



Stakeholder Consultation Notes: Understanding Context

November 28, 2018



April 2019

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1. Background

In response to requests from the implementing partner (IP) community and staff of USAID’s Office of Food for Peace (FFP), in July 2018 TOPS agreed to host a Stakeholder Consultation that allowed relevant actors to explore the roles and responsibilities of IPs and FFP, and perceived challenges related to the studies that IPs conduct to support Development Food Security Activity (DFSA) design and implementation.

To prepare for the consultation, TOPS conducted a series of qualitative interviews with partner and FFP staff from late August to early November 2018. The purpose of the interviews was to document topical priorities and challenges from the perspectives of partners and FFP staff. All 12 current FFP DFSA partners contributed thoughts – a total of 54 staff members. Additionally, eight FFP staff shared perspectives, including staff from the Technical, Learning, Planning (TLP) team; the Collaborative Learning and Adapting (CLA) team; and Agreement Officer's Representatives (AORs).

TOPS synthesized the input shared by partners and FFP into a perspectives summary (Annex E), which was distributed to all participants prior to the consultation. Finally, TOPS coordinated with partners and FFP staff to prioritize the topics into a manageable list for a four-hour consultation.

A half-day consultation (1:00- 5:00 pm) entitled “Understanding Context” was held at the Save the Children, 899 N. Capital NE, Washington, D.C. on November 28th, 2018. Annex A shares the agenda.

Who attended: Representatives from FFP TLP, CLA and AOR teams (18 total); staff from 11 IPs with current DFSAs (32 representatives); and 4 staff of the newly-awarded IDEAL activity. By design, the majority (49) of participants attended in person. Additionally, FFP provided five note takers to assist at each of the discussion tables.

Participants	Partner staff	FFP staff
In-person	32	17
Online	4	1
Total	36	18
Note takers		5

Of note:

- Unprecedented ratio of FFP staff to IP staff (1:2).
- Unprecedented attendance by 11 of the 12 current implementing partners

Scope of Consultation: Within the theme “Understanding Context” we included all studies partners carry out themselves, or contract out, in order to understand the contextual nuances of their implementation areas for both **Refine and Implement (R&I) and traditional DFSAs**.

Baseline and endline studies conducted by a third party were outside the scope of the consultation. Although there is substantial overlap for many issues, also outside the consultation’s scope were the specifics related to completing PREPS, Annual Result Reports, using annual monitoring indicators, etc.

Actions taken or in progress since consultation. FFP and partners have been quick to act on many of the suggestions and next steps that were raised at the 11/28/2018 consultation. Section 5 summarizes this progress.

2. Myth busters

A number of “myths” surfaced in pre-consultation interviews. To “bust” these myths, participants were asked to respond to a variety of statements by moving to a designated location within the room (labeled

“Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree” or “Unsure”). Online participants voted by poll. Not all statements displayed were myths.

- **Myth: Participatory qualitative methods are not as acceptable to FFP as quantitative methods.**
 - This was a common perception among partners during pre-consultation interviews.
 - FFP stance: We recognize the value of qualitative data and encourage partners to collect it.
- **Myth: FFP views barrier analysis as the preferred qualitative method to understand the reasons for behaviors.**
 - Another common belief among partners during pre-consultation interviews
 - FFP stance: FFP staff have varying feelings about the utility of this method. “It is difficult for staff, because [today] we are representing our individual take on it, since our office has not made a public statement on it.”
 - FFP individual opinions: “The barrier method is a preferred method, but it is not the only method available to partners.” “Barrier analysis probably needs to be coupled with other methods.” “Barrier analysis may be okay with very simple things, but getting into complex solutions that we are trying to solve, barrier analysis is not an acceptable qualitative method.”
- **True statement: FFP does not have a key technical research person who oversees the reviews of all DFSA context studies.**
 - The majority of interviewed partners believe there is not one key person, and perceive this as a challenge.
 - FFP comments: “CBOs, AORs are responsible for managing the program and will have eyes on all of the various studies. Is there one technical person? No. Is it feasible? It is rather difficult for one person to be fluent in all the technical areas. Can we improve the process? Yes, and it would be easier if we had more staff.”
 - From the FFP GEO team perspective, PVOs would appreciate consistency across country partners. Something like that would be helpful regardless of the challenges.
 - IP comment: “We do not expect one key technical person to be able to review all of the studies, but consistency and accountability go together, and we should draw from lessons learned in a systematic way. That’s the kind of thing we’re looking for.”
- **Undetermined: FFP prefers that partners contract (rather than try to develop) adequate research capacity**
 - No consensus among partners during pre-consultation interviews. Many partners were confused about this issue.
 - FFP comment: “The vast majority of people in the room are “Unsure”. I’m also unsure myself, so I think it’s one of those areas where there is no institutional preference. There probably are individual preferences, so we need to work on getting on the same page.”
 - Partner comments: “Contracting feels like a safer option when developing a budget. Including internal capacity building will likely be more heavily scrutinized than contracting out.” “There’s a knee jerk for contracting out. When there’s an explanation for what we want to do and the capacity we have in country, it’s fine. There’s nothing written, there’s no guidance.”

