Guidance to Identify Priority Information Gaps

Target Participants: This guidance is for RFSA staff already familiar with the RFSA's proposal technical narrative, BHA non-threshold comments related to refinement period learning; RFSA Learning Agenda, and the RFSA Theory of Change (ToC).[1]

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to identify the most essential information gaps to fill in the refinement period.

Objectives of this Exercise

To identify information gaps:

- That will test TOC pathways with unproven hypotheses. For example,
  - Clarify whether all proposed preconditions are necessary and sufficient in the given context.
  - Explore new approaches for interventions that did not achieve anticipated results in past programs of your IP or others in the same areas.
- That will enhance contextualization of the activity design. For example,
  - differentiated approaches for distinct populations
  - gender and youth dynamics
  - sustainability considerations
    - e.g., motivating or inhibiting factors for participants, local service providers, and other actors
  - unknown risks
- That will test external assumptions

Form small groups of (2-6 people) per sectoral/ Purpose review team.

Team members should be:

- Familiar with your proposal,BHA non-threshold issues; Learning Agenda and TOC
- Knowledgeable about the sector/Purpose review they will contribute to.

[1] For staff less familiar with TOCs in general, PCS recommends hosting the 60-90 minute session "New Staff ToC Orientation" before including them in this process.

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What to Have on Hand

Estimated Team LOE

Review and capture existing progress in workshop spreadsheet: approximately **60 minutes** per Purpose team.

Use the BHA outstanding questions to identify additional gaps: **1-2 hours** per Purpose team.

Early progress on information gaps: Your proposal development team likely started the process of identifying information gaps and learning questions already. Similarly, BHA staff identified a number of areas where they felt refinement year learning could help the RFSA to contextualize approaches. Build on what you have!

- ☐ **Learning agenda**
- ☐ **Relevant BHA non-threshold issues**
- ☐ **Draft Statements of Work** (only if they already exist)
- ☐ **TOC Purpose diagrams**
- ☐ **Proposal technical narrative**
- ☐ **TOC narrative/ complementary documentation:** Unfortunately, after IPs submit RFSA proposals, many teams forget about the TOC complementary documentation. This under-utilized document, if done well, should supply evidence to support the external assumptions and the less intuitive aspects of causal logic (rationales). At times, what we perceive to be an information gap, is clearly explained by existing rationales. The narrative should also provide external actor information that can help to identify information gaps related to sustainability plans.
- ☐ **Information Gap Identification and Clustering Template***:* Your team does not need to use this exact template to track information gaps, but should ensure all columns/elements are included in the format you choose to use.

Identify and Document Information Gaps

1. Document gaps previously identified by RFSA or design team

Start by listing the gaps the RFSA and or design team already identified for the refinement period.

- Typically, these are phrased as learning questions in the Learning Plan or draft Statements of Work. **Enter the learning/ research questions and the source/proposed study** in the relevant columns of the information gap template. If you already know that the question will be a part of a specific study, please list that study versus just listing "learning agenda".
- **Consider specific**: For each gap listed, are there sub-questions that should be prioritized to understand existing gender or youth roles and dynamics so that refinements to the implementation strategy are effectively tailored to these specific groups? Are there sub-questions that should be prioritized to understand behavioral determinants? If so, please list them in columns on gender, youth, and social and behavior change. If not, *you do not need to fill out these columns.*

SPECIFIC LENSES		
GENDER	**YOUTH**	**SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE**
Anything we must know about **existing roles and gender dynamics** when we ask this question? Reflecting on the research question in Column E, what sub-questions will help us understand how to tailor the implementation strategy to distinct gender groups? **You do not need to fill out this cell for every row. Complete when relevant.**	Anything we must know about **existing roles and youth dynamics** when we ask this question? Reflecting on the research question in Column E, what sub-questions will help us understand how to tailor the implementation strategy to distinct youth groups? **You do not need to fill out this cell for every row. Complete when relevant.**	Anything we must know about **behavioral determinants** when we ask this question? Reflecting on the research question in Column E, what sub-questions will help us understand how to tailor the implementation strategy to address these determinants? **You do not need to fill out this cell for every row. Complete when relevant.**

Set yourself up for a fluid application of findings process at culmination

- Take time to identify exactly which outcome(s) or output (s) the questions from your learning agenda are relevant to. In other words, once you fill the information gap what portion of the TOC may need to be modified. **Fill in that outcome/output** in the template**.** Sometimes it may be difficult to determine this. If so, complete the research justification column first, and then come back to it.

