SCALE Final Evaluation (2022)
Lessons Learned Summary

CONTEXT

To build on the work completed under the USAID-funded Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) program, the Office of Food for Peace (FFP, now merged with OFDA into the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, BHA) funded the Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment (SCALE) Associate Award. It is a five-year USD $4.9 million capacity strengthening, knowledge sharing and learning initiative operating between 2018 to 2023.

Its aim is to strengthen the impact, sustainability and scalability of BHA-funded agriculture, natural resource management, and off-farm/non-farm livelihood activities in both emergency and non-emergency contexts. Implemented by Mercy Corps in collaboration with Save the Children, SCALE partners with food security implementers to capture, generate, apply and share knowledge to foster resilient agricultural systems and enhance income opportunities for the world's vulnerable.

Purpose, Scope and Methodology

In March 2022, Bodhi Global Analysis was contracted to undertake a final evaluation of the SCALE Award. The purpose of the final evaluation was to assess SCALE's relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, and performance. The evaluation provides recommendations for future food security support mechanisms and other capacity strengthening and learning activities.

Bodhi implemented a multi-phased evaluation to answer 13 research questions. The triangulation of multiple sources of data ensured robustness and reliability to the findings. The evaluation team employed: (i) a **desk review** of program design documents, reports, and activities documentation, (ii) **key informant interviews** with SCALE program staff, USAID/BHA staff, implementing partners (IPs) and other stakeholders, (iii) **focus group discussions** with SCALE program staff, Community of Practice participants, and Technical Committee members, and (iv) an **online survey** sent out to IP staff and other beneficiaries of SCALE's activities (with 72 responses, including 40 IPs).

KEY FINDINGS

1. Program design

SCALE was found to be correctly designed to meet its goal, through its adaptive management approach, effective staff structure and mechanisms to determine what support IPs need.

SCALE's adaptive model set up a strong structure for the program to respond to IP needs, in terms of both the type of support offered and priority focus areas. SCALE had effective channels to understand these needs through formal platforms, as such the Technical Committee and roundtable consultations. Equally important, SCALE had informal discussions with the wider community, through emails/phone exchanges and one-on-one mentorship sessions. This model was supported by a technically strong staff and their positive relationship with the donor.

IPs found the SCALE team to be effectively managed, with the right technical skills. They found communication with the team to be frequent and appropriate to their needs. SCALE's staffing structure consisted of a small team of permanent staff and a number of external consultants, which was appropriate given the budget and uncertain nature of SCALE's programming. The Technical Committee provided an important mechanism for technical knowledge sharing between SCALE and IPs, but had limitations in its ability to validate SCALE focus areas and for IPs to learn about BHA priorities.

Limitations related to SCALE's funding streams and approach restricted its ability to cater to BHA-funded emergency partners. Despite emergency programs being part of SCALE's mandate, SCALE's approach has generally focused on non-emergency program needs, due to funding restrictions and, according to some respondents, a mismatch between SCALE's long-term approaches and the short-term interventions typical of emergency programs. The few responses from emergency staff suggest that budget and time are the biggest barriers to engaging with SCALE.

Recommendations include:

- Continue the current adaptive model focused on prioritizing activities according to IP needs;
- Collect consultation perspectives from a wider pool of IP representation;
- Consider setting up a centralized platform for TC members to share feedback;
- Develop an approach to providing support to emergency programs.

2. Relevance and Effectiveness

SCALE effectively filled IP capacity gaps by providing standard support activities to address common IP needs, and ad hoc support on requests to fill specialized needs. IPs provided many examples of how they were able to apply SCALE knowledge.

IP respondents found the types of resources and support SCALE provided relevant and useful to their needs, particularly resilient agriculture and social and behavior change (SBC) trainings. Overall, SCALE was able to fill common IP capacity gaps through its main support activities, as well as a number of more specific gaps through ad hoc support. When IPs were asked what technical assistant gaps they still had, most mentioned specific topics related to climate and markets.