- **Undetermined: FFP believes it is important (for FFP) to be highly directive of partner’s efforts to understand context**
 - No consensus among partners during pre-consultation interviews. Also no consensus among IP and FFP participants in the room or online.
 - FFP comment: “This is something that comes up internally. There is no consensus. [in this room] a lot of FFP are standing in “Unsure,” and a lot in “Disagree/Agree.” This is one of the cases where we fully admit that we need a little more consistency across country teams, across technical specialists, between country teams and technical specialists; we don’t all agree on our particular goal. Collectively we’ll be able to develop a shared sense on some of that in the future.”
 - FFP comment: “I strongly “Disagree” about being highly directive, but I think my understanding of “directive” is different from other colleagues in FFP. I would like to tease that out today. Maybe “broad guidance” is directive or adequate, but for someone else in FFP, it may not be sufficient, it may be too heavy handed or too light.
 - FFP comment: “[Let’s] highlight the world “believes.” What FFP believes and FFP practices can be different. Need to tease out that word as well.”
- **Undetermined: Partner HQ technical leads are almost always involved in inception workshops and the design of formative research**
 - Divisive point in pre-consultation interviews. FFP asserted that partner high-level technical expertise does not consistently show up at the moments they are needed. IP staff asserted that they always send high-level technical expertise. In the room, FFP staff were clustered in “unsure”. Partner staff in room were spread out among all responses.
 - Partner comment: “This question combines inception workshops and the design of formative research. Two separate and distinct process. Between our regional and our HQ technical people, there is a lot of engagement in the formulation of research.”
 - FFP comment: “I’m standing in “Unsure” because SOWs that come to FFP vary in quality. Some may have been viewed properly by technical leads, but some are not. Quality assurance and HQ involvement are a concern of FFP. If the assumption is that HQ has the technical expertise, then IPs should assign a budget for technical staff to be there.”
 - Agreement by all parties that the root causes of this challenge could be discussed in subsequent session.

3. Main Session Discussions:

Session discussions addressed the most common pressing themes mentioned by IP and FFP staff in pre-consultation interviews; however not all the issues raised in the summary document (Annex E) were addressed due to time limitations. Follow up discussions are planned under the IDEAL award.

- **Capacity Gaps - What are they? How to fill them?**
- **SoWs: developing shared standards and expectations**
- **Improving communication and collaborative planning**

Session 1: Capacity Gaps - What are they? How to fill them?

In pre-consultation interviews, FFP and the majority of partners agreed that currently there are substantial capacity gaps and challenges to finding the right expertise to conduct quality research, as demonstrated in the text boxes.

“The cost of maintaining in-house expertise is high. Vast areas of expertise are necessary... DRR, WASH, markets, environment, nutrition and gender. It’s difficult to have a sufficient pool of experts in all these areas who are available to support programs without direct billable time.”

“Few high quality consultants are available, and when FFP approvals take too long, quality consultants are scooped up by someone else.”

Implementing partner staff

“The quality of partner studies varies- some studies require a very specific type of expertise, and without that level of expertise, quality problems arise”

Food for Peace TLP staff

Participants were asked to take off donor or partner hats and collaboratively seek more details related to the root causes of the problems, and then to propose solutions.

Small group discussion output: Additional challenges with getting the right expertise

- **Difficult to find quality consultants**
 - Small pool of consultants with multi-disciplinary expertise for integrated studies
 - Very small pool of consultants with research experience, technical/ sectoral expertise, familiarity with USAID regulations and FFP expectations, geographic contextual knowledge and appropriate approaches.
 - Shortage of French speakers, and people fluent in local languages or dialects. Local universities sometimes disappoint. This applies to research capacity and translation capacity.
 - Expertise may be excellent, but consultant lacks ability to collaborate (personality)
 - There is lots of capacity (including local) to collect the data, but not to analyze
- **Specific technical areas where research skills are lacking**
 - Formative research for SBC
 - Expertise is limited or inconsistent for environment, governance , collective action/ social cohesion; resilience; value chain assessment
 - Difficult to find qualitative expertise; limited use of rigorous qualitative methods
- **Timing/ availability for HQ technical leads and quality consultants**
 - Lengthy FFP approval times results in all the good consultants taken
 - Following regulations/ procurement rules delays hiring of quality consultants
 - Delayed time post start up to bring on board context researchers and to develop protocols
- **Cost of consultant**

Notes from TOPS Stakeholder Consultation: Understanding Context November 28, 2018

- **FFP and partner coordination / communication**
 - Lack of shared expectations. FFP has higher expectations—but partner staff often know more than consultants.
 - Communication challenges: Partners are responding to 2-3 “masters”: FFP Mission, HQ, and Regional who may not provide the same guidance. Often there is a disconnect between the various country office missions.
 - A lack of consensus with FFP on the key thematic areas to place focus on

- **Partner internal capacity and challenges**
 - Ineffective scoping: if we don’t clearly articulate what we want, we may not get what we need.
 - Lack of guidance templates for similar types of SoWs
 - Siloed planning by HQ, partners, and consultants
 - Need to better link research team with implementation team from the beginning (expert consultants need to understand the TOC)
 - Limited technical support to programs by HQ & regional partner staff
 - Different levels of skills across IPs, it is difficult to provide guidance across this broad spectrum.
 - HQ is missing people/ manpower to conduct the research
 - HQ/ Orgs not having adapted tools to handover to consultants or hired researchers
 - Research can have different goals; e.g., getting statistically significant findings for policy change versus getting the field team on board to apply learning (which may be messier). We need to vary the tool for the purpose. FIT TO FUNCTION

