# Insights from **USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance Multi-Year Humanitarian Activities**

**MAY 2024**

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

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## PHOTO CREDITS

Catholic Relief Services. P2R adult literacy class in Kapoeta North County in Eastern Equatoria State, South Sudan.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

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## ABBREVIATIONS

**ACCESS** Accelerating Recovery and Resilience in South Sudan Activity

**AOR** Agreement Officer's Representative

**APS** Annual Program Statement

**BHA** Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance

**BHAKARI** Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin Activity

**CARB** Complementary Action for Resilience Building

**CLA** Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting

**CRS** Catholic Relief Services

**FAO** Food and Agriculture Organization

**FFP** Office of Food for Peace

**HDP** Humanitarian-Development-Peace

**IDEAL** Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis, and Learning Activity

**INGO** International Non-governmental Organization

**KII** Key Informant Interviews

**NRC** Norwegian Refugee Council

**P2R** Pathways to Resilience

**RRM** Rapid Response Mechanism

**RFSA** Resilience Food Security Activity

**SLI** Sequencing, Layering, and Integrating

**TVET** Technical and Vocational Education and Training

**UPG** Baidoa Building Pathways Out of Poverty for Ultra-poor IDPs and Vulnerable Host Communities in Baidoa

**USAID** United States Agency for International Development

**VSLA** Village Savings and Loan Association

**WFP** World Food Programme

**WVI** World Vision International

# Executive Summary

Multi-year humanitarian activities have shown promise in responding to emergencies while strengthening local capacities, promoting resilience, and supporting localization. In December 2019, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) launched an Annual Program Statement (APS) to fund pilot activities in Nepal, South Sudan, and later a similar activity in Somalia. In line with Grand Bargain commitments, these activities emphasized longer-term humanitarian funding and planning for improved responses across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus. As these activities drew to a close, the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis, and Learning (IDEAL) activity explored what lessons could be applied to future implementation to improve the effectiveness of multi-year humanitarian activities. Combining a desk review with collected qualitative data, the study offers applicable lessons, promising practices, and actionable recommendations for improving multi-year humanitarian activities.

## Key Findings

The findings are organized into three phases based on shared experiences and commonalities, with additional attention paid to cross-cutting findings that were common across all phases.

### DESIGN

- Co-creation involving USAID/BHA, implementing partners, and key stakeholders (such as local actors) is foundational to the success of multi-year humanitarian activities. Early allocation of resources and comprehensive design workshops contribute to positive impacts, underscoring the importance of upfront investments.

- Prioritize consortia that include or are led by local organizations wherever possible. Consortia designs should focus on local organizational capacity, promoting sustainability, and working with government where possible. Including local organizations in key roles alongside international partners with on-the-ground expertise increases effectiveness.

- To improve program relevance and community acceptance, implementing partners should ensure that they design the activity to include dedicated time and resources for assessments early in the implementation phase.

- Establish a clear and realistic exit strategy in the design phase, along with points at which it will be revisited and updated, and include strategic engagement with external stakeholders to ensure post-activity support for vulnerable populations.

### IMPLEMENTATION

- Effective use of a crisis modifier requires anticipating and preparing for shocks. When a crisis occurs, rapid assessments based on contextual needs should guide responses and adaptations. Multi-year activities should prepare to respond to emergencies in their targeted areas and proactively engage with the cluster system to reduce delays.

- To maximize benefits, multi-year activities should be considered as a single program. A balance between predictability and flexibility is essential to achieve goals, and this requires adaptive management and regular review.

- Maximize local engagement to align projects with community needs. Regular, meaningful input from affected communities and local actors enhances appropriateness and effectiveness.

## WRAP-UP AND EXIT STRATEGY

- All multi-year activities require a realistic and regularly updated exit strategy. A well-communicated and living document will ensure that benefits continue beyond the initial funding period.

## CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

- **HDP coherence:** Multi-year programming allows activities to address longer-term resilience needs as well as immediate emergency needs, promoting deeper engagement with vulnerable groups and better prospects for sustainability.

- **Localization:** Multi-year activities provide an opportunity for sustained engagement with local communities and government actors, promoting sustainability and stakeholder buy-in, which contributes to more HDP-coherent programming.

- **Gender and youth:** Multi-year humanitarian activities provide an opportunity to better integrate gender- and youth-informed programming and ensure the participation of women and youth in planning and design. Promising practices include capacity strengthening of staff and local actors, and gender and youth-informed strategies for improved results.

- **Climate risk reduction:** Multi-year humanitarian activities provide opportunities to address climate change and consider environmental impacts, with local perspectives driving design.

Participants in the BHAKARI activity.



Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps, Nepal

WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

Tie dye vocational training for IDP mothers.

# Introduction

Humanitarian crises are increasing in frequency and duration around the world. Climate change is driving a surge in weather-related emergencies, and conflicts continue to displace people in record numbers. As a result, humanitarian responses have become larger, longer, and more costly. However, multi-year humanitarian activities that meaningfully engage with local communities and systems can strengthen capacity to manage risk, foster resilience, and support localization.

In 2019, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)[1] introduced an Annual Program Statement (APS) for multi-year international emergency food security assistance[2], initiating a pilot of multi-year activities in several recurrent and protracted crisis contexts. This shift towards longer-term, multi-year humanitarian funding and planning stemmed, in part, from the Grand Bargain commitments on quality funding to enable stronger program linkages across the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus to maximize program outcomes and ultimately reduce the need for humanitarian assistance. The APS resulted in an initial activity in Nepal[3] and three activities in South Sudan[4], followed by a similar activity in Somalia, although not through the same APS mechanism.

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1   Formerly the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) which merged with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in 2020 to form the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA). For simplicity, this document refers to BHA throughout.

2   https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Final_FY_20_FFP_Multi-Year_Emergency_MYE_APS_compliant.pdf.

3   https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Final_FFP_FY_20_Multi-Year_International_Emergency_APS_Amendment_1_for_Nepal_compliant.pdf.

4   https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Final_FFP_FY_20_Multi-Year_International_Emergency_APS_Amendment_2_South_Sudan_compliant.pdf.

These activities recognize the potential of multi-year humanitarian programming to help households, communities, and national actors reduce risk by rebuilding capacities eroded by recurrent crises. Multi-year humanitarian activities can strengthen local systems, build community resilience to future shocks, and work closely with communities to promote peace.

In 2023, the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis, and Learning (IDEAL) activity conducted an initial study of these five BHA multi-year humanitarian activities as they approached the end of their awards. The study identified promising practices and lessons learned to improve the implementation of future multi-year humanitarian activities in different regions and contexts. The study also examined how these activities facilitated HDP coherence, coordination, and constraints.

The study began with a desk review conducted by external consultants with expertise in the evaluation of multi-year activities. The second phase of the study included scoping discussions followed by a series of key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts from both USAID and implementing partners working on the first BHA multi-year humanitarian activities in South Sudan (3), Somalia (1), and Nepal (1).

Findings from the interviews were validated, where possible, by a desk review of available research. The diversity of locations, contexts, and methods of design and implementation, as well as the commonality of lessons learned, help to ensure that the findings of the study are widely applicable.

The results of this methodological design are promising practices, challenges, and recommendations derived from an in-depth analysis of multi-year humanitarian activities. These conclusions are intended to guide future multi-year initiatives, increase the effectiveness of multi-year humanitarian assistance, and improve the lives and strengthen the resilience of communities affected by recurrent and protracted crises.



Participants in the BHAKARI activity, planting and weeding alongside an irrigation canal.

Mercy Corps, BHAKARI, Nepal

Map of Nepal; implementation area of the BHAKARI activity.

## Overview of Activities

Mercy Corps' **Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin (BHAKARI) activity in Nepal** focused on increasing long-term food security while responding to short-term emergency shocks through an integrated, multi-sectoral approach with a strong focus on disaster risk reduction and gender and social inclusion. It was implemented in partnership with six district-level implementing partners, as well as three national-level technical partners and an international social enterprise partner, while also leveraging work with other USAID implementers, donor programs, and key Government of Nepal initiatives. The activity began in October 2020 and ended in December 2023.

Parvati Kunwar grinds beans that she and her husband grew in the fields beside their house.



Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps, BHAKARI, Nepal
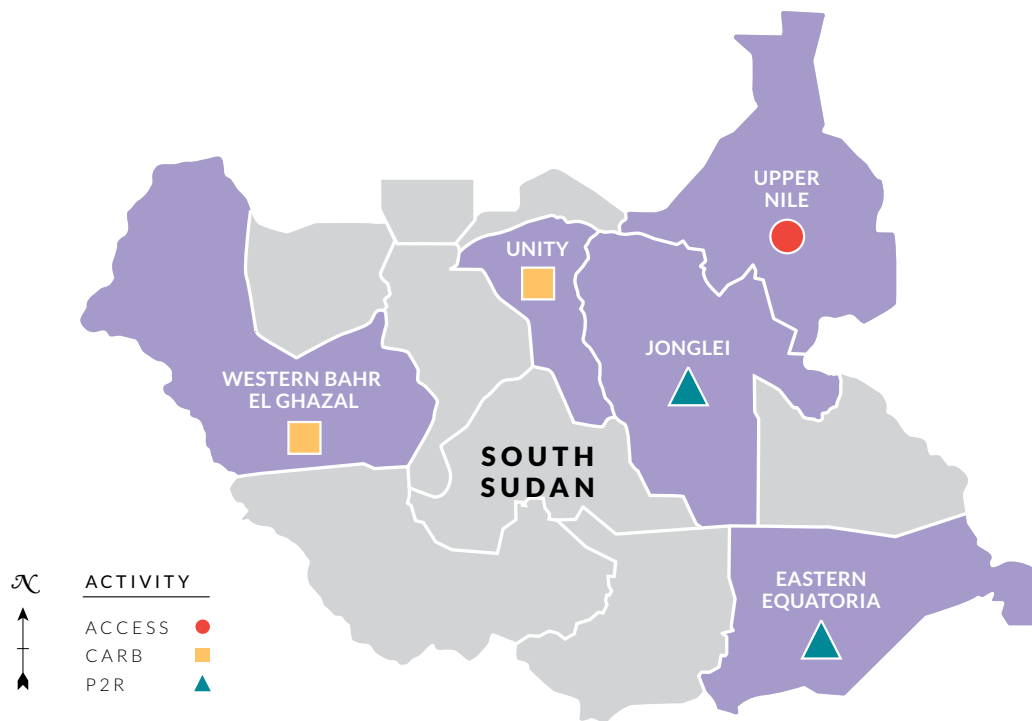
Map of South Sudan; implementation areas of the CARB, ACCESS, and P2R activities.

The Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) **Complementary Action for Resilience Building (CARB) activity in South Sudan** aimed to strengthen the resilience of people affected by conflict and climate change by promoting the integration of activities from different sectors to provide comprehensive support. Interventions were designed to restore rural livelihoods and food production, improve maternal and child nutrition, facilitate rapid humanitarian response and coordination, and strengthen community resilience and so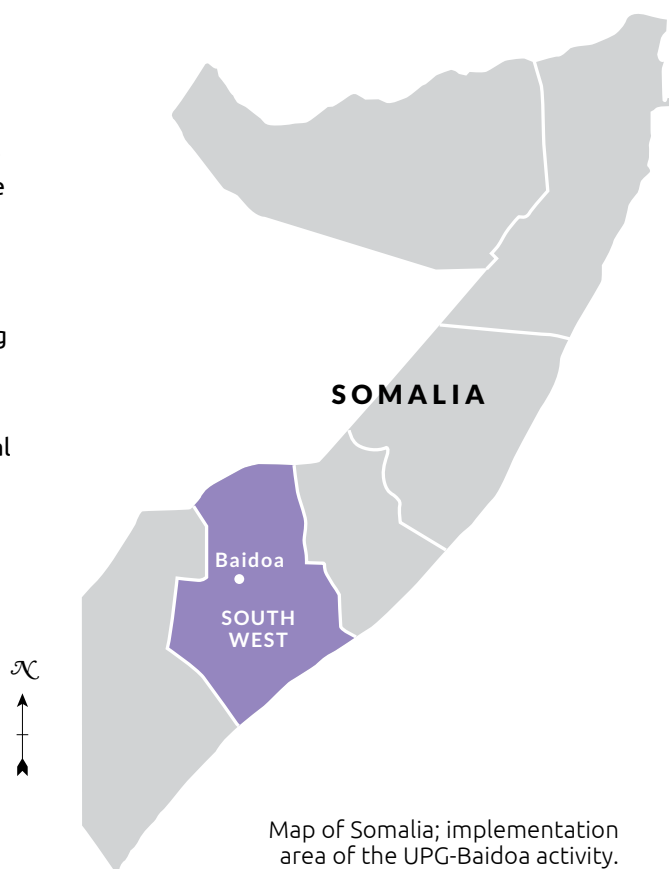cial cohesion in Unity and Western Bahr el Ghazal states. It was implemented by a consortium of five international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The activity began in January 2021 and ended in January 2024.

World Vision International's (WVI) **Accelerating Recovery and Resilience in South Sudan (ACCESS) activity** worked in the Upper Nile region to support vulnerable communities by strengthening their resilience to acute shocks and chronic stresses through capacity strengthening. ACCESS worked with two local partners to strengthen household livelihoods, agricultural productivity, and nutrition, and build community cohesion through improved disaster risk management, protection, mental health, and psychosocial support services. The activity began in December 2020 and ended in January 2024.

Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) **Pathways to Resilience (P2R) activity in South Sudan** aimed to improve food and nutrition security through enhanced risk reduction interventions and livelihood productivity. CRS implemented the project in collaboration with an international partner. P2R worked with the local community in Eastern Equatoria State to engage local leaders, youth, government authorities, and activity participants in trauma awareness, self-healing, stress management, peaceful coexistence, and intra-community dialogue. By addressing and reducing conflict, the activity sought to strengthen food security. The activity also worked within communities to increase access to finance—a powerful, proven tool for social cohesion—and with local groups to improve nutrition practices. The project began in January 2021 and ended in December 2023.

WVI's **Building Pathways Out of Poverty for Ultra-poor IDPs and Vulnerable Host Communities in Baidoa (UPG Baidoa) activity in Somalia** aims to graduate ultra-poor internally displaced persons (IDPs) and vulnerable host communities in Baidoa, Somalia, out of extreme poverty. To achieve this, selected households receive a range of interventions, including coaching and mentoring. Multi-purpose cash transfers, financial literacy, and business skills training help improve their financial management and income-generating abilities, while market-based vocational training and capital help develop and restore livelihoods. The project began in November 2021 and will end in October 2024.



Map of Somalia; implementation area of the UPG-Baidoa activity.

| | BHAKARI | CARB | ACCESS | P2R | UPG Baidoa |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | Nepal | South Sudan | South Sudan | South Sudan | Somalia |
| **Lead Organization** | Mercy Corps | Norwegian Refugee Council | World Vision International | Catholic Relief Services | World Vision International |
| **Consortium Partners** | Viamo, NTAG, SAPPROS, Rupantaran, BNA, WAC, SAEWCC, RCDC, KIRDARC, and HuRENDEC, with close collaboration with the Government of Nepal | Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, ACTED, and REACH Initiative | Nile Hope and Humanitarian and Development Consortium | Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Germany | ACTED |
| **Reach** | 22,350 vulnerable households | 243,060 individuals | 237,000 individuals | 242,709 individuals | 30,000 individuals |
| **Implementation Period** | Oct. 2020 – Dec. 2023 | Jan. 2021 – Jan. 2024 | Dec. 2020 – Jan. 2024 | Jan. 2021 – Dec. 2023 | Nov. 2021 – Oct. 2024 |

**Table 1:** USAID/BHA Multi-Year Humanitarian Activities

Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps, BHAKARI, Nepal

Parvati Kunwar grinds beans that she and her husband grew in the fields beside their house.

# Methodology

This study included a desk review, research, scoping interviews, and KIIs. Key stakeholders reviewed the initial data in a validation workshop to refine the findings and conclusions. This approach aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the lessons learned from the multi-year humanitarian activities, combining the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders involved in the activities with insight and validation from existing research.

### EXTERNAL DESK REVIEW

For this study, Causal Design, an external consultancy with experience in evaluating multi-year humanitarian activities, was contracted to conduct a thorough desk review of the available research on multi-year humanitarian programming, looking for promising practices and lessons learned in different contexts. The desk review examined available studies and reports from publicly available sources, unpublished reports from the sector, and BHA- and non-BHA-funded multi-year humanitarian activities.

### SCOPING INTERVIEWS

Scoping interviews were conducted with at least one representative from each of the five targeted multi-year humanitarian activities, as well as BHA focal points for each activity and additional BHA team members. These scoping interviews provided insight into the targeted multi-year humanitarian activities, aligned expectations about what would be covered in the KIIs, and guided the key informant selection process. In addition, these interviews provided detailed information on each of the activities, their current stages of implementation, and their key barriers and successes.

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

IDEAL conducted KIIs with individuals deeply involved in all aspects of the multi-year humanitarian activities. Their expert insights form the backbone of this study. BHA representatives worked closely with IDEAL to identify the most appropriate interviewees, selecting individuals with a wealth of knowledge and diverse experiences and perspectives. Interviewees included:

- **BHA focal points:** Three key country-facing staff responsible for overseeing and coordinating BHA's multi-year activities.

- **Chiefs of Party (CoPs):** Five individuals who lead the multi-year activities in South Sudan, Somalia, and Nepal to provide on-the-ground perspectives on implementation.

- **Experts:** Three individuals recommended by BHA focal points and CoPs, as well as BHA's Applied Learning Team staff, with expertise and insight relevant to multi-year humanitarian activities. These included:

  - Country director: A senior representative of the implementing partner in Nepal, who provided a first-hand account of activities in this specific geographic context.

  - Final evaluator: An external evaluator responsible for writing a final evaluation for one of the activities, providing insight into the activity.

