

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

The Refine and Implement Pilot: USAID Food for Peace's Approach to Adaptable Mechanisms

Joan Whelan

USAID/Food for Peace



Women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in an adult literacy class, part of a development food assistance program. Adult literacy was identified as one barrier to food security. *Jessica Hartl, USAID.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) works in more than 50 countries to improve the food security of vulnerable populations. FFP's emergency food assistance program meets life-saving needs of populations in crisis. Its large-scale multi-sectoral development food assistance activities target the underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition among the extreme poor while strengthening the resilience of individuals, households, and the local systems where they live.

These development activities are implemented in challenging, crisis-prone, and ever-changing environments where the complex nature of food insecurity and how it affects highly vulnerable populations can be difficult to untangle. To make programming more responsive, FFP, starting with its Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 round of procurements, has asked all applicants to develop a comprehensive theory of change (TOC) that would strengthen the strategic response to underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition and guide design and implementation of the assistance awards.

Working with its implementer community, FFP chose to further support context-responsive programming in the FY 2016 round of procurements. A new pilot approach called Refine and Implement (R&I) builds in a 1-year refinement period during which new awardees are to carry out extensive formative research and community consultation, develop more refined partnership

engagements, and prepare for implementation through hiring and training of staff and procurement of goods and supplies. At the end of the 1-year period, in consultation with FFP, the awardees are to refine their TOCs and implementation planning to better respond to the opportunities and challenges in the local context.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

FFP is aware that all too often, as with other donor-funded programs, design is carried out at a distance from implementation. Request for applications (RFAs) for assistance awards (as with proposals for acquisition awards) are generally not written by those who will be responsible for implementation, and in-depth knowledge of the local context—and the barriers and enablers to achieving food security in that context—is not always available at the time an applicant is designing their response to the RFA. Further, due to the length of procurement cycles, situations on the ground may change, with new challenges or new opportunities arising by the time the award has been made, staff has been hired, and the awardees are ready to implement. Yet, all too often, the implementation strategy and anticipated results are established at the application stage, and implementers feel constrained to carry out only what was initially envisioned.

FFP targets the most vulnerable populations, in contexts subject to shocks and stressors that can cause the backsliding of development gains if the risks are not anticipated, understood, and protected against. Given the many underlying drivers of food insecurity and their interconnected nature, understanding the local determinants of hunger and poverty will help to prioritize limited resources most effectively, while working strategically and in a coordinated manner within the local systems will help those limited resources go farthest in meeting extensive needs. Finally, in-depth consultations with local communities can result in greater community buy-in and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of sustainability of outcomes. R&I seeks to create opportunities for each of these pathways to successful programming in complex environments.

R&I calls for a strong focus on collaboration, learning about the local context, and adaptive management to update the TOC, implementation planning, and strategic partnerships. FFP envisions that with R&I, program design will be shaped to better reflect the operating environment, and space will be created for innovation, iterative learning, and strengthening of partnerships and coordination with local stakeholders. Ultimately, as a result of the refinement period, activities will be better equipped to respond to changing or unanticipated situations on the ground once the awardee begins implementation.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

The process through which FFP developed the R&I approach embodies CLA principles. Through its collaborative learning mechanism, the Technical and Operational Performance Support Program, FFP held a series of consultations with the implementing partner community to examine its annual RFA



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for development awards. The goal was to improve FFP requirements and guidance in ways that would facilitate stronger design and more effective implementation by awardees.

The first consultation was held in June 2013 and resulted in a recommendation that FFP explore funding a refinement year during which start-up activities, assessments, baselines, and other formative activities could be completed at a low level of funding. FFP called for another partner consultation meeting in 2014, during which the recommendation for this refinement period was discussed in more detail. Finally, in 2015, a third consultation with implementing partners was dedicated solely to R&I, to discuss what it might look like in practice, and the implications on budgets, design, implementation, and the quality of results. The consultation also allowed implementers to discuss any concerns they might have over the new approach.

But R&I is itself an approach deeply rooted in CLA principles. The goal is to provide an inception period during which partners will better understand and adapt to the local context, applying principles of learning and adaptive management to the engagement with the communities, learning from these interactions, and refining the TOC and implementation planning in response. Further, a key focus of the refinement period is on enhanced stakeholder engagement, allowing for greater community consultation and input, as well as collaboration and synergies with other actors.