Proposed solutions to identified capacity challenges

Participants proposed solutions in small groups and then all participants voted on the most promising suggestions. Participants were not limited in the number of votes they could cast. **See Annex B for all topics and corresponding votes. See supplementary detailed notes for more suggestions that did not make it to the flipcharts.**

*Proposed solutions deemed most promising by **both** implementing partners and FFP staff, with number of votes in parentheses.*

- **Standards for SoWs – guidelines and templates for common assessments (FFP 7) (IP 19)** *(n.b., FFP completed a draft template in early 2019. Initial input suggests partners are quite satisfied with and are using the template; IDEAL will follow up to determine if the templates resulted in improved SoW quality)*
- **FFP provides clearer expectations regarding what needs approval, agrees with IP ahead of time on deadlines and timeline (FFP 7) (IP 16)**
- **Guidance/ encouragement from FFP for IPs to work together for studies that span themes, geographic areas (FFP 8) (IP 11)** *(n.b. During the March 2019 R&I workshop for Niger and Burkina Faso DFSAs, FFP explicitly encouraged partners to coordinate research questions and plan assessments together when feasible.*
- **Long-term partnerships with universities (US and local) (FFP 10) (IP 8)**

- **Pairing local or international research institutions with IPs: FFP could suggest research institutions and establish a range of methods; Partners would reach out to identify institutions (FFP 9) (IP 9)**
- **Research deliverables can include workshops, not just reports (FFP 8) (IP 9)**
- **Training on selecting and supervising researchers; partners would commit time and resources; FFP would encourage participation and support a mechanism for holding this type of training. (FFP 8) (IP 9)**
- **More FFP-PVO conversations, fewer email back and forth (FFP 6) (IP 10)**
 - **Improved direct communication (IP 8) *(n.b This occurred during planning for the Niger/Burkina R&I workshop and there was additional commitment by AORs and IPs to do this moving forward)***
- **FFP to coordinate feedback process – quality control, resolving contradictions, focusing on threshold issues when reviewing SoW, reports. (FFP 6) (IP 7)**

Additional solutions deemed most promising by implementing partner staff. Number of votes in parentheses

- FFP/TOPS to share a database of consultants (expertise, languages, etc.) (14)
- Have fewer FFP permissions needed; let NGOs get on with it. (13)
- Understand that those who know the local context are often field staff: can there be a willingness to have less rigor, but more accuracy for adaptive management? (12)
 - Simplify research, but retain quality (8)
- Introduce threshold / non-threshold issues related to evidence gaps (nice to know versus need to know) (11)
- Define “expertise” to fit the function (9)
- Introduce novel data collection methods (i.e., cameras given to children) ; FFP would suggest those that qualify and partners would suggest new / feasible ideas (8)

Additional solutions deemed most promising by FFP staff follow. Number of votes are in parentheses.

- Research expertise involvement at the beginning and during the design phase to help ensure adequate budget and time allocation. (7)

Session 2: Challenges in drafting a scope of work

The pre-consultation interviews identified partner quality and FFP timeliness of approval as the two most challenging issues related to Scopes of Work (SoW).

High-level partner perspective

The length of time it takes to get SoWs approved and the different standards of different reviewers is very challenging.

FFP should offer guidance, but not necessarily approval on the studies we plan to conduct.

High-level FFP perspective

The quality of research to understand context starts with the quality of the SoW. FFP has received many low quality SoWs.

Aspects of partner studies must be approved to ensure that the research gets the desired result.

FFP agrees that timing of approvals has not gone well.

Participants formed discussion groups with the intention of developing shared standards and expectations for SoWs. The assumption being that shared standards and expectations would result in higher quality and improved timeliness of approvals.

Two discussion groups attempted to reach consensus on **what specifically FFP should approve in the SoW and what they should simply provide input on**. Discussion groups did not elaborate the “why” on their flipcharts.

Both discussion groups agreed that the following items should require FFP approval in the SoW.

- **Deliverables**
- **Minimum qualifications for consultants**
 - Partners request that FFP better define Minimum Consultant qualifications. If IPs can meet these, then FFP can skip approval of consultant later.

Components where FFP and IPs did not reach consensus are:

- **Consultant:** FFP wants to approve all consultants. Partners wish FFP would only provide input on consultants. If FFP must approve the consultant, partners request that FFP to provide very clear reasons when they disapprove of proposed consultants.
- **Specific research questions:** One group reached consensus that FFP should approve the research questions; the other group did not. Partners believe FFP should only offer input, not approval on the proposed research questions.
- **Methodology:** FFP wants to approve; one group of IP representatives desired input from FFP but not approval; the other group agreed that FFP should approve the methodology.

Pre-consultation interviews demonstrated that although a couple of partners assert they have no problem writing a quality SoW, several partners believe that FFP should provide a format-specific SoW.

Other partners elaborated that because “FFP requirements for studies and assessments are evolving, it may be very difficult to write a SoW that meets the latest expectations.”