  - Additional BHA colleagues: Those with direct experience in designing and developing multi-year APSs and managing the pre-implementation phase of selected multi-year humanitarian activities.

IDEAL conducted interviews in August and September 2023. They were structured to facilitate an open dialogue that allowed participants to share their experiences, insights, and perspectives on multi-year humanitarian activities. These discussions focused on identifying commonalities, differences, successes, challenges, and unique lessons learned. The KIIs were organized by phase and prompted discussion on additional topics such as gender and youth and the impact of climate change.

The analysis emphasized drawing comparisons across countries and perspectives to identify overarching trends and factors that contribute to the successes and challenges of multi-year humanitarian programming. IDEAL then cross-referenced and validated this information with the desk review.

Participants in the BHAKARI activity.



Mercy Corps, BHAKARI, Nepal

## VALIDATION WORKSHOP

Stakeholders involved in this study validated and refined the findings in a workshop held in November 2023. The validation workshop included representatives from the implementing organizations involved in the activities and key informants from the BHA team, as well as additional BHA leadership to provide a more detailed and thorough review of the findings.

## LIMITATIONS

This qualitative study was based on interviews with a limited number of key experts. However, this methodology allowed IDEAL to capture an important level of detail and nuance and, given the extensive expertise of the interviewees, the conclusions are highly applicable. The findings are further validated by the results of the desk review of available research.

Notably, all of the activities studied took place in roughly the same time period (2020–2024), which included the COVID-19 pandemic. While interviewees rarely discussed the pandemic in the context of lessons learned for future programming, the health crisis did affect relationship building, coordination processes, staff recruitment and retention, and even implementation—especially in the early years of the activities.

The activities also took place during a period of record humanitarian funding. None of the activities experienced budget cuts during implementation, but future activities may not receive such substantial or sustained funding.

In addition, while this study relies on validated expert opinion, it did not collect or analyze budgets or the effectiveness of specific intervention outcomes, and it did not compare multi-year interventions to single-year interventions. Further studies could examine the cost-effectiveness of multi-year interventions using other methods and analyze other differences, such as the modalities of programming implemented.

A final limitation of this study is the lack of perspectives from the populations affected by the interventions. Future research on this topic would benefit from including interviews with key community representatives.

An instructor teaches a class in tailoring.



WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

A Saving for Transformation (S4T) group doing business in Baidoa, Somalia.

# Key Findings

During the scoping discussions, conversations coalesced around three simple chronological phases of activity implementation: (a) the design phase, including conception, engagement, design, and preparatory actions taken; (b) the implementation phase; and (c) the closeout phase and exit strategies. In addition, cross-cutting themes of HDP coherence, localization, gender and youth, and climate risks emerged across all phases.

## Design Phase

### EARLY PLANNING

USAID implementing partners initially applied under the requirements of the multi-year APS of the Office of Food for Peace (FFP), which was later transferred to BHA when the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and FFP merged in 2020. The agreement for the activity in Somalia was finalized through a separate process after the merger. In their applications to BHA, implementing partners proposed activity designs and consortium members prior to their initial selection by BHA and the co-creation process. While these five multi-year humanitarian activities were all created through a BHA-led process specific to multi-year activities, BHA has made it clear that future multi-year awards may be proposed in response to other funding mechanisms that are not specifically designated as multi-year.

Several countries mentioned that the timing of the launch of the first round of multi-year humanitarian activities was complicated by the dynamics of the merger between OFDA and FFP. The timing of the merger and the new type of APS for multi-year humanitarian programming created confusion about requirements, standards, and processes ranging from procurement to MEL to reporting. BHA and implementing partners worked together to address these challenges.

These multi-year humanitarian activities were created in response to different contextual needs and through different mechanisms. During the validation workshop, BHA team members involved in the design of the 2020 multi-year APS (for Nepal and South Sudan) explained that the impetus was a search for activities that could better complement existing humanitarian pipelines. In Nepal, following the completion of a Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA), the new multi-year humanitarian activity was designed to respond to shocks in the targeted geographic area to improve food access and reduce the long-term need for humanitarian assistance. The reduction of long-term humanitarian assistance aligned with the needs of communities and local government to improve access to and use of water resources. In South Sudan, there was strong interest in the multi-year humanitarian APS as an opportunity for "strategically coordinating the delivery of emergency humanitarian assistance to help slow the erosion of food security,"[5] resulting in BHA selecting three activities to go through the pre-engagement process, and all three proposed consortia were ultimately engaged as activities. In Somalia, BHA developed and solicited proposals through a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) that was shared with existing partners. This was based on USAID/Somalia's core objective to strengthen resilience to shocks.[6]

## CO-CREATION

Co-creation was a key step in program design. After being selected by USAID/BHA, implementing partners refined project designs in USAID/BHA-supported workshops. USAID/BHA Mission staff worked closely with partners in Nepal, South Sudan, and Somalia during project start-up. In Juba, Mission staff spent two to three months working closely with implementing partners to address design barriers and ensure a smooth transition to implementation. This on-the-ground presence built mutual understanding and guided activities throughout implementation.

Based on feedback from stakeholders involved in this phase, co-creation between BHA and the broader USAID team, the implementing team, and other USAID partners was important in developing the multi-year activities. In South Sudan, one interviewee noted, "they had seven to eight participants from the USAID Mission involved in the co-creation, plus substantial representation and resources." The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) were also involved in the process, agreeing to provide humanitarian food assistance and agricultural inputs as needed. By bringing actors together in a design workshop, BHA and implementing partners co-created an initial foundation for multi-year risk reduction and resilience programming. However, while the design workshop identified other actors to support interventions by providing additional resources during a crisis, the planned assistance was not always implemented. In future, where co-creation includes specific responses



A participant in the BHAKARI activity.

Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps, BHAKARI, Nepal

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5  USAID/BHA Annual Program Statement for Multi-year International Emergency Food Assistance, Amendment 2.
6  Notice of BHA Funding Opportunity for Somalia, 2021.

from other BHA-supported actors, such as WFP and FAO, the actors and their support should be integrated into the activity structure itself, so that emergency response plans can draw on the capacities within the multi-year humanitarian activity structure. This can be done, for example, by documenting the agreement and communicating the need for firm commitments or operational plans prior to implementation.

## PLANNING FOR CRISES

Multi-year humanitarian activities take place in areas prone to both conflict and natural disasters, that will result in shocks that need to be addressed. Accordingly, during the design phase, implementing organizations should build in as much flexibility as possible to respond to unforeseen events. Wherever possible, the activity should be designed to be able to respond to the unexpected, with increased flexibility in the event of an emergency, allowing for a response that is needs-driven and not constrained by specific sector, commodity, or partner limitations. It is recommended that advance planning be documented and solidified, either through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or firm commitments from consortium members and non-consortium actors. For countries with a resilience focus, such plans are an important part of the overall resilience portfolio approach.

## PARTNERSHIP

Several organizations showed interest in the funding opportunities for multi-year humanitarian activities, and their applications were evaluated through a competitive selection process. Without exception, the selected implementing partners applied as consortia with different designs reflecting their contexts and priorities.

Each consortium used a different structure. In South Sudan, NRC partnered with other INGOs in the CARB consortium, CRS partnered with another INGO and led the P2R consortium, and WVI worked with two local partner organizations to implement the ACCESS activity. In Nepal, where INGOs were not allowed to implement directly, Mercy Corps partnered with many local organizations because each local partner had a specific geographic reach. In Somalia, WVI worked with other international organizations in the UPG Baidoa activity. While different consortia structures can all lead to successful programming, interviewees agreed that local partners are beneficial for program quality, sustainability, and continuity.

Both Mercy Corps' BHAKARI activity and WVI's ACCESS activity made local partnership a key component of their consortium design. Due to the longer three-year timeframe, local partners benefited from in-depth capacity strengthening that would not have been possible in a single year of implementation. BHAKARI and ACCESS identified and worked with local partners throughout the duration of the project, going beyond capacity strengthening to prepare the organizations to become more self-sustaining. This allowed the local partners to grow and develop consistently throughout the award, rather than starting and stopping each year as in an annual award timeframe. While BHAKARI was required to work with local partners due to Nepalese government regulations, working with local organizations was still considered a successful component of the project. According to the USAID focal point in Nepal, one of the key lessons learned was to allow enough flexibility in the design for the partner to identify local partner organizations after the award was agreed upon and after the co-creation process. The flexibility to add additional partners could increase geographic reach and available expertise, resulting in greater resilience. "In-depth knowledge of the local context and a high level of collaboration and consultation with program beneficiaries and local partners is key to maximizing cooperation and program relevance."[7]

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7   Causal Design. (2023). *Desk Review: Multi-Year Humanitarian Programming.* Prepared for Save the Children, 5.

While BHAKARI saw local partnership as a strength, Mercy Corps and the USAID focal point in Nepal agreed that the large number of consortium partners may have complicated implementation and that working with so many organizations created challenges in strengthening partner capacity. In this case, the large number of consortium partners was necessitated by local requirements to have separate local organizations in each geographic area. Mercy Corps also successfully partnered with an international organization with nutrition expertise to strengthen the capacity of its local partners.



