

# Learning and Adapting from Community Feedback

**AUTHORS**

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**ACTIVITY/PROGRAM**

Graduating to Resilience (GRA)

**ORGANIZATION**

AVSI Foundation

**COUNTRY**

Uganda

## CONTEXT

The Graduating to Resilience Activity (GRA) is a 7-year project implemented by the AVSI Foundation, in partnership with Trickle Up and American Institutes for Research (AIR). The activity is working with 13,200 households across two cohorts in the Kamwenge District of Western Uganda. These households are economically active but chronically unable to meet their basic needs without assistance. The activity serves an equal number of host and refugee communities in the district, considering each population's unique needs. The activity aims to improve the food security and nutrition status of household members, improve the household's economic status, and increase resilience of household members and communities.

## ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

### Describe your adaptive management example. What is the problem you were trying to solve? Why did you choose to implement it this way?

The Graduating to Resilience Activity is implemented across a wide, multicultural area, in which interventions planned for one group of participants are not always appropriate or effective for other groups of participants. As a result, the activity needs to carefully tailor, adapt, and validate individual interventions to the specific needs and priorities of different communities. This requires activity staff to have regular access to up-to-date and contextually grounded information on the needs, priorities, and concerns of individual communities. Additionally, given that the Activity was committed to proactively involving participants in decision-making processes and activity design, it needed a system for incorporating participant views into ongoing scenario planning and decision-making. To fill this need, GRA established standing committees, democratically elected bodies made up of activity participants who regularly come together to provide feedback on activity interventions, discuss issues arising from interventions, and highlight participant priorities. By offering a platform for feedback and dialogue between the activity and participants, the standing committee meetings are an important part of GRA's adaptive management approach. Once elected, standing committees serve for the duration of their cohort and represent their fellow participants in quarterly meetings with activity staff.



The women's standing committee holds a meeting. Photo Credit: Esther Bikyuka, AVSI

Standing committee meetings are held quarterly immediately following the quarterly data collection cycles. Meeting locations are decided by committee members, with support from the Activity in finding a safe, convenient, and accessible space. Within two weeks of quarterly data collection, data is reviewed and analyzed to identify and compile potential topics of interest on which activity staff would like to receive feedback or information from participants. Based on these topics, field and program staff draft Focus Group Discussion guides, which are reviewed and approved by the Technical Steering Committee. The standing committee members are then mobilized and informed of the suggested dates for the meeting. The meetings are led by a facilitator who draws on focus group discussion best practices to keep the conversation focused, while allowing committee members the freedom to express themselves and openly provide feedback. Each session includes specific questions that the activity has prepared for the standing committee, along with an open Q&A, in which staff listen to the questions and concerns that the committee members themselves wish to raise. This feedback is recorded in the Standing Committee Action Tracker, where all identified questions or concerns, any follow-up actions, and staff responsible for completing follow-up actions are logged. This report is shared with the technical steering committee, and the outlined actions are fed into the implementation plan and timeline, which are updated accordingly.

## IMPACT

### **Describe the impact your adaptive management approach has had on your activity and its objectives. If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?**

Among the various mechanisms GRA uses to gather participant feedback, including a toll-free line and an onsite suggestion box, standing committees are the most popular and easy way for community members to have their voices heard. The engagement with the standing committee members has helped create an understanding of how emerging issues may influence activities. Activity staff use this information when creating and reviewing scenario plans to prepare to address risks and challenges. This process has improved the responsiveness of the activity, as it can quickly adapt work plans once scenarios materialize and staff are notified of challenges. Through this process, GRA ensures that participant voices are present in the identification of and response to the scenarios.

For example, through standing committee meetings, the Activity learned that participants were facing challenges with withdrawals of MobileMoney, which is how the consumption support is distributed. Specifically, it learned that participants in refugee communities were having to walk long distances to reach MobileMoney agents and that it was taking them up to two hours to make withdrawals. Participants also highlighted that even after they reached MobileMoney withdrawal points, agents sometimes ran out of cash before withdrawals could be made. As a result, the Activity engaged with MTN management to expand the number of MobileMoney agents in the settlement making it better equipped to plan for this issue in the future.

Standing committees also allow GRA to contextualize trends in programmatic data, facilitating the ability to plan appropriate responses to issues as they emerge. When an issue is identified, the standing committees help the Activity better understand the reasons why a given intervention or strategy may not be working, which allows Activity staff to assess which adaptations would be most appropriate. For example, GRA learned from the data collection efforts that households did not seem to be boiling their water to treat it. However, the data collected did not provide any insight into why this was occurring. Thanks to the Standing Committee, activity staff was able to identify multiple factors that were contributing to this problem, including - among others - scarce fuel and charcoal; the belief that the water from pumps had already been treated; and a fear that treated water would cause illness. This information allowed the Activity to adapt and add coaching on WASH topics that specifically addressed community member concerns into the work plan. Activity staff also relayed the standing committee's feedback to WASH partners to ensure alignment of messaging.

## REFLECTION

### What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?

GRA's system for tracking the standing committee's feedback and incorporating the actions that emerge from it into planned activities is critical to the ability to use this feedback mechanism to strengthen adaptive management on the activity. Additionally, the fact that standing committee meetings are aligned with other quarterly data collection mechanisms ensures that information is reaching GRA teams at the appropriate time for workplan revisions and that staff efforts are not duplicated.

Participants are divided into separate committees based on their age, gender, and host/refugee status. The creation of separate committees based on these characteristics allows Activity staff to bring together individuals with similar lived experiences and who share a level of trust with one another. This creates a space where all committee members feel empowered to participate. For example, since Uganda is a highly gendered society, it is important for women to have a space where they are able to speak among each other openly. The decision to create a separate standing committee for youth was born out of the Activity's adaptive management approach. In response to feedback that youth felt that their contributions were not sufficiently valued, the Activity observed the need for youth to have their own spaces in which to provide feedback and be heard more effectively. The close connection and trust that participants have with their elected representatives also strengthens the effectiveness of the standing committee, by ensuring that participants feel comfortable and able to elevate issues they are facing to committee members.



The men's standing committee holds a meeting. Photo Credit: Esther Bikyuka, AVSI

When asked what they wished had been done differently in the implementation of these committees, standing committee members highlighted two administrative issues that had the potential to negatively impact participants. More specifically, members requested that the scheduling of sessions occur earlier to avoid conflicts with income-generating activities and that transportation reimbursement be paid out more rapidly. Improvements in these two aspects can increase participants' ability to fully engage in the committees and decrease dropout rates during the cohort length.

## TOOLS

### What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach? Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.

The Standing Committee Action Tracker provides a record of participant feedback and assigns responsibility for completing any necessary steps relating to the feedback. Following standing committee meetings, Activity staff catalogues the suggestions, feedback, and opinions shared in the meeting, and the technical steering committee assigns relevant program officers to investigate and/or resolve the issues. The tracker is used to record any necessary adaptations to the program that might need to be implemented, escalated, or considered later. Click [here](#) to download a copy of the Standing Committee Action Tracker.

## CONTACT

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The Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity is funded by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and 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, supporting them in the design and implementation of effective emergency and non-emergency food security activities.