Three groups tried to identify the specific aspects of drafting a quality SoW that are most challenging for partners and FFP standards and expectations for the SoW that need more detail/ additional guidance. The output from their flipcharts follows:

Parts of the SoW that get the most questions from FFP.

- Sampling design (qualitative and quantitative)
 - Mission creep – we can’t do it all in one study.
 - Methodology – data analysis methods
- What does FFP expect from various sections of the SoW? FFP does not have to be prescriptive but some guidance would be helpful. Maybe a “Protocol Guide” on what methods are preferred.
 - There is confusion between SoW input coming from the Mission, region, and DC. It is not always consistent, not always clear what questions, suggestions, or issues must be addressed.
 - Delayed approval for SoW: 3 layers of review takes up to 6 months; this results in the loss of qualified consultants.
 - Is a better SoW worth the cost of the delays?
 - There are many challenges in coordinating FFP communications/ comments on SoWs. How should partners respond to lame questions from FFP?
 - We (partners) default to methods we are most familiar with, even if they are not the most rigorous or appropriate to the question or issue.
 - We (partners) have MANY learning / research questions; too many. How should we prioritize? What is feasible? What is the logical sequence for filling these knowledge gaps?
 - Every IP technical expert feeds us their own critical questions for their sectors – so many questions get added to the mix. We end up with too many questions.
 - Can we combine different research questions that are related, but not exactly the same?
 - There is not enough focus on end-use analysis and application of study results. This should be specified in the SoW
 - Partners believe they can define research questions, but cannot define how they will analyze that data. How can we do a better job of using the findings to inform implementation?
 - Are the people who are implementing the program looking at the data? Are they reflecting on how it triangulates with the activity?
 - Language barriers create problems in drafting SoWs
 - At start-up, we [partners] may not have the expertise we need, whether because staff are new to context or are staff from a program that had lower requirements/ expectations.

Partners need guidance / capacity strengthening for:

- Research questions and how to develop them.
- Research methods
- Translating research results into project design.

Notes from TOPS Stakeholder Consultation: Understanding Context November 28, 2018

- Broad guidance/ templates for technical levelling
- How do we obtain consent? Who is managing the data?

Proposed Solutions to SoW challenges

- Create SoW templates that are tailored to sectors *(n.b., FFP completed draft in early 2019, initial input suggests partners are quite satisfied; IDEAL will follow up to determine if the templates resulted in improved SoW quality)*
 - Major headings, sections, additional detail
 - FFP share their standards and expectations and some formats
 - Examples of good SoWs would be very useful.
- 4-corners plus technical staff on a call after the initial set of feedback on the SoW. More efficient. Reach consensus on the way forward together.
 - QA/ QC check in on SoW before submission via CoP? Template would speed up
 - Need to have conversations versus emailing back and forth (conversations would be followed by email detailing agreements) *(n.b., commitment at Niger/ Burkina R&I workshop to do just this)*
- For different types of questions or analysis, FFP and IPs determine the appropriate tool kit or options for methodologies together. *(n.b., sessions devoted to this at March 2019 R&I workshop)*
- Can we go rogue and use new methods/ indicators? FFP might not be hip to new ways/ ideas that aren't already in use (let's question what "gold standards" should be.)
- Use the USAID Technical reference sheets
 - Make the technical reference sheets more user-friendly.

Options for SoW Reviews—up for discussion, no consensus yet:

- FFP reviews the whole SoW, not just parts
- FFP reviews some elements of SoW, such as purpose, deliverables, or methodology but does not comment on the rest
- FFP approval only on SoWs over a certain value, e.g., \$250,000
- IPs do not need approval – they are allowed to get on with it, but they are accountable for quality.

Session 3: Suggestions for enhancing communication and collaboration between FFP and partners.

- Create a master calendar – workshops, deliverables, what needs to be ready when, sequencing, and who needs to be part of each. A Process Map!
- Collaboratively developed review timelines and expectations on how the review will occur. Mutual respect for the timelines
 - **Calls are better than email for resolving issues** *(n.b., this occurred during planning for the Niger/ Burkina R&I inception workshop and there is additional commitment by AORs and partners to do this moving forward)*
 - More informal communication