R&I envisions awardees using the inception period, along with their other start-up activities, to consult with communities and validate proposed interventions, assumptions, and the overall TOC; analyze the institutions, the operating environment, and policies that might affect the project's implementation and success; carry out formative research and the initial environmental examination; begin a gender analysis and market analysis; and note major shocks and stresses and how people are managing them. During community consultations, awardees would discuss the communities' priorities and needs, causes of food insecurity and undernutrition, vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition, and capacity to recover from food insecurity shocks. In looking at institutions, operating environments, and policies, awardees would research the institutional and policy environment, governance issues, synergies with other U.S. Government investments and other donors, and existing and potential linkages to achieve broader resilience objectives. In addition to required analyses (gender, environmental impact, and climate change impact), formative research may investigate positive deviances and the determinants and barriers to optimum health and nutrition practices for pregnant and lactating mothers and children under 2; barriers and proven pathways to proper hygiene, sanitation, and access to safe water; challenges to and opportunities for recovery from food insecurity; and water resources vulnerability analysis.

At the end of Year 1, the chief of party is expected to make a presentation on assessment and consultation results and their implications, including presenting the revised TOC, revised partnership plans (if applicable), and updated implementation schedule. This presentation would be developed and carried out in partnership with FFP. The main implementation is to take place during Years 2-5. Toward the end of Year 4, the award is to undergo an external evaluation with quantitative and qualitative components that will be compared with the baseline study. Based on the results of this evaluation, the award may be extended for 3-5 years or will close at the end of Year 5.



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Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

The R&I pilot would not be possible without strong leaders at FFP committed to consultation and learning throughout all aspects of FFP's work. The Missions in the pilot countries, Liberia and Democratic Republic of Congo, also provided full support to the experiment. The pilot also benefited from the commitment of staff in the Office of Acquisition and Assistance who worked with FFP to make the pilot a procurement reality. As was evidenced through open dialogue during the 2-3 years preceding the pilot, the FFP implementer community was optimistic about the opportunity to deeply engage with the local system and refine design and implementation planning as a result. All parties believe that this process will result in stronger development results.

The R&I pilot will require greater involvement and time investment from FFP staff backstopping the awards. Planning for the Year 1 refinement period will be carried out by the awardees in consultation with FFP, with FFP reviewing the scopes of work for assessments to be conducted, and engaging with the awardee on the refinement of the TOC and the implications it will have on partnerships, work planning, and measurement of results.

The operating environments in which FFP customarily implements its development awards serve as both a justification for and obstacle to the R&I pilot. The countries where the pilot is occurring, Liberia and Democratic Republic of Congo, are complex, low-resource, and shock-prone operating environments, exactly the context where R&I is most needed. However, these same characteristics provide challenges to carrying out a pilot activity: In the kind of operating environment where coups, floods, viral outbreaks, or drought are realistic challenges, potentially providing setbacks to the achievement of planned results, it is more difficult to establish a fixed vision of success with the pilot.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The submission deadline for this RFA was June 13, 2016.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

As noted above, given the complex nature of the operating contexts where the pilots are being carried out, defining "success" for the pilot in terms of fixed results will be difficult. In addition, because R&I is expected to have a positive impact across broad aspects of the overall design and implementation of the award, and because of the scale and scope of these large multi-sectoral efforts, it is not feasible to carry out an experimental research design that would provide us a clear counterfactual and, thus, an impact that can be attributed to the R&I approach specifically.

Instead, we are trying to adopt more complexity-aware methods, such as a modified version of Most Significant Change, to monitor and document how awardees engaged differently with the local



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systems in which they are working, the value of the knowledge they gained, and how such knowledge was applied in programmatic adjustments. Another line of questions should explore whether staff feel more empowered to make decisions and innovate, and, if so, how this may have changed how they plan or manage their work. Though FFP has no baseline to which to compare it, the reflection should include dialogue with community members to gauge whether they feel they have had a say in the work being implemented and whether their needs and strengths are reflected in that work.

FFP's first internal reflection exercise will take place after the selection committees have finished reviewing applications. The discussion will explore how R&I was included and developed in the applications to document what was different, any perceived value to the approach at the application stage, any unintended consequences, and how guidance for R&I should be improved for the future.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Due to the nature of procurement timelines, FFP has begun planning for its FY 2017 round of development awards, and will be making awards by September 30, 2017. At that time, the FY 2016 round of R&I pilots will still be in the midst of, or finishing, their refinement year. The implication is that full information on the value of the FY 2016 refinement year will not be available by the time FFP needs to commit to proceed with R&I for FY 2017.

However, after internal discussion, there seems to be a general belief that the positive impacts of R&I will far outweigh the challenges FFP will encounter over the next few years in implementing the approach. Therefore, all indications are that FFP will commit to R&I for FY 2017.

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.