- **Clearly fill in the research justification**, briefly explaining how findings will be applied. A common misstep is to list a research justification that is so broad it is unclear how the RFSA team will apply the findings to the activity design or implementation strategy. Taking the time to pinpoint exactly why it is important for the RFSA to fill this gap, helps in two key ways.
  - It helps to demonstrate whether the question is truly a "need to know" gap versus a "nice to know" gap.

Research Justification Samples

Too broad: "This will help to tailor and refine interventions to suit the communities based on research findings."

Good detail: "To inform a revised approach on how to promote adolescent mother participation in care groups."

- Once findings start rolling in and the team must overlay the results on the TOC to help make refinement decisions, having a clearly articulated justification that aligns to a TOC outcome(s) or output(s) will streamline the process.

- You don't need to write a paragraph, just succinctly document how you will use the findings, e.g., *"to determine whether to implement or eliminate the safe migration campaign".*

2. Cross-Check for Gap Prioritization: Which gaps will require primary research

The cross-check questions in the template are based on trends observed across the last five cycles of R&I awards, where the tendency has been to include extraneous information gaps. Performing a simple cross-check can help teams determine whether each information gap is, in fact, critical to fill using primary research. Each column has a drop-down menu for yes, no, or unsure.

GAP PRIORITIZATION: Primary or Secondary		
Is there a good chance we already know this? e.g., past RFSA learnings; proposal research, generally available evidence	**Will IE baseline data answer this question?**	**Do we think this info might be available via secondary data?**

- **Is there a good chance we already know this?** Will collecting this information substantially add to our existing knowledge base?
    - Per BHA, past trends indicate that R&I RFSAs routinely collect information they already have access to, whether through their own organization's documentation or generally available evidence. This is particularly true for continuing programs. Unless there is a good reason to believe that existing data may no longer be valid (e.g., large changes in context), make the most of information you already have!
- **Will the impact evaluation baseline data answer this question?**
    - In the past R&I cycles, it has been common for RFSA teams to prioritize questions for formative research that the baseline will answer. If you find that you are asking a question that will be answered by baseline data, it is important to discuss whether there is any benefit to gathering this information before the baseline is complete? In most cases, the question should be modified, such that the findings can complement baseline results.

> **Example:**
>
> **Instead of asking** "*How diversified are people's livelihoods?"* a common baseline indicator, **perhaps ask questions like:** "What motivates or influences distinct populations to diversify livelihoods?" "What, if any, tradeoffs have individuals and households experienced due to diversification?"

- **Do we think this information might be available via secondary data?**
    - In the past R&I cycles, it has been common for RFSA teams to prioritize questions for formative research that could be easily answered by existing secondary data. The RFSA team may not yet know the answer to these questions, but it will not take more than a

desk review to find the answer. Flagging these questions helps efforts to whittle down the list of gaps to those that must be answered via primary research.

Once these questions are answered, the color-coding provides a helpful visual for prioritization.

Lots of green in a row?

➔ A sign of a good info gap candidate.

Lots of red in a row?

➔ Reconsider whether this is a priority gap.

Primarily yellow in a row?

➔ More team discussion is necessary.

3. Identify gaps to respond to key BHA non-threshold issues

If BHA has outlined a number of non-threshold issues in an issues letter, the next step in the info-gap identification process is to capture key questions that can help the RFSA understand how to respond to these issues. For each issue, you will follow the process outlined above with two key distinctions:

- The specific questions you document have not yet been formulated as they were for the Learning Agenda. The team will need to read the BHA issue and then design appropriate questions that respond to the issue.
- A first step will be to cross-check the existing gaps/ questions from the Learning Plan to see if they will respond to the BHA issues.

Annex A offers questions that may help you identify gaps for BHA non-threshold issues.

Numerous questions will bubble up in this process. Try to do an initial triage by primarily listing questions that must be fully understood prior to beginning any implementation. For example, areas where it would be risky or potentially ineffective to begin to implement without understanding the issue. The section Need to Know or Nice to Know in Annex A offers more detail on this best practice.