- Consistent messaging, names and contacts, who needs to be engaged in which activities, reviews, and how to strengthen relationships for productive work. Key contacts! Making sure there is a strong transition “handshake” when staff move to new portfolio. What can support consistency?
 - 4-corners calls with agenda and written summary REALLY HELP to talk through issues. *(n.b., several partners state 4-corners calls are now taking place; others have not had 4-corners calls. There seems to be regional differences.)*
 - Debrief 4-corners plus technical specialists on SoWs; reach consensus and document decisions, next steps
- **Have internal FFP conversations before sending feedback to partners to solve the current challenge of multiple, diverse, and contradictory opinions.**
 - Make sure the FFP messages from HQ, Region, and Mission are aligned.
 - FFP should speak with one voice through the AOR and across USAID
- **R&I inception workshop and Gender workshops – jointly planned by FFP and IP** *(n.b., March 2019 R&I inception workshop involved collaborative planning and agenda setting)*
 - Workshop agenda should be co-designed with IPs
- Host an earlier workshop on multiple issues once sufficient key staff are on board, but not four months in.
 - Establish clear points of contact for different tasks, communication, protocols and checking
 - TOC review to identify key learning questions AND PRIORITIZE the questions *(n.b., this was a key focus of March 2018, R&I inception workshop for Niger and Burkina Faso)*
 - Inception workshop is too early to revise the TOC; staff are not oriented to project goals yet *(n.b., At the March 2018 R&I inception workshop, FFP modified the focus of the TOC review to identifying key research questions and abandoned the former re-shuffling of outcomes exercise per partner request.)*
 - Provide a review of expected deliverables, sequencing, and workshops—consideration of country and HQ/ Regional tech staff engagement requirements *(n.b., Session devoted to this at March 2019 R&I Inception workshop)*
- FFP/ IP Co-design of research goals, method, etc. (e.g., Gates model) *(n.b. Partners and FFP staff began to do this during March 2019 R&I inception workshop)*
 - Structured design meeting, then annual meetings
 - Ethiopia TII consultation group as a collaboration mechanism
- For all workshops or trainings: *(n.b., conducted for March 2019 R&I inception workshop)*
 - Send invite/ save the date
 - Specify intended audience
 - Specify number or requested participants
- Follow-up communication on post-results use and application.
- Tech-to-tech (FFP and IP) links established
- IP involvement in creation / revision of guidance documents
- IDEAL should look for opportunities to bring together FFP and IPs *(n.b., specific outreach conducted during March 2019 R&I inception workshop and ongoing throughout all IDEAL efforts)*

SoW approval

Notes from TOPS Stakeholder Consultation: Understanding Context November 28, 2018

- 4 weeks from submission of SoW to issues letter
- Substantial involvement clause
- Inter-country/ CBO standardization of level of involvement

4. Satisfaction Survey Results

General satisfaction with event

More than half of the 54 participants completed the satisfaction survey (n= 31). Nineteen responses were received from IP staff; nine responses were received from FFP staff; and three from staff of the newly-awarded IDEAL activity. To simplify interpretation, IDEAL staff responses are aggregated with DFSA IP responses in the results that follow.

The majority of participants who responded to the survey were either satisfied (68%) or extremely satisfied (23%) with the consultation. A small percentage (10%) were neutral about the experience. No respondents stated they were dissatisfied. More IP staff expressed extreme satisfaction compared to FFP staff (27% versus 11%).

Notably, online respondents were less satisfied than their in-person counterparts. Due to the participatory nature of the event, TOPS anticipated this might be the case and alerted registrants in advance that in-person participation was preferred and highly encouraged and that online attendance might result in the inability to participate in all discussions. Unfortunately, the one online FFP representative had to leave halfway through the event, making the online discussion even more insular.

Please see **Annex C** for all comments related to participant satisfaction.

“Very helpful to begin to understand the differences between FFP and IP perspectives, and where we are misunderstanding each other. Also satisfying to articulate some concrete ways forward.”

“High level of interaction with other partners and with FFP staff; preparation was very good”

“Excellent participation from implementers and FFP, substantial conversations and practical ways forward outlined. Overall spirit of collaboration and problem solving.”

Implementing partner staff

“We identified critically important issues that the community needs to have better shared understanding around, and set the stage for future solutions. Everyone was engaged.”

“It's always good to hear the partners' perspectives. I'm glad they were so open. I think it would have been good to highlight at the end the follow-up that FFP will be doing.”

FFP staff

Pre-consultation summary notes

[The summary notes] "Really set the stage for the meeting and ensured we started at the halfway point rather than the beginning."

IP staff

Almost two-thirds of respondents (61%) stated that the pre-consultation summary notes were "extremely helpful" to understanding the various perspectives among partners and FFP; 35% of respondents found the notes "helpful". Three percent did not read the notes. Partner respondents were slightly more inclined to find the summary notes "extremely helpful" compared to FFP respondents (63% and 55% respectively.) Annex E contains the pre-consultation summary notes.

Making consultations more satisfying and productive for all involved

Major themes stemming from partner and FFP suggestions on how to make future consultations more satisfying and productive include:

- **Regularity: more often and with the same group of participants**
- **Clarity on and commitment to next steps**

Detailed responses follow.

FFP Staff	It was hard to keep the conversations specific enough (i.e. what can we all leave with and implement tomorrow to make things better). I would like to get a "playbook" with rules of engagement , like quarterly or monthly 4 corners calls (that would be agreed upon by the AOR, partner home office, field team, Mission, etc., at the start of the award or start of a new fiscal year)
	It was probably confusing (and somewhat enlightening) for the IPs to see how divided FFP is on many issues. So this comment is not so much about what you can do while the session is happening but rather about the need for FFP to do our own homework and developed more aligned positions on central issues so that IPs don't have to adapt to the position of each individual they interact with.
	Perhaps steadier, more consistent FFP consultations within FFP , particularly GEO, and how AORs/CBOs can develop a more shared understanding as to key features of DFSA awards are managed, could be helpful
	Provide more details on methodology used - some FFP staff (not me) felt that the methodology used to collect data did not represent the right viewpoints.
	There needs to be more follow through so that FFP and IPs actively build upon these efforts and carry the identified needed next steps forward.
	For outcomes to be sound, consultations must have the right people talking about the right things using the right information.

