

Building Trust through Adaptive Learning Processes

The Program Cycle Support (PCS) Associate Award is funded by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) through the IDEAL project led by Save the Children. It aims to assist implementing partners (IPs) in developing and executing efficient, evidence-based initiatives that drive substantial and sustainable improvements in food and nutrition security. PCS, in collaboration with BHA personnel, USAID Mission staff, and food security support mechanisms (FSSMs), offers IPs facilitation and capacity-building support at critical stages throughout the lifecycle of BHA-funded resilience food security activities (RFSAs), including the refinement period.

PCS promotes its own development through feedback and established processes for internal analysis and reflection. These measures allow PCS to continually enhance its technical capabilities and ensure that support and events are delivered effectively. The team leverages its capabilities to tailor events to align with BHA and IP priorities using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. These approaches evaluate team strengths and challenges, and collect stakeholder input to identify issues and opportunities that can impede or support reaching the activity's objectives. PCS uses the following methods to collect and/or review stakeholder feedback:

- End of Action Surveys
- After Action Reviews (AAR) - External and Internal
 - Key Informant Interviews
 - Focus Group Discussions
- Participant Observations
- Ongoing Informal Feedback Loops

PCS also dedicates time for "Pause and Reflect" retreats where the team collectively reviews feedback, identifies patterns, devises solutions for challenges, and reaches a consensus on new standard practices. Allocating time to implement these approaches and draw out insights from stakeholders helps build trust in the event design process. PCS then pinpoints trends and synthesizes the findings in a report to document achievements, lessons learned, and recommendations to improve future events.

END OF ACTION SURVEYS

At the end of each workshop (and occasionally technical assistance sessions) PCS shares a participant survey to gather qualitative and quantitative insights into project indicators, concentrating on assessing the extent to which participants:



- Are satisfied with the **knowledge generated** during the event,
- Believe **priorities and objectives** of the event were achieved,
- Think that **general agreements** were achieved,
- Cite **shared understandings** on BHA expectations,
- Are satisfied with the **collaboration and coordination** experienced between BHA, IPs, and FSSMs, and
- Have found **PCS support** to be valuable in enhancing collaboration and coordination.

AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

Immediately following each event, the team conducts an internal meeting to review the event's performance and identify areas for improvement. About two to three weeks after an activity has ended, PCS invites key IP, BHA, and FSSM stakeholders to participate in **focus group discussions** or **key informant interviews** to share more in-depth feedback on the event process. PCS tailors the after-action review process to each country's context and is sensitive to constraints on IP and BHA staff time. Questions focus on different phases of the event: preparation activities, coordination with participants, clarity and usefulness of supporting materials, extent to which needs were met, event and facilitation structure, relationship-building, and effectiveness of technical discussions in achieving objectives.

PAUSE AND REFLECT LEARNING RETREATS

PCS conducts internal regular pause and reflect meetings to review learnings from activities during the quarter in aggregate and to discuss any needed adjustments, the design of events, or written guidance. To do so, the team engages in a comprehensive review, delving into the challenges faced by both the team members and their partners throughout each phase of the activity. This reflective process aims to identify potential solutions and strategies to adapt technical support approaches. Additionally, the team takes this opportunity to formalize and document best practices. The team also reflects on the learning agenda questions and records observations from recent events.

PCS' four learning agenda questions include:

- What are the areas in which RFSAs most need support during the program cycle? Which roles need this support? Why?

- How does different timing, sequencing, and layering of program support components throughout the program cycle contribute to IPs' ability to address key capacity gaps?
- What support modalities are most appropriate for the program cycle and/or how can the given support modality be enhanced?
- What strategies help or hinder creating collaborative relationships between IP staff and BHA and the FSSMs? How?

These questions help PCS guide discussions about the value and practical application of the observations and experiences for various stakeholders, including FSSMs, BHA, and IPs. Overall, the Pause & Reflect Retreats enable PCS to apply experiences, innovate solutions in response to feedback and anticipate future challenges and potential responses.

FEEDBACK IN ACTION

PCS leveraged its adaptive learning process to shift its approach to and framing of technical support to RFSAs. Early feedback from event surveys and the AAR process suggested that partners highly valued PCS support. However, in the immediate lead-up to the event, partners could at times find PCS guidance to be overwhelming or they were unable to take advantage of support due to limited bandwidth. Through reflections during internal AARs and the Pause & Reflect Learning Retreat, the team identified some possible adaptations to better respond to RFSAs needs and availability, such as adding informal check-ins on preparations, providing 'just-in-time' feedback right up to the event date, and offering a wider variety of support options. As additional feedback was considered, PCS rebranded its 'technical assistance' as 'technical collaboration' to underscore that PCS recognizes the expertise of RFSAs and is available to partner together. This process has bolstered trust with the RFSAs, evident in their openness during AARs and subsequent engagements. Moreover, these ongoing iterations reflect PCS' commitment to continual learning and adaptation.