Fadumo Deer in Baidoa benefitting from Agriculture support under the BHA supported project

WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

Each consortium lead recognized that partnership (whether with international or local sub-implementing partners) required capacity strengthening, and that partnering with less experienced local organizations required additional resources. The UPG Baidoa activity did not include local partners because, according to interviewees, local NGOs tended to be clan-based, but emphasized that strengthening local organizational capacity was a strategic goal. One interviewee noted that partnership models and the selection and role of local partners "really depends on the sophistication and capacity of the [available] partners." In some countries, local partners may not be able to take on key technical roles without significant capacity strengthening, while in other areas, local organizations may have the capacity to lead future consortia. However, implementing partners must be realistic about how much capacity strengthening they can accomplish in a three-year timeframe. Despite the limitations, partnering with local organizations can strengthen resilience capacities "to manage risk; to anticipate, withstand, recover from, and adapt to shocks and stresses; and to support positive, transformative change."[8] Engaging local partners and strengthening their capacity is a meaningful step toward resilience and sustainability.

CARB and P2R acknowledged that they did not engage local partners but stated that partnering with local organizations could have increased local capacity. If given the opportunity to design a similar activity in the future, both would include local organizations in the consortium. While strengthening the capacity of local organizations can be costly and challenging, INGOs may also require a similar level of capacity investment. For example, both CARB and P2R found that their INGO partners needed more capacity strengthening than expected. In addition, local organizations often have better relationships with the community and help ensure that the impact of activities is sustained. While CARB and P2R were able to achieve their goals without local partners, they believe that if they had prioritized local NGO consortium members, they could have achieved similar results while sustainably strengthening the capacity of local partners. To increase the focus on strengthening the capacity of local organizations, multi-year humanitarian consortia should limit INGO involvement where possible and select sub-partners with an established presence and/or deep contextual knowledge in the areas of implementation.  Even organizations that focused on engaging local partners said that increasing local partnership would have been an improvement. Despite engaging the most local partners of all consortia in South Sudan, the ACCESS CoP stated that they should have further expanded the scope of tasks implemented by local organizations to maximize post-activity sustainability.

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8   BHA. (2022). *Strategic Framework for Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience (ER4)*. USAID, 5.

Where possible, organizations should also work to involve the host government in the activity design phase. For example, the government of Nepal was closely involved in the design of BHAKARI, even attending the design workshop, and members of relevant government ministries were seconded to WVI offices during the implementation of ACCESS.

Implementing organizations and their consortium partners should have previous experience working in the targeted geographic areas. In Somalia, UPG Baidoa partnered with an international organization with strong technical monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) skills but no physical presence in the targeted areas. This resulted in systems that were poorly adapted to the context and created a disconnect between data collection and analysis. While the international partner leading MEAL was able to guide the process and ensure that data was collected in a technically competent manner, the interpretation of these statistics was not always accurate, contextualized, or clear. When international organizations do not have an established local presence, expanding geographic reach is time-consuming and resource-intensive. However, it is still possible to work successfully with INGOs without local expertise in a specific technical support role. In Nepal, for example, BHAKARI successfully engaged a specialized INGO to strengthen the nutrition technical capacity of the activity's local partners without directly engaging program participants.

## FOUNDATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Implementing partners should prioritize community engagement and conduct assessments to improve multi-year risk reduction and resilience-based activities, guide implementation, and prioritize community engagement in multi-year activities. They should design activities that not only produce tangible results in the first year, but also use limited start-up resources for preparatory data collection and community engagement tasks that improve outcomes throughout the life cycle of the activity. While organizations can use their prior experience in the targeted region to inform their proposal, it is unrealistic to expect them to have the resources to conduct assessments before the award agreement is signed. It is likely and important that organizations selected to implement multi-year humanitarian activities will have extensive experience in the targeted geographic area, but multi-year programming requires different strategic information to effectively engage communities and guide decisions. Therefore, conducting additional market, environmental, and other assessments and community engagement processes early on is critical to long-term success.

A village Saving for Transformation (S4T) group in Coaching sessions with UPG-Baidoa.



WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

## MULTI-YEAR DESIGN

Multi-year humanitarian activities are designed to be more locally-led, culturally appropriate, women- and youth-focused, and sustainable than similarly budgeted activities supported by three cycles of annual funding.

To maximize benefits, implementing partners should design their multi-year humanitarian activities to be considered continuous activities that require multiple years of implementation. Performance thresholds that are common in single-year activities are often unrealistic in the context of longer-term projects with phased modalities that cover the HDP nexus. For example, due to the complexity of contexts and program modalities, all of the multi-year humanitarian activities in this study experienced delays in the first year of implementation and were unable to meet short-term targets. In Nepal, geographic distance combined with poor transportation infrastructure complicated the process of establishing a community presence in areas where Mercy Corps had not previously worked. In South Sudan, historic flooding overwhelmed community capacity and the emergency response required all available human resources during the start-up phase. Similarly, in Somalia, the implementing partner had to respond to a historic drought. In addition to the expected complications of working in a crisis context, the selected multi-year humanitarian activities required the onboarding of staff, working with partners to form consortia, and managing complicated, multifaceted procurement processes. Multi-year humanitarian activities must be designed for the long term, with targets, outcomes, and budgets that allow for both flexibility and stability over the life of the award.

Maluk Bol is a fishery producer group member Duk County.

Interviewees also mentioned that the countries and targeted program areas have received humanitarian assistance for a very long time. They have received funding for "emergency, recovery, and a bit of development here and there."[9] While past interventions have focused on reducing deaths from hunger and disease, one expert working in South Sudan observed that they have rarely supported a consistent move toward self-sufficiency. The multi-year interventions were designed with a deep understanding of community needs and capacities and aimed to examine community linkages, address food security and livelihoods and long-term barriers to progress, and respond to emerging crises. Interviewees discussed programs that ranged from expected interventions (livelihoods, food security, risk reduction, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET)) to the unexpected, such as literacy, armed violence reduction, and fishing.

When planning multi-year humanitarian activities, it is important to design them through to the end of the award, including a system for regularly updating exit strategies. In contexts where crises are likely to recur, shocks will often undermine development gains, overwhelm local capacity to respond, and require engagement with other actors, including a wide range of other humanitarian, development, and government stakeholders. It is important to prepare for shocks within the implementation timeframe and in exit planning, while being realistic about the potential for sustainable change.

## Implementation Phase

USAID/BHA representatives interviewed for the study stated that these multi-year humanitarian activities were considered anchor projects for the USAID strategy and received attention throughout their development and implementation. Collaboration was key. In South Sudan, the USAID resilience advisor emphasized that "the MYEs in South Sudan brought together all offices of USAID for planning and coordination. This created better harmony and collaboration of USAID as a whole." The intention, according to one USAID representative, was that these projects would lead to additional efforts to reduce risk, support recovery, and build resilience. Over time, USAID and implementing partners intended these activities to reduce the need for costly humanitarian aid.

### THE CRISIS MODIFIER

All five multi-year humanitarian activities included a crisis modifier in their agreements. According to interviewees, these crisis modifiers were designed to provide implementing partners with a rapid response component that would allow them to respond quickly to shocks during the implementation period. The crisis modifiers could redirect up to 10% of the annual budget and required an initial assessment and BHA approval prior to use. All implementing partners used the crisis modifier several times during their activities. The crisis modifier was intended to support short-term responses to shocks to protect resilience capacities while households in targeted areas continued to work towards longer-term resilience where possible.

BHA expected implementing partners to initiate an emergency response within one week of a shock. Implementing partners were required to conduct a rapid assessment and share the results with BHA in a one-page report that identified the targeted population and caseload. All five activities went through this process several times. Both implementing partners and BHA agreed that BHA's process was reasonable and appropriate and that approvals were timely, but that response time to emergencies could be improved.

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9  KII.

Preparing requests for approval took more time than expected. On paper, preparing a one-page report on changes in context should have been quick and straightforward: identify a shock, conduct a rapid assessment, and propose a response to BHA. In complex emergencies, however, there were additional steps, such as working with external partners. Partners in all contexts described losing time to ensure that the recommended response was coordinated with other actors. Depending on the context, the BHA approval process sometimes required coordination or approval from the food security cluster or other coordinating actors in addition to BHA. As BHA encourages implementing partners to work with the clusters, this is another level of approval that is unrealistic in the one-week timeframe. Recognizing that coordination has led to delays, partners should work proactively to mitigate these delays before an emergency occurs. Improvements should be made to reduce the time spent coordinating with the cluster and other response actors by establishing detailed agreements and scenario plans prior to emergencies.

While allocating 10% of the annual activity budget to the crisis modifier was significant, implementing partners found it insufficient to respond to medium- and large-scale emergencies. As the crisis modifier is not designed to cover all emergency needs, multi-year humanitarian activities required additional resources and/or coordination with other emergency response actors both before and during an emergency. Coordination with existing clusters extended the time between shock identification and response, and coordination was also used to identify resources outside the limits of the crisis modifier.