Implementing partner staff	Regular discussion between the same IP staff and same FFP staff would build relationships
	The advance survey and compilation of perspectives was extremely useful. Eliciting the selection of representatives who know/understand the issues to be discussed also very helpful.
	Would be good to have more of these types of meetings at regular intervals to continue to improve relationships and program functioning
	More of the same. Just making sure that next steps are agreed.
	I appreciate the many benefits of Stakeholder Consultations for forging stronger understanding and linkages between FFP and IPs. While not all SCs can/should be explicitly "results-oriented", but where possible, it would be good if they could organized around, or at least linked directly to, specific decisions/actions to be taken.
	I salute you for doing this. I think that very thoughtful attention to capturing the conversation and decisions and disseminating them more widely is key. We see high inconsistencies across FFP (and I'm sure within implementing partners too) so special attention to message transfer should be central to the planning of these consultations.
	It's tricky, but more time for discussion between partners and FFP - although the consultation document was great and took care of a lot of that. Maybe I am hoping for a follow-up workshop to work together for standardization of SOWs, approval and review processes, and other ideas that came up in the consultation.
	Make it more regular for instance quarterly
	Overall it was a good session. It is hard to get at the specific actions that can be done. I feel like often we are giving broad recommendations, and sometimes I feel we've gone through these topics before. The challenge is to get to the next stage, where we identify the specific steps and actions we can take with FFP. So I'm hoping that there will be a next phase to this that gets into that - perhaps with FFP in conjunction with partners to go through the high level topics that came up and agree on a couple of specific actions to try going forward that could make a big difference to coordination and collaboration.
	The planning on this involved gathering information and viewpoints from both sides. The workshop did not involve personalization (just a bit), but did foster mutual understanding from both sides - with an even playing field. The only thing missing was what would be done to make things "stick". In order for things to stick, there needs to be a work plan, outcomes, and high level commitment to it. While the process for this consultation on a controversial issue was better than other previous similar consultations, I think there just needs to be more attention to making things stick built into the end of the consultation. That is - who will do what by when, and how will we all be notified?
	Useful format and background work to make good use of the time. Could benefit by capturing next steps/ action in a visual way.
	Having time for a more in depth conversation would be good. We tried to cover too much in a 4-hour period.

Recommended next steps

Participants were asked to identify their priority “next steps” as a result of this consultation. Multiple interpretations of this question resulted: some participants shared individual next steps, others stated next steps for their organization, some partners recommended next steps for FFP, and others shared general next steps for the DFSA community of practice.

FFP staff priority next steps	
SoWs	FFP needs to get on the same page with what we expect in terms of studies/assessments and especially SOWs.
	Work on finalizing a SOW template.
	Create templates for SOW's (something I'm already working on);
	Develop a SoW template for the formative research that suits the purpose of the exercise. FFP staff hold internal discussions to determine which features of these SoWs are really 'most important' to provide added value in the approval process.
Other	Create templates for M&E plan reviews
	Press for 4 corners calls
	Work with others in FFP on areas where we need to build greater consensus.
	[Determine] how to make the takeaways from the discussions actionable.
	Recommend limiting future events to twice a year (not quarterly).
Implementing partner staff priority next steps	
Suggested next steps for all	Develop a work plan to address the recommendations, including interested IP and FFP reps to determine the best courses of action to make certain that recommendations are met. This may involve restructuring coordination and communication with missions, other USAID entities, etc. - Get high level FFP endorsement for the work plan.
	To agree on standardized processes and formats
	Summarize the information provided and discuss how to reduce the number of assessments.
	Assign responsibilities, deadlines, etc.
Internal next steps	Discuss with senior management the best way to plan for context assessments - review recent assessments which haven't been finalized to improve consistency and overall quality
	Get busy drafting SOWs for assessments in the Refine year
	Improving the use of study findings to inform project activity implementation as well as future designs
	Rethink our barrier analysis on handwashing!!
	Reviewing internally our process for prioritizing/developing scopes formative research
	[Determine] who would be right staff to represent our organization's interests for the working group.
	To work close with my organization's internal team (and research partners) on reviewing plans for formative research and context analysis that draws from lessons learned to make the process more time/cost effective and more applicable to project implementation.

Suggested next steps for FFP	Build in more quality guidance into technical reference chapters, or some other mechanism
	Provide a general R&I calendar that outlines both sequencing of events/deliverables and definitions of events/deliverables.
	Process map looking in particular at R&I, to identify changes needed for better logic, sequencing, and utility of workshops, deliverables and other events.
	Identify the top 3 actions that you will take to address implementing partner comments.
Suggested next steps for TOPS/ IDEAL	Conduct a second SH consultation after changes are completed to review what has changed. This could include a second review/response to recommendations.
	Next workshop to look at common knowledge gap questions or question types and consider what can be consolidated as well as which kinds of approaches might result in simple ways to get at answers without extensive studies.
	Ensure a training component on how to structure and develop research SOWs and R&I by IDEAL. Also include some support around qualifications for recommended consultants.
	Sharing of the suggestions and meeting notes
	Survey on what is meaningful to both IPs and FFP for next consultations

Suggestions for how to improve facilitation of consultation sessions.