IPs appreciated the technical rigor and practical nature of capacity strengthening activities. IPs receiving resilient agriculture training were able to integrate knowledge in their programming, especially if they received follow-up support. For SBC training, some IPs were able to apply knowledge and notice results; however, this depended on existing staff skill sets, interest and time.

IPs felt SCALE learning documents and tools were useful and applicable to their work. The most applied resources were those used in conjunction with other SCALE support activities (such as training), particularly the SBC and resilient agriculture manuals and tools. IPs that did not access and/or apply SCALE resources mentioned not having time to search through the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network website, having sufficient expertise within their teams, and language barriers.

Knowledge sharing events provided practical knowledge and focused on relevant technical areas. Events on broader practices, including COVID mitigation and SBC, were applicable to wider range of IPs than events focused on more specialized topics, such as financial inclusion or migration. Regardless, IPs found it useful to hear other perspectives, connect with others and have concepts explained to them, even if knowledge was not directly applied. IPs would prefer in-person events, with longer sessions and more networking.

Recommendations include:

- Continue to focus training topics on areas that can benefit a wide range of IPs, alongside ad-hoc support
- Co-facilitate training with local consultants to ensure materials are fully adapted to IP-specific contexts;
- Develop a directory of SCALE learning documents and tools, and consider adding a comment section on the FSN Network website for each learning resource;
- Facilitate more in-person knowledge sharing events to increase networking opportunities.

3. Engagement efficiency

SCALE built a strong relationship with a high number of IPs. The focus tended to be on the most responsive IPs, which are not necessarily those most in need.

The SCALE team was able to leverage many channels to initiate outreach to IPs. IPs were happy with the ways SCALE made first contact. However, there were a number of challenges for IPs to engage with SCALE, including not having time and not being aware of the kinds of support SCALE could provide.

SCALE successfully connected with IPs at the start of the RFSA cycle through introductions at PCS-led Inception workshops and then following up. SCALE was also able to engage IPs during their implementation phase by initiating collaborations, for example, on case studies and webinar presentations. This increased IP contact time with SCALE, leading to deeper relationships and eventually IP requests for support. SCALE support can be useful throughout the RFSA cycle, but early planning is preferred.

There is some positive correlation between the amount of support received and IP satisfaction with SCALE. However, IPs are mainly satisfied when they are fully aware of SCALE's support activities, have made intentional choices on what support suits them best, and feel that support has been tailored to their needs.

Recommendations include:

- Take a comprehensive approach to making contact with all IPs and at a minimum, ensure all IPs are fully aware of what support SCALE can provide;
- Provide full information of SCALE's support activities on the FSN Network page for SCALE;
- Continue making first contact with IPs at PCS-led workshops and through direct contact.

4. Sustainability

SCALE's resources and support are being institutionalized into IP activities (and donor practices). SCALE has taken efforts to ensure the quality of knowledge is maintained and its resources are accessible and used beyond the program.

IPs were able to replicate SCALE training, especially resilient agriculture and SBC training. IPs cascaded training down many levels, primarily to fellow staff

members, and eventually program beneficiaries. The key challenge was maintaining quality at each level. Some IPs provided examples of passing training to people outside of their programs. In terms of long-term sustainability, SCALE has been producing e-learning content to ensure its materials can be accessed beyond the program.

Respondents are likely to continue using SCALE resources beyond the program, as they have been internalized into their practices and libraries of tools. Sharing of resources and tools is widespread, particularly documents on resilient agriculture and SBC. IP staff are using SCALE resources outside of their current BHA-funded programs.

As SCALE is well-placed to understand both the challenges that country programs face and the interest of the donor, SCALE has been able to feedback IP experiences to BHA, which has influenced BHA practices.

Recommendations include:

- Prioritize co-facilitations with local training centers and consultants to continue using SCALE content;

- Continue investing in e-learning video modules;

- Continue acting as an informal conduit for collecting IP feedback on BHA processes

Access the full report here and learn more at www.fsnnetwork.org/SCALE.