Anticipatory actions, such as pre-positioning emergency supplies, cementing cooperation agreements with other organizations for rapid response, or pre-arranging methods of emergency cash distribution, shorten the time between shock and response. It is recommended that this advance planning be documented and solidified, either through MOUs or firm commitments from consortium members and non-consortium actors. Implementing partners should also prioritize rapid engagement of affected community members to ensure an appropriate and targeted response.

While close coordination with cluster coordination mechanisms, other humanitarian organizations, and local actors, including government actors, is essential for a rapid response in a crisis, implementing partners reported that relying on other organizations to manage the response was unsuccessful. BHA and its partners assumed that other emergency actors would step in and provide support during the immediate humanitarian response phase to relieve pressure on activities. However, this did not happen in a timely manner when crises occurred in Nepal, South Sudan, and Somalia. As one interviewee put it, "The USAID assumption was that they were leveraging other programs [during an emergency]. This was not thought out and it was not true." Despite advance planning and efforts to coordinate with other emergency actors, including WFP, FAO, other INGOs, and clusters, the emergency response was largely left to the multi-year humanitarian activities, which were seen as being "responsible" for their areas of implementation. In cases such as Nepal and South Sudan, major humanitarian actors were unable to access rural areas targeted by multi-year humanitarian activities quickly enough during emergencies. When designing multi-year humanitarian activities, it is essential that implementing partners do not rely on support from other actors or mechanisms. Instead, they should have a robust plan to meet emergency needs, including those beyond the scope of the activity. This could include the effective use of crisis modifiers or clear, documented plans for working with other actors (or both). By encouraging clusters to collaborate with BHA implementing partners on emergency response planning, all stakeholders can improve outcomes and reduce delays in cluster response times.

**ACCESS' CRISIS RESPONSE**

ACCESS operates in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan, where floods affected the entire area each year of implementation. For ACCESS, community engagement in the form of market assessments led to a change in assistance modality. Working with other actors, WVI conducted an initial rapid needs assessment alongside other actors and found households in need of assistance with no other actors to support them. These communities were considered to be Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 prior to the flooding, and as a resilience actor ACCESS needed to respond quickly to ensure that communities targeted for resilience programming did not fall into IPC Phase 4 or even Phase 5, as these more extreme levels of food insecurity would have precluded the ability to conduct resilience-based programming. ACCESS adopted an adaptive management approach to guide its emergency response. Initial assessments recommended the use of cash to support food security and agricultural inputs. WVI worked quickly with BHA to secure approvals to activate the crisis modifier and provide cash to approximately 4,000 households in the first year, which was later expanded to 5,000 households in Year 2 and 8,000 households in Year 3. As designed, the activity included a crisis modifier with the flexibility to use 10% of the total annual budget to respond to acute humanitarian needs, but with the support and flexibility of BHA, ACCESS was able to go beyond the 10% to respond to acute needs by reallocating cost savings (particularly salary related costs as the project took longer than expected to onboard qualified staff).  This additional flexibility and close coordination between BHA and ACCESS allowed the emergency response to better meet the urgent needs without delays.

## FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY IN MULTI-YEAR FUNDING

Multi-year humanitarian activities work best when flexibility and adaptability are "prioritized at all stages, including planning, financial arrangements, and assessments."[10] The P2R activity in South Sudan credited the flexibility of the multi-year award with its ability to repeatedly respond to the needs of the most vulnerable throughout implementation. When an influx of IDPs and returnees arrived, P2R was able to pivot and activate the rapid response plan (utilizing the crisis modifier), allowing them to respond immediately while still implementing pre-planned interventions where appropriate. The activity was also able to multiply the effectiveness of the response by layering coordination with other actors and leveraging resources from the FAO pipeline, including seeds and fishing equipment. According to CRS representatives from the P2R activity, the flexibility and adaptability built into the multi-year design led to two unique successes: the first was the sequencing, layering, and integrating (SLI) of interventions, and the second was the integration of HDP coherence. The crisis modifier allowed the activity to respond to shocks while continuing to deliver resilience and peace-related interventions.



Members of a farmer producer group weed their crops under a drip irrigation system provided by CRS in Budi County, South Sudan.

CRS , P2R, South Sudan

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10   Desk Review, 5.

Some interviewees felt that it would have been impossible to have this level of flexibility in a single-year activity.[11] The flexibility and adaptability of the opportunities, particularly given the multi-hazard risk environments in which they were applied, meant that "a multi-year project was the right design."[12] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recommends the use of annual funding estimates, with "the first year's estimates being most detailed and subsequent years' estimates based on predictions from needs, risk projections, and planned operations."[13] However, using annual breakdowns for effective financial tracking could allow greater flexibility to respond to emergencies that arise during regular programming.

### FLEXIBILITY AND THE BHAKARI ACTIVITY

Throughout the interviews, interviewees expressed that "the key to success is flexibility" and the BHAKARI activity in Nepal is a great example of this. For example, the Mercy Corps-led team effectively used collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) workshops, regular team meetings, and community and government consultations to continually reassess the activity and improve implementation. With less restrictive budget rules, they were able to pivot interventions based on data collected during implementation, resulting in better and more localized action.

However, limitations on flexibility also stifled a specific response. While the project was designed as a single award with a fixed budget over three years, implementing organizations of multi-year humanitarian activities were clearly informed that USAID was not obligated to fulfill the entire budget. It was clear that continued funding depended on USAID funding availability and agency priorities each year, and that Mercy Corps had to reapply and meet certain thresholds. At times, while waiting for the next annual budget to be approved, the work plan and associated expenditures exceeded the committed support from USAID. In 2022, Nepal experienced significant flooding while Mercy Corps was waiting for approval. An emergency response was required, and during the other months of the year the crisis modifier would have been available to respond to this crisis through the efficient process described above. However, the budget approval did not come in time, leaving Mercy Corps to either respond immediately with internal funds and hope that the requested funding would be approved later, or wait to respond until the funding was confirmed. In the end, Mercy Corps struck a balance and responded in a limited way until full funding was confirmed.

Implementing partners of multi-year humanitarian activities should ensure that they are aware of structural limitations to flexibility and include strategies to work around these limitations in their internal planning.  All of the activities included in this study provided positive examples of flexibility and adaptability throughout the three years of implementation, but it is also recommended that implementing partners work closely with their counterparts at BHA to understand where the limits to flexibility lie before problems arise and to proactively communicate with program participants about ways to mitigate the impact.

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11   KII.
12   Ibid.
13   Desk Review, 16.

Despite the intentional community engagement and detailed planning in the design phase of these activities, flexibility remained necessary once implementation began. Some challenges, such as the Nepalese government's resistance to unconditional cash-based transfers in emergency response, were discovered only after implementation began. Similarly, other contextual challenges, such as shifting from dry-land agricultural interventions to supporting floating gardens or fishing in flooded areas of South Sudan in response to climate-related emergencies, required rethinking appropriate resilient response options.

In South Sudan, both ACCESS and the P2R activities faced challenges in using WFP's beneficiary tracking program, the SCOPE system. For ACCESS, the challenges were eventually mitigated. P2R, however, had to take more drastic measures. P2R had planned to implement cash programming for its disaster risk reduction and resilience-building activities using WFPS's SCOPE system. However, during the initial implementation period, they found that various partners struggled to use the system. P2R did not have sufficient access to the system to share information through the platform, so with support from BHA and WFP, P2R worked quickly to move to another system that could track assistance provided, facilitate cash transfers, and share information between organizations. The new system allowed P2R to reduce problems, duplication, overlapping assistance, and "ghost" participants, and resulted in a comparatively low number of complaints. This was not part of the activity proposal, but strong communication from CRS led to BHA's demonstrated flexibility with changing technology and associated costs, which allowed P2R to switch to a more effective system for delivering cash transfers.

## CARB'S CRISIS RESPONSE

Along with other actors in South Sudan, CARB's areas of implementation experienced massive flooding in the first year. The flooding caused immediate displacement to higher ground, and, as the floodwaters remained high, CARB realized that its plans for agricultural livelihood interventions could no longer be implemented.

The historic flooding overwhelmed the humanitarian community's capacity to respond. In some areas the flooding was so severe that people left, and other areas where CARB was working, such as Bentiu, were crowded with newly displaced households. The government tried to move the IDPs into camps, and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan set up areas on higher ground where people could stay temporarily.

The first action CARB took was to activate the crisis modifier. This allowed CARB to support the most at-risk households with a one-month cash transfer to meet basic needs. Then "people started fishing." Because of the extensive flooding, fish multiplied and communities quickly adapted to include fishing as a livelihood. CARB worked with the community to determine how to support this new livelihood opportunity, and then engaged participants with business skills training and start-up capital. In other areas, where appropriate, CARB developed floating gardens and participants were able to produce much needed vegetables for the community. As participants continued to receive relief assistance, they piloted floating gardens, and now, as the waters are finally receding in Year 3, participants are building more permanent gardens in the lower water levels.