Generally participants were very satisfied with facilitation. A few concrete suggestions for improvement follow:

- There needs to be more focus on making these sessions actionable and impactful (i.e., agreements going forward, commitments, action plans, etc.).
- The voting with dots (stickers) exercise should be organized better. Too many had the same results so you were not sure where to vote. Also should limit the number of dots.
- Smaller groups- maybe all Bangladesh or all DRC meetings.
- Great facilitation. We still need to figure out how to crack the nut of getting specifics and keeping the conversation on the trees sometimes, rather than the forest...or even the leaves on the trees.

“As with previous consultations, I think the facilitation was excellent. In fact, it seems to have even improved over time through experience. I wish all “consultations” or working group sessions were facilitated as effectively.”

“I thought that the facilitation was great, neutral and not favoring one person or another. I would just add items mentioned [in earlier comments about next steps and an action plan].”

All comments related to facilitation are included in Annex D.

Recommended amount of time needed for a stakeholder consultation

The vast majority (77%) of respondents believe that 4-hours is the ideal amount of time needed for similar consultations. About one-fifth (19%) recommend a 2-hour consultation. Comments included considering the topic at hand when determining the amount of time and striving to have morning consultations versus afternoon sessions.

5. Summary of progress since 11/28 consultation

A number of the solutions and next steps suggested by participants have already taken place or are in motion. Examples follow:

Proposed solution	Action taken thus far
FFP shares standards and expectations and some formats for SoWs	FFP completed draft SoW template in early 2019, initial input suggests partners are quite satisfied; no input yet from FFP on changes to SoW quality. Standards and expectations were shared at the March 2019 R&I workshop.
Guidance/ encouragement from FFP for IPs to work together for studies that span themes, geographic areas	During the March 2019 R&I inception workshop for Niger and Burkina Faso DFSAs, FFP explicitly encouraged partners to coordinate research and plan assessments together when feasible.
Have conversations versus emailing back and forth (conversations followed by email detailing agreements)	This occurred during planning for the Niger/ Burkina R&I inception workshop and there was additional commitment by AORs to continue communicating in this way moving forward
Initiate or continue 4-corners calls	Several partners state 4-corners calls now take place
R&I inception workshop and Gender workshops – jointly planned by FFP and IP	March 2019 R&I workshop involved collaborative planning and agenda setting
For all workshops or trainings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send invite/ save the date • Specify intended audience • Specify number or requested participants 	Conducted for March 2019 R&I inception workshop, although participants state there is still room for improvement with respect to the timeliness of communication.
R&I TOC review should focus on identifying and prioritizing key learning questions. R&I TOC review is too early to revise TOC; staff are not oriented to project goals yet.	In response to partner requests, identifying and prioritizing knowledge and evidence gaps was the key focus of the TOC review during the March 2018, R&I inception workshop for Niger and Burkina Faso.
FFP/ IP co-design of research goals, method, etc. For different types of questions or analysis, FFP and IPS determine the appropriate tool kit or options for methodologies together	FFP and partners jointly reviewed appropriate methods for research questions during the March 2019 R&I inception workshop
Partners conduct internal review of process for prioritizing/developing scopes formative research	In progress as a result of the March 2019, R&I workshop
Provide a general R&I calendar that outlines both sequencing of events/deliverables and definitions of events/deliverables.	In progress
Conduct a second SH consultation after changes are completed to review what has changed. This could include a second review/response to recommendations.	In progress
IDEAL should look for opportunities to bring together FFP and IPs	Outreach conducted during March 2019 R&I inception workshop and ongoing throughout all IDEAL efforts

Annex A: Agenda

Stakeholder Consultation: Understanding Context
Washington, D.C.
November 28th, 2018 1:00-5:00 pm

Time	SESSION INFORMATION
1:00-1:20	<p>Welcome, introductions, and overview</p> <p>Why is FFP increasingly emphasizing context analysis and formative research?</p>
1:20-1:50	Myth-busters and follow-up discussion
Capacity Gaps - What are they? How to fill them?	
1:50-2:35	<p>Overview: main points from summary.</p> <p>Small group discussions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the challenges associated with getting the right expertise?</i> • <i>What types of context research are most difficult to obtain the right expertise for?</i> • <i>What solutions exist to remedy these challenges?</i> • <i>What should FFP's role be? What should partners' role be?</i>
2:35-2:45	Plenary vote on most feasible and promising solutions and roles
2:45-3:00	Break
SoWs: developing shared standards and expectations	
3:00-3:45	<p>Overview: main points from summary.</p> <p>Small group discussions – one question per group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Which items in the SoW are critical to have approval on and why?</i> • <i>What specific aspects of drafting a quality SoW are most challenging for partners?</i> • <i>Which FFP standards and expectations for the SoW need more detail/ additional guidance?</i> <p>Group report out: identification of common themes</p>
Improving communication and collaborative planning	
3:45-4:20	<p>Overview: main points from summary</p> <p>Small group discussions:</p> <p><i>What aspects of communication and collaborative planning should FFP and partners prioritize? Why? How?</i></p>
4:20-4:30	Plenary vote on most feasible, promising ideas
4:30-4:55	Plenary wrap up – the way forward
4:55-5:00	Satisfaction survey

