively and appropriately as a means to enable communities and households to make strategic and transformational choices for themselves, will minimize the possibility of dependence or short-lived impact.
		Liberia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Understanding the role of resource transfers as time-bound, and using them creatively and appropriately as a means to enable communities and households to make strategic and transformational choices for themselves, will minimize the possibility of dependence or short-lived impact.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Key Commodity-Related Guidance
3	2017	Uganda Karamoja	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Applicants should describe how conflict dynamics were taken into account, including any identified risks that FFP resources will exacerbate conflict, how these risks will be mitigated in implementation, and how resource transfers can be applied in a manner that strengthens social cohesion. - FFP encourages applicants to consider imposing conditionalities in exchange for resource transfers, as appropriate. - Use resource transfers and subsidies strategically. FFP supports the use of tailored resource transfers to meet the food security needs of participants and to build capacity of and leverage households and local systems to ensure long-term food security and to become more resilient to shocks and stresses. Doing so not only provides direct support to activity participants but also can strengthen markets, leading to wide reaching multiplier effects. - Specific opportunities exist to engage Karamojong in the market system as key actors and not merely participants. This includes deciphering how resource transfers could help facilitate market growth and expansion while ensuring inclusion of activity participants.
4	2017	Uganda Graduation Pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Applicants should describe how conflict dynamics were taken into account, including any identified risks that FFP resources will exacerbate conflict, how these risks will be mitigated in implementation, and how resource transfers can be applied in a manner that strengthens social cohesion. - Where applicable and appropriate, cash for work or FFW mechanisms may be used to build water and sanitation related infrastructure. - The purpose of food assistance is to smooth consumption and thus minimize the need for negative coping strategies that have harmful long-term consequences. As such, it is a necessary component for graduation.
5	2018	Niger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Deliberate efforts to weave hygiene messaging into other sectoral activities (e.g., linking agricultural asset transfers to hygiene messaging on animal feces and child health) and to push behavior change approaches beyond communication are strongly encouraged.
		Burkina Faso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Deliberate efforts to weave hygiene messaging into other pertinent activities (e.g., linking agricultural asset transfers to hygiene messaging on animal feces and child health) and to push behavior change approaches beyond communication are encouraged.
6	2019	Madagascar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity.

RFA #	Issue Year	Country	Key Commodity-Related Guidance
		Malawi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Using Food Strategically: While approaches varied, both the activities distributed food to project participants to prevent chronic malnutrition in the first 1,000 days and to create assets for communities targeting the most vulnerable, e.g., via food for work. FFP development food assistance (in-kind food aid) took place in a context where World Food Program was also providing food assistance to select households identified by the MVAC. Given the history of food assistance in Malawi, the JMTR was concerned with projects reinforcing expectations of handouts by NGOs, as well as concerns with participants' attention being diverted away from the messages. The JMTR urged the projects to consider shifting in-kind food distribution to other food assistance modalities to support other components of the projects and support existing markets.
7	2019	Kenya	
8	2019	Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity.
9	2020	Zimbabwe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - For the purpose of this policy, the term "construction" includes "construction, alteration, rehabilitation, or repair (including dredging and excavation) of buildings, structures, or other real property", including any infrastructure built or rehabilitated via conditional food assistance activities (e.g. cash-for-assets, food-for-assets).
10	2020	Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. - Applicants should propose interventions that provide youth from PSNP households with public works and tailored livelihood opportunities as part of a "wage employment pathway" that includes cash transfers. - Food for work activities that substantially increase poor people's time burden without producing any clear and direct benefit for the participant other than the transfer itself should not be proposed. - Woredas are classified by GoE as either food, cash, or, a combination of food and cash. Given the predominance of Title II food available for transfers, DFSAs should primarily operate in woredas where in-kind food is more appropriate, reserving cash resources for deepening USAID's efforts to enhance beneficiaries' livelihoods. - Targeted nutrition interventions should complement all food/cash transfer, livelihood intervention, and/or other inputs proposed by the applicant ensuring that all PSNP households, especially Temporarily Direct Support (TDS) clients, simultaneously improving both food security and nutrition related practices.
11	2021	Haiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distributions must support interventions that sustainably reduce vulnerability to food insecurity.