Despite these dramatic adjustments to CARB's initial plans, BHA did not require a lengthy approval process for these changes. CARB's internal adaptive management processes identified new opportunities and, in close coordination with the affected communities, CARB was able to redesign the planned activities. Together CARB, BHA, and the South Sudan Relief and Reconstruction Commission were able to make the adjustments.

Flexibility and adaptability allowed CARB to work across the nexus, addressing both emergency and development needs simultaneously. CARB participants noted that "the results realized were even more positive than expected."

Implementing partners stated that greater flexibility at times would have improved the response. Accordingly, implementing partners should design activities to allow for additional flexibility in response to changing needs, including across modalities, sectors, and between humanitarian and development focuses, depending on the changing context during the life of the award.  In the UPG Baidoa activity in Somalia, WVI was frustrated that its response, even during a crisis, was limited to certain sectors. Due to the severe drought, sustainable agricultural interventions could not move forward without improving access to clean drinking water. According to the UPG Baidoa expert, the crisis modifier could not be used for water or health because other implementing partners in the same areas were expected to cover these needs (this was due to coordination with partners, not a BHA restriction). A key takeaway from the discussions was that implementing partners should work with USAID to ensure that the flexibility built into multi-year humanitarian activities is sufficient to respond to a range of needs arising from changes in the context.[14] To further enhance this flexibility, implementing partners should use adaptive management techniques that involve regular review and reflection to effectively mitigate response challenges as they evolve.

## LOCALLY-DRIVEN MULTI-YEAR PROGRAMMING PROMOTES SUSTAINABLE SUPPORT

Implementing partners and donors should consider ways in which affected communities and other local actors can drive project design and delivery and sustain meaningful contributions, as this can lead to greater impact and long-term results.[15] For example, the CARB project in South Sudan had a number of successful community-driven interventions. Access to credit in South Sudan is extremely limited, and moneylenders, when available, charge interest rates that are too high for most borrowers. CARB's monitoring systems indicated that communities had some money available, and CARB decided to establish village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) in targeted communities. After the first year, neighboring communities in the targeted areas became interested in starting their own VSLAs. The VSLAs were profitable and self-sustaining. In addition to generating income, the community-owned VSLAs created jobs and targeted youth. CARB leadership found that VSLAs were successful because they were community-driven and supported by the stability of multi-year programming in the same geographic area. These activities would likely have ceased if the project had existed for only one year. CARB found that it took almost the entire first year to establish the first VSLAs, with measurable success in years 2 and 3, and the potential for scale-up and replication in other areas in year 3.

In Nepal, local leadership was key to the emergency response. Because of the structure of the BHAKARI activity (the Nepalese government requires implementation through local partners), local organizations led the response on the ground in their communities, while Mercy Corps worked to strengthen the capacity of local organizations and local government. According to the BHA focal point, it is difficult for outsiders to understand the nuances of local needs and vulnerabilities in a short period of time, even for an experienced actor like Mercy Corps, so having a frontline partner in each area is essential.

## WRAP-UP AND EXIT STRATEGY

Multi-year humanitarian activities should include realistic and achievable exit strategies that can be adapted and updated throughout the award, as the context at the end of the agreement will also affect what follows a multi-year activity.  It is likely that some form of assistance will continue to be required for at least some populations that need further resilience strengthening or to support crises that overwhelm local response

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14   Desk Review, 5.
15   Desk Review, 15.

capacities. In South Sudan, a shift back to shorter-term life-saving programming began in 2023, just before the end of the three multi-year humanitarian activities, according to a BHA focal point. Both BHA team members and implementing partner staff expressed disappointment at the need to return to shorter-term awards focused on life-saving programming. The multi-year humanitarian activities, which were intended to serve as anchors to facilitate greater SLI in specific geographic areas with the explicit goal of helping communities move beyond costly, repetitive, emergency activities, continued to have a positive impact even though only a small shift to longer-term development programming was secured. While the USAID office and BHA implementing partners in South Sudan continue to push for increased resilience programming despite continued volatility, some of the CARB multi-year activity populations are receiving programming through USAID South Sudan's economic growth and education office. Meanwhile, other implementing partners are motivated to continue trying to secure linkages and investments through development actors, even though this is a process that can take years of upfront work. Participants in the validation workshop stated that multi-year activities should begin discussions about linking programming with USAID and other development actors early in order to take advantage of different planning processes and timelines that can increase the likelihood of success.

Two of the multi-year humanitarian activities included in this study worked to transition multi-year activities into BHA-funded RFSAs, which is a risky and inadequate exit strategy with many variables beyond the control of implementing partners. First, the selection of countries for BHA RFSAs is limited, so not all multi-year humanitarian activities will take place in areas where a transition to RFSAs is possible. Second, by relying on a potential BHA follow-on activity, additional opportunities to link with other development actors may be missed.

Although multi-year humanitarian activities are tailored to fragile, conflict-affected situations, with programming that builds longer-term resilience that can pivot to respond to emergency needs, exit strategies that rely on new humanitarian funding are highly unreliable. Global humanitarian funding, already stretched beyond capacity, is expected to continue to fail to keep pace with growing humanitarian needs.

In Nepal, where opportunities for additional humanitarian funding have always been uncertain, elements of the program will continue after BHAKARI closes. BHAKARI has successfully partnered with the local government to continue support for parts of the activities, and the government has committed to maintaining the gains made during the activity. The bioengineering work, multi-use water systems, and Viamo's mobile phone information messaging system will continue after Mercy Corps' multi-year activity ends. BHAKARI staff are confident that local actors, in coordination with the local government, will be able to respond effectively to small- and medium-scale natural disasters. In the event of a major disaster on the scale of the earthquakes in Nepal in 2015, the international emergency response can be enhanced by the robust emergency cash distribution system established by BHAKARI. This is a key lesson for future multi-year humanitarian activities: in areas where future funding is uncertain, implementing partners must take early steps to link with other actors that can continue or build on the investments made, such as working closely with local governments, other implementers, bilateral and multilateral donors, the private sector, and/or local organizations.

Implementing partners should plan for exit strategies early on. It is also important for implementing partners to develop multiple exit strategies, depending on the risks and probabilities of program success, to work towards continued support beyond the end of the activity. This could include different plans and options depending on the context. Early planning and action on exit strategies, including for programs across the HDP nexus, is recommended.

Interviewees said that an exit plan is best as a living document, routinely updated throughout the life of the project, and should include strategies for using the flexibility of the award depending on the risks and probabilities of specific changes in the context. It should be accessible to staff and serve as a strategic guidance document. USAID's Advancing Nutrition strategy emphasizes developing a transition plan prior to implementation to ensure lasting value for the community.[16] Similarly, another study recommends creating a concrete and detailed exit strategy that includes sustainability plans for each intervention with a specific timeline, steps, and tasks required. The exit strategy should also include an assessment of the current capacities of any partner organizations and what additional knowledge and/or materials are needed to ensure sustainability, e.g., an assessment of maintenance committees for infrastructure (WASH, road rehabilitation, etc.) to determine their level of functionality and requirements for post-project continuation.[17]

## Cross-cutting Lessons Learned

The multi-year activity model provides additional stability and time to improve coordination with local communities and government actors, demonstrate early successes, and increase stakeholder buy-in. While the multi-year humanitarian activities faced many challenges during implementation, these challenges were "secondary to the advantages of this funding model."[18] BHA focal points and implementing partner CoPs strongly agreed on this point. For example, multi-year humanitarian activities allow more time to embed interventions in communities and strengthen the capacity of staff and local partner organizations, which benefits the activity throughout its lifecycle and can contribute to sustainability goals.

Multi-year humanitarian activities also provide opportunities to apply adaptive management techniques within the award period. Successful Year 1 modalities can be expanded and improved upon in subsequent years. Implementing partner organizations and their local partners have time to learn from and adapt initial approaches, designs, and assumptions. Multi-year humanitarian activities encourage innovation and allow for new activities and approaches not previously tried in USAID programming. According to interviewees, shorter-term humanitarian activities may miss opportunities for improved responses that are contextually appropriate, locally led, and achieve better and more sustainable outcomes. Shorter-term responses structurally tend to default to simpler interventions that lack space for long-term planning, exit strategies, and sustained locally-led community engagement.

Participants in the BHAKARI activity.



Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps / BHAKARI, Nepal

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16   Desk Review, 13.
17   Desk Review, 20.
18   KII.

WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

IDPs find hope in vocational skills training.

## HDP COHERENCE

The multi-year activities were designed to combine humanitarian, development, and peace (HDP) interventions in ways that enhance HDP coherence and SLI, and to meet both emergency needs and longer-term needs to address the root causes of recurrent crises in the targeted areas. While all activities achieved results in each component of the HDP nexus, additional focus on HDP coherence, both internally and through coordination with external humanitarian and development actors, could strengthen exit strategies, improve activity outcomes, and sustain support.