4. Repeat the Cross-Check for Gap Prioritization Process

Once gaps are documented, repeat the process outlined in the earlier "Gap Prioritization" section and fill in the corresponding columns in the template to cross-check whether this gap is critical to explore via primary research.

Remember:

Once these questions are answered, the color-coding provides a helpful visual for prioritization.

Lots of green in a row?

➔ A sign of a good info gap candidate.

Lots of red in a row?

➔ Reconsider whether this is a priority gap.

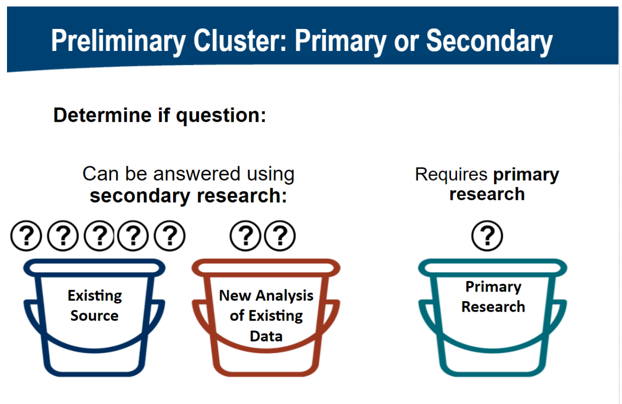
Primarily yellow in a row?

➔ More team discussion is necessary.

At this stage, the RFSA team will have two key clusters:

- Questions that are already known or can be filled via a secondary source or the baseline
- Questions that will require primary research.

Moving forward you will only work with the primary research questions. Sorting the spreadsheet using the cell color function can help bring those important primary research questions to the top.



5. Clustering: Which gaps will require a refinement SOW?

Clustering the primary research information gaps into those that must be filled during the refinement period and those that can be answered by continued learning and/or operational research will be a key objective of discussions with BHA. Your team can get a head start by considering the following cross-check clustering questions but don't worry if you don't know all the answers yet. Use the drop-down menus in the Excel sheet that correspond to each question.

First Cluster: Is this question a candidate for refinement period learning?

- **Is it essential/ urgent that we fully understand this gap prior to beginning any implementation?**
    - Distinguishing between what we must know BEFORE we begin to implement and what we could capture via implementation will help the team prioritize refinement period questions. Ask yourselves—why is it urgent that we understand this?
    - One key objective of refinement period research is to ensure that we are implementing in the most contextually appropriate way, including ensuring that proposed interventions will not increase risk. If our RFSA team already knows enough to safely implement a contextually appropriate intervention, we may not need to prioritize some information gaps for refinement period research. Instead, we can include these questions as part of the continued learning plan whenever implementation begins.

- **Is this a long-term learning question?** i.e., It will be difficult to understand in the timeframe of the refinement period
    - Learning agendas often contain broad questions that will be explored over the life of the award. While they may be excellent questions for long-term learning, these questions are not good candidates for refinement period research because it will be impossible to answer them within the typical 12-15 month window. Priority information gaps are those that, when filled, will inform a RFSA's culmination decisions about how to adjust the activity design or implementation strategy.

Once these answers are completed in the template, the color-coding provides a helpful visual for prioritization.

Are they green?

→ Probably a good candidate for refinement period learning.

Are they red?

→ Probably a good candidate for operational and/ or continued learning.

Are they yellow?

→ More team discussion is necessary.

Third Cluster: Methodology/ methods

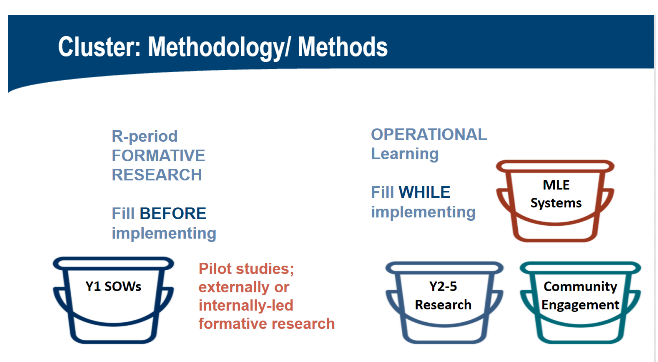
Once the information gaps are grouped into refinement period learning and operational or continued learning, you can start to determine the best methodology, or in some cases, method for answering each question.