In each case, the humanitarian needs in the targeted countries were immediate and striking during the first six months of the award period. Each activity ensured that humanitarian responses were directly linked to ongoing, longer-term development and resilience activities. When activity participants faced sudden shocks, the activities helped them manage the shock and, where appropriate, continue with development programming—whether it was TVET, VSLAs, or agricultural activities. One interviewee summed up this connection: "That is the beauty of this type of program. Even designed with the development lens in mind, you can respond to humanitarian situations and then re-link to development activities."[19]

Multi-year humanitarian programming provides an opportunity to deepen engagement with at-risk communities and promote pathways to sustainable development. In South Sudan, despite the challenging context, implementing partners emphasized the importance of investing in conflict-sensitive peacebuilding efforts alongside humanitarian and development interventions. They noted that multi-year humanitarian activities have a clear role to play in promoting peace in local communities. At the same time, implementing partners recommended that, where appropriate, multi-year activities should also consider working on peacebuilding initiatives at the national level, perhaps in collaboration with USAID, in order to multiply the project benefits. In the words of the ACCESS CoP: "There are so many reasons that South Sudan can grow its own food, but the problem is peace… When peace prevails in South Sudan the country will move towards food security. However much we [humanitarians] focus on on-farm and off-farm livelihoods, peace is key [to self-sufficiency and sustainable food security]."[20]

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19   KII.
20   Ibid.

Recognizing that peace was key to the success of its programming, UPG Baidoa in Somalia made conflict-sensitive livelihood interventions a cornerstone of its response. The activity targeted areas where Al-Shabaab, an armed youth group, had a foothold and was causing problems in the community. Local youth were involved in small-scale cattle raiding and were occasionally exploited by nefarious local government actors. UPG Baidoa engaged these youth through TVET programming. After graduation, the supported youth continued to run workshops and bakeries, creating sustainable livelihoods. This type of multi-step intervention was made possible by the multi-year nature of the project. The multi-year implementation allowed implementing partners to invest in building longer-term resilience pathways, allowing for a smoother transition between emergency response and sustainable development.

HDP coherence programming requires context-specific approaches that are tailored to the communities themselves. Through effective targeting, implementing partners working in relatively stable areas can take steps to promote peace by implementing community-led resilience programs. At the same time, they can focus life-saving recovery interventions on communities in crisis. In South Sudan, implementing partners sometimes felt obligated to continue with the resilience programming they had committed to, even when the crisis made resilience programming more difficult and potentially inappropriate. While a crisis modifier provides flexibility for emergency support, implementing partners should have contingency plans in place and communicate them to BHA, the community, and other stakeholders to redirect resilience programming to more stable areas or pause implementation of planned resilience-focused programming until affected communities return to relative stability.

To improve HDP coherence, implementing partners must focus on highly targeted programming. By improving understanding of targeted populations through initial assessments, regular monitoring, and adaptive management systems, implementing partners will be better able to target households with the most appropriate types of assistance over multiple years of implementation. This may mean shifting from emergency to development assistance as a situation stabilizes, or from development to emergency assistance in response to a crisis. Implementing partners can also use an integrated mix of emergency and development programming based on strong targeting of households in different locations. Multi-year humanitarian activities can also use the extended timeframe to "discuss needs and priorities of the targeted communities with other actors across the HDP nexus to strengthen coordination efforts to further build the resilience of the populations and provide a continuity of support."[21] Implementing partners should work across the aid response community to multiply the effectiveness of the response and strengthen HDP coherence.

Finally, multi-year humanitarian activities that prioritize deep community understanding will have a better view of opportunities for HDP coherence. HDP coherence programming is most effective when implementing partners understand community priorities, vulnerability factors, and local capacity to respond to shocks. Multi-year humanitarian activities are uniquely positioned to build strong, nuanced relationships with communities that can help provide immediate humanitarian assistance and protect pre-shock development progress. This explicit link to community engagement allows multi-year activities to implement humanitarian, development, and peace interventions within the activity, facilitate linkages with programming outside the activity, and protect pre-shock development progress.

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21   BHA representative, validation workshop.

## LOCALIZATION

Across interviews, roles, countries, and activities, interviewees emphasized a key benefit of multi-year humanitarian activities: more meaningful engagement with local communities. Stakeholders talked about building lasting relationships and working closely with local tribal leaders, farmers, community committees, and agricultural experts. They also highlighted the benefits of including local organizations in consortia and involving local government actors in the planning, implementation, and exit strategies of these activities.

For CARB, these local connections led to identifying key community actors and working with them to "play a major role in conflict resolution."[22] This long-term community investment and engagement took longer, but the process produced results that would not have been possible with a quick assessment and short implementation cycle. As the CARB CoP noted, "The initial gender and conflict analysis did not come out very clearly. But as they interacted with the communities, they identified the peace brokers, they started in one area with a long process, and now they feel they have a model to build peace."

Sustained local engagement also led to new opportunities and practices being implemented through the activities. For example, Mercy Corps' BHAKARI activity used locally available plants (bamboo) to stabilize walls and reduce mudslides in Nepal. In South Sudan, activities worked with local farmers and farmer field schools to identify locally available seeds for agricultural programming.

Local connections, whether through formal consortium partnerships, assessments, or community engagement before and during implementation, were consistently cited as strong positive drivers of improved programming and results across all activities.

## GENDER AND YOUTH

The multi-year humanitarian activities were designed with a focus on empowering women and youth and strengthening their economic opportunities in ways that would not have been possible in a single-year activity. Central to this approach was promoting opportunities for women and youth to actively participate in decision-making processes and to assume leadership roles within their communities. Implementers used gender and youth analyses, conflict assessments, and youth livelihood market assessments to design targeted interventions that mitigated harm and promoted positive engagement and social cohesion.

A BHA official supporting South Sudan said that they "saw a breakdown of social norms and community cohesion as a main driver of vulnerability and food insecurity—particularly in youth," which led BHA to place gender and youth at the center of its multi-year humanitarian activities. Focusing on youth has also supported peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected regions, where livelihoods and skills development have helped counter youth recruitment into extremist groups.

Multi-year activities can invest more than single-year activities in strengthening the capacity of staff and local actors. This includes training initiatives aimed at equipping staff with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) first approach that puts marginalized groups at the forefront of program design and implementation. According to one interviewee, this would not "have been actualized had it been a one-year project. There would simply not have been enough time to ensure that GESI was integrated into each of the component areas... The multi-year approach is conducive to much stronger work when reaching women and marginalized groups."

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22   KII.

Gender- and youth-focused interventions must be community-driven to be successful. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, with one interviewee saying that implementing partners need to "listen to the community first, then listen to the frontline NGOs' perspectives."

The multi-year humanitarian activities in South Sudan, for example, raised awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) and implemented preventive measures. Beyond simply raising awareness, the activities ensured that women and youth received consistent messages over time and were equipped with knowledge and strategies to improve their economic conditions, address GBV, increase their agency, and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding at the community level. The focus on empowering women and youth to be proactive agents of change in addressing GBV emerged as a central theme.

Applying a gender lens was particularly important in Nepal due to high rates of male migration to urban areas or abroad. The activities recognized the specific challenges faced by households where men had migrated elsewhere. The BHAKARI activity explored gender disparities in vulnerability and capacity to respond to disaster impacts, and mapped remittance flows, paying attention to the household level. Deep local understanding, long-term engagement, and strong early assessments resulted in tailored, culturally responsive programming.

Interviewees stressed the importance of adapting approaches based on community feedback and the perspectives of NGO partners on the ground. They emphasized the need for a listening-first approach to better understand the nuances and challenges related to gender dynamics in specific contexts.

The UPG Baidoa activity in Somalia worked to lift entire households out of poverty, and this household focus led them to prioritize engagement with women and youth. Women primarily used VSLAs to increase their savings, while youth were targeted for skills building through TVET. The youth component was particularly important because households were fleeing drought and young boys were at risk of recruitment by Al-Shabaab. Ultimately, these targeted interventions contributed to peacebuilding in the area.

Adow Abdullahi is a TVET graduate currently working as a tailor in Baidoa, Somalia.



WVI - UPG Baidoa, Somalia

## CLIMATE RISK CONSIDERATIONS

Between 2020 and 2023, much of the world was affected by the natural events that experts associate with climate change. Nepal was hit by unusual monsoons, parts of South Sudan experienced historic multi-year floods and droughts, and Somalia suffered an unprecedented drought. While all of the multi-year humanitarian activities were selected because of recurring crises, natural hazards affected planned implementation in the first year.

The risks associated with a changing climate need to be better considered and explicitly addressed in future multi-year humanitarian activities. While environmental impact assessments were specifically mentioned in several interviews, there was greater agreement on the need to consider and address the changing climate (and increasing climate-related hazards) during the project design phase. Project design and implementation should explicitly consider the impact of climate change on context and programming, and include adaptation measures to reduce climate risks.