Common choices for **refinement period learning** include:

- Pilots and formative studies ---which will require a Statement of Work (SOW) or Protocol
- Community consultation--which will not require a SOW or Protocol

Common choices for **operational or continued learning** include:

- RFSA monitoring system
- Community engagement
- Y2-Y5 formal research (which may require a SOW).



Annex A: Questions To Guide the Identification of Information Gap Identification

The following questions may help to determine what you must know in order to refine your RFSA design and implementation plans over the course of the refinement period.

Contextualization

- Evidence supporting the causal linkages should be valid for the **specific operating context**. Preconditions (including cross-purpose linkages) should be **necessary and sufficient** to achieve the outcomes.
    - ? *What information is necessary to feel confident that the set of proposed interventions will produce the anticipated results in the current context?*
    - ? *What information might help us decide whether to eliminate a proposed intervention based on the current context?*

Example: Identifying the most promising target population in a given context

Evidence from other countries may show that grandmothers have high potential to influence the IYCF practices of new mothers and fathers. The TOC therefore lists grandmothers as the key target group for trainings & knowledge sharing interventions related to IYCF. However, this may or may not be true for your current context. What questions do you need to ask to either confirm or refute that ***in your RFSA implementation area*** *grandmothers are the most strategic target group? What questions will help identify who in addition to grandmothers could potentially have the most influence over changing IYCF practices of young mothers and fathers?*

- The ToC should demonstrate **differentiated approaches/pathways for distinct population** characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, livelihoods, exposure to shocks, and available assets).
    - ? *What information will help us fine-tune distinct approaches for distinct populations? E.g., What information will help us identify the most economically viable approach for distinct target groups?*

Examples: Differentiated Pathways

A pathway to change infant and young child feeding behavior or family planning practices will substantially vary by women's age and perhaps ethnicity.

Pathways to increase income will vary by livelihood type, assets, growth potential, and risk profile of the livelihood strategy.

A good start is to ensure that the TOC identifies distinct populations in the outcomes (as relevant) and the distinct needs of the distinct populations in the outputs.

- **Risk Mitigation**
    - ? *What information is necessary to identify potential risks posed by the proposed interventions?*
    - ? *What information do we need to effectively adapt the RFSA design to mitigate such risks?*

Sustainability

? *What more do we need to understand about the motivating factors that will encourage targeted populations (individuals [men, women, youth], households, local service providers (LSPs), etc.) to* *adopt recommended approaches, use and/ or pay for desired services, or provide necessary services?*

- *What is essential for us to understand about LSPs' capacity to provide quality services? Their access to required resources for service delivery?*
- *What is essential for us to know about the willingness of existing institutions (government, NGOs, private sector, etc.), CBOs, LSPs, etc. to assume increasing responsibility for interventions over the LOA? To be responsive to population needs?*

Assumptions

Are there any internal or implementation assumptions related to outcome achievement?

E.g., Income-earning potential is sufficient to sustain participants' engagement with value-chain actors; or Community decision-making bodies will not prevent youth and women from actively participating.

Internal assumptions are not the type of assumptions that BHA asks partners to document in TOCs because they are within the activity's control. However, it is critical to explore them in the process of identifying information gaps.

For example:

- *What is essential for us to know about community decision-making bodies' attitudes toward women and youth involvement?*
- *What level of income is necessary to sustain participant's engagement in value chains?*

Need to Know or Nice to Know?

One challenge with using a TOC to identify gaps is that the list can grow and grow. Suddenly that small and focused list is a hundred rows long!

Before you list a new information gap in the Excel spreadsheet, use a "need to know" versus "nice to know" lens. The goal is to whittle this list of questions down to those that are essential to answer. **If an information gap is essential, it should be very clear how you will apply the knowledge gained. (i.e., Why do we care?**)

- Is this knowledge essential to selecting the most appropriate interventions for distinct populations? To whittling down RFSA efforts to the most effective suite of interventions? To identifying the best timing for an intervention? To eliminating an intervention?
- Is this knowledge essential to identifying the most effective practices/ ideas to promote in training?
- Is this knowledge essential to identifying the most promising target populations for various interventions? (distinct from the impact population of any particular outcome)
- Is this knowledge essential to identifying strategic stakeholders to engage for long-term sustainability of input or service provision?

Remember! If an information gap is essential, it should be very clear how you will apply knowledge gained.