While the multi-year humanitarian activities responded to the impacts of climate change, they missed an opportunity to integrate climate considerations into program design from the outset. Activities in Nepal, for example, bioengineered a response to landslides by building walls with locally available and sustainably harvested bamboo. Implementing partners in South Sudan used floating gardens and flood-tolerant seed varieties to cope with multi-year flooding, while activities in Somalia sought more drought-resistant livestock options. While effective, these interventions were responses to unplanned circumstances. One interviewee noted that "climate responses were integrated but never explicit" in their activity.

Activities must also avoid contributing to environmental degradation. The experts interviewed for this study were clear on this point: the potential environmental impacts of their activities should be considered from the planning stage. This comes from a combination of a deep, local understanding of the changing climate, combined with implementing partners' use of existing research. By combining available research with local knowledge, implementing partners can respond to food security emergencies with a focus on interventions that improve the environment.

# Conclusions

## Design

**Co-creation between USAID, selected implementing partners, and other stakeholders is key to the success of multi-year humanitarian activities.** The time spent in the co-creation process was credited with long-lasting positive impacts on the activities themselves. Front-loading resources prior to the start of activities improved results throughout the multi-year implementation. The design workshop, which included representatives from implementing partners, USAID, and other complementary actors, was considered essential to the success of the activities.

**Future multi-year humanitarian activities should prioritize consortia with or led by local organizations and, where possible, include the government as a key stakeholder.** All implementing partners in this study applied as consortia. Consortium designs varied widely and depended on the contexts in which activities were implemented. Of the five consortia studied, two intentionally focused on strengthening local organizational capacity as part of their sustainability plan, and two organizations stated that they would involve local organizations in the future to improve results and sustainability. Multi-year humanitarian activities should be led by or include local organizations in key roles and make strengthening local organizational capacity a stated outcome of the activity. Given the longer timelines, multi-year humanitarian activities can build better relationships and make real progress in strengthening local capacity.

In addition, the involvement of international organizations should be kept to a minimum and only in situations where the international sub-implementing partner has specific technical expertise and/or an established local presence. This will minimize the risk of implementing poorly tailored interventions.

Where possible, implementing partners should also involve host governments in the design phase to increase the chances of successful implementation. Activities that involve the government as a key stakeholder produced more sustainable results, and implementing partners were also able to help strengthen the capacity of various government bodies.

**Implementing partners should invest time and resources early in the activity to conduct assessments to improve multi-year risk reduction and resilience-based activities, guide implementation, and prioritize community engagement.** Each of the activities included in this study fell behind their work plans in the first year due to contextual difficulties. This is to be expected given the complexity of the targeted contexts, and the first year of implementation should focus on positioning the activity for subsequent years. To improve the relevance of activities and local community buy-in, implementing partners should proactively conduct assessments and seek opportunities for targeted communities to guide programming. At the same time, implementing partners would benefit from less pressure to deliver on targets in the first year.

**Efforts must be made during the design phase to ensure continuity of support to vulnerable populations after the activity ends.** This includes developing a clear exit strategy and handover plan during the design phase of the intervention. This exit strategy should begin early in the activity and be reviewed over time, updated as the context changes, and include multiple options for future HDP coherence programming depending on the needs of the targeted population at the end of the activity.

# Implementation

**For the crisis modifier to be as effective as possible, it is important to anticipate the most likely challenges and develop responses from the start of implementation.** The multi-year humanitarian activities were able to respond to sudden shocks thanks to the crisis modifier, which allowed implementing partners to reallocate up to 10% of their annual budget to a sudden shock or emergency response. These modifications required an assessment, a brief report, and a request to BHA for approval. While BHA responded quickly, implementing partners still experienced contextual delays due to coordination on the ground. Working in advance to anticipate challenges will reduce the time between identifying a response and delivering much-needed assistance.

**Activation of the crisis modifier should be evidence-based and not constrained by inflexible budgets.** While the crisis modifier was well used, implementing partners found the 10% limit arbitrary and unhelpful. Since implementing partners are required to conduct assessments before redirecting funds through the crisis modifier, the results of the assessment should drive the response, not an arbitrary pre-selected amount. Allowing implementing partners to respond directly to emergencies in their targeted communities will improve emergency response and resilience-focused activities in the design of multi-year activities.

**Multi-year humanitarian activities must lead the response to crises in their areas of implementation without relying on assistance from other humanitarian actors (including other BHA partners).** During the implementation of the five activities studied, interviewees reported that promised external resources were not available during emergencies. Because the multi-year humanitarian activities had an established presence in the specific geographic areas, other organizations—even other USAID partners working in the same country and involved in advance planning—saw the areas where multi-year humanitarian activities were operating as less vulnerable. These other humanitarian actors viewed multi-year humanitarian activities as responsible for meeting the needs in these areas. As a result, other actors prioritized other areas for their emergency responses. Problems persisted despite the concrete plans made during the co-creation phase, where BHA and implementing partners agreed that a specific actor (such as WFP and/or FAO) would address emergency needs while the multi-year humanitarian activities maintained resilience-building activities. Although this was agreed during the co-creation phase, as the crisis unfolded, other emergency actors directed their limited resources elsewhere. Implementing partners insisted that the multi-year humanitarian activities were best positioned to respond to emergencies because they already had established local connections, a presence in the affected area, and available resources.

**To maximize benefits, multi-year humanitarian activities should be viewed as single programs that can be implemented over multiple years without additional approvals or mid-activity thresholds.** Multi-year humanitarian activities rely on a balance of predictability and flexibility to achieve their goals. Additional approvals, annual benchmarks, or other requirements cause delays. For activities that were subject to additional approvals or annual spending thresholds, the delays and uncertainty affected their implementation success. Budget thresholds (set by percentages or other ad hoc measures) should not be applied. As these activities operate in dynamic contexts, adaptive management and flexible programming can mitigate challenges and support both flexibility and accountability through regular review and reflection.

**Implementing partners should consider ways in which affected communities and other local actors can meaningfully contribute to project design and delivery to further maximize relevance according to local needs.** Multi-year humanitarian activities provide a unique opportunity to engage local voices, consider local perspectives, and deliver more effective and appropriate assistance. The multi-year activity model provides the stability and time needed to work closely with local communities and government actors, demonstrate early successes, and increase stakeholder buy-in. Success hinges on local engagement: "One of the most imperative practices for multi-year emergency program implementers is achieving stakeholder buy-in through collaboration." Multi-year humanitarian activities can achieve greater impact and long-term outcomes when donors and implementing partners have strong relationships with local institutions.

## Wrap-up and Exit Strategy

**All multi-year humanitarian activities should have realistic and achievable exit strategies.** Well before the end of multi-year programming, implementing partners need to develop a realistic and achievable exit strategy so that the program's gains are protected beyond the end of funding. The exit strategy should be a living document, updated regularly throughout the life of the activity. It should be clearly communicated and accessible to staff and serve as a strategic guide for staff actions, including strategic engagement with external stakeholders early in the activity.

## Cross-cutting Themes

**Localization, climate risk reduction, gender- and youth-centered programming, and HDP coherence enhance the effectiveness, responsiveness, and resilience of multi-year humanitarian programming.** These themes were raised in each of the interviews conducted.

### HDP COHERENCE

**Multi-year humanitarian activities should include strategies to increase HDP coherence with stakeholders outside the activity, including but not limited to government, and to invest in local capacity and leverage local knowledge.** Implementing partners should have a strong understanding of the context, invest in strategic relationships with external actors, and develop approaches tailored to the communities themselves. The longer timeframe of multi-year humanitarian activities allows implementing partners to understand and work with actors across the HDP nexus and with targeted vulnerable groups to sustainably improve their lives and livelihoods.

### LOCALIZATION

**The multi-year humanitarian activity model provides the stability and time needed to work closely with local partners, communities, and government actors.** The longer timeframe provides opportunities to deepen relationships with local leaders and communities, both of which have led to improved programming, planning and implementation, and sustainability across contexts and activities.

## GENDER AND YOUTH

**Multi-year humanitarian activities should integrate gender and youth approaches into programming.** All activities prioritized gender and youth empowerment for sustainable economic opportunities. The approach included the active participation of women and youth in decision-making, with targeted interventions informed by gender analysis and conflict assessments. The strategy recognized the vulnerability of youth in conflict and aimed to prevent recruitment into extremist groups.

The multi-year timeframe allowed for capacity strengthening of staff and local actors, such as BHAKARI's implementation of a GESI approach. Community-driven interventions were emphasized, highlighting the importance of listening to community and NGO perspectives.

The activities in South Sudan and Nepal raised awareness of gender-based violence, equipped women and youth with strategies for economic empowerment, and applied a gender lens to migration challenges. In Somalia, the focus on engaging women and youth contributed to poverty alleviation.

## CLIMATE RISK REDUCTION

**Proposed activities should explicitly address their goals through the lens of a changing and more extreme climate, and implementing organizations should consider the environmental impacts of their interventions.** Across all interviews, stakeholders emphasized the overwhelming need to better address the impacts of climate change in future multi-year humanitarian activities. In addition, activities should be designed to ensure that they do not inadvertently contribute to environmental degradation. This climate sensitivity must be locally led and informed by available climate science, with local understanding of the challenges and opportunities driving the design.