Annex B: Proposed solutions to research capacity challenges

Proposed solutions to research capacity challenges	FFP votes	IP votes
Approvals		
FFP provides clearer expectations regarding what needs approval, agrees with IP ahead of time on deadlines and timeline	8	16
Have fewer permissions needed; let NGOs get on with it.	2	13
Introduce threshold / non-threshold issues related to evidence gaps (nice to know versus need to know)	4	11
Process mapping for approval processes	2	4
Both implementers and FFP open to changes in TOC	1	3
Earlier technical FFP input versus later review	1	1
Capacity		
Use research expertise during data analysis to help with depth of analysis	2	4
Pairing local or international research institutions with IPs : FFP could suggest research institutions and establish a range of methods; Partners would reach out to identify institutions	9	9
Training on selecting and supervising researchers; partners would commit time and resources; FFP would encourage participation and support a mechanism for holding this type of training.	8	9
Long-term partnerships with universities (US and local)	10	8
Allow time to explore “fit to function”, identify purpose of research and the required quality	3	2
Define “expertise” to fit the function	5	9
Communication		
More FFP-PVO conversations, fewer email back and forth	6	10
Improved direct communication	3	8
FFP to coordinate feedback process – quality control, resolving contradictions, focusing on threshold issues when reviewing SoW, reports.	6	7
Consultant acquisition		
IPs share vetted consultants	2	5
Ensure the PI is not just a subject matter expert, but has research background	3	3
Identify the need and bring on board the right senior staff or consultant	2	2
Consistently use one consultant if a series of studies is needed		2
Expanding the pool / roster of potential research candidates (conversations with FFP to brainstorm).		

Proposed solutions to research capacity challenges	FFP votes	IP votes
Internal IP tendering process for new consultants/ research partners		
FFP/TOPS to share a database of consultants (expertise, languages, etc.)	2	14
Coordination		
Guidance/ encouragement from FFP for IPs to work together for studies that span themes, geographic areas	8	11
Pairing the right teams (technical, programmatic, and research	6	7
Research expertise involvement at the beginning and during the design phase to help ensure adequate budget and time allocation	7	4
To resolve the delays inherent in context / formative research startup required bringing on board research assets at the same time as implementation start-up field teams.	6	6
Methods		
Introduce novel data collection methods (i.e., cameras given to children) ; FFP would suggest those that qualify and partners would suggest new / feasible ideas	3	8
A review of SoW, protocols, instruments to identify best methods or a compiled set of broad recommendations	3	6
Level of rigor		
Understand that those who know the local context are often field staff: can there be a willingness to have less rigor, but more accuracy for adaptive management?	5	12
Simplify research without compromising quality	4	8
Scopes of work		
IPs prioritize finding quality consultants in the Sow	3	6
IP to pre-identify consultant and put it into proposal for early approval	1	6
IPs HQ take more responsibility to review SoWs so that FFP need not review	3	2
SOPs for SoWs – guidelines and templates for common assessments	7	19
Miscellaneous		
FFP should develop a big research and learning agenda	1	1
Deliverables can include workshops, not just reports	8	9

Annex C: Participant general satisfaction comments

What was satisfying or dissatisfying about the event?	
Implementing partner staff	Good to have very frank discussions and for FFP to be open to listening
	High level of interaction with other partners and with FFP staff, preparation was very good
	It was great to have so many FFP staff at the session - not only that they were listening, but also to see where there was agreement within that group. Plus it was useful to spend time with other implementers talking about these issues.
	Very helpful to begin to understand the differences between FFP and IP perspectives, and where we are misunderstanding each other. Also satisfying to articulate some concrete ways forward.
	Excellent participation from implementers and FFP, substantial conversations and practical ways forward outlined. Overall spirit of collaboration and problem solving.
	I think this was an important topic and greatly appreciate the responsiveness of FFP and TOPS-Bridge in addressing it an open forum via the Stakeholder Consultation. There are few opportunities like these for open dialogue between IPs and FFP, and it presents a great opportunity to share with and learn from each other. I understand that it's difficult to achieve, but the one thing that would change my "satisfied" to "extremely satisfied" would be a clear sense of concrete actions/responses to address some of the current challenges.
	I'd have given it an extremely satisfied except that while I know we have to keep things focused, much of the discussion linked back to themes present and challenging related to other aspects beyond just formative research and context analysis. We weren't able to explore that a bit more fully and it could have created some efficiency in not having to repeat this discussion again.
	It was good, I'll be curious to see what happens now. It was great to hear FFP's point of view and be able to share with them. It was also good to have the information ahead of time.
	What was satisfying is that IPs were listened to, and I think that most FFP staff felt our very real pain. However, I think that some FFP folks were still a bit "Pollyannaish" regarding their assumptions about our capacity. Also, we need to see what the ultimate results are and how long it takes to bring about this change. It is over a week later and have still not received an official invitation to the Niger/Burkina inception workshop. I have people writing to me asking if they should go, when will we get the notification? They have another trip before or after the workshop that they need to book now, why can't they tell us, etc. I would like to see action for change, a work plan, what will be done as a result of the workshop (or not and why), etc.
	Great coming to the table, sharing experience, and collective thinking around context analysis and qualitative research. A good starting point for understanding of context analysis and its application
It was a bit confusing when groups were talking, when to have discussion online, or when we were waiting for the onsite group. I know it is challenging to get online participation, so I appreciate the effort that was done to keep us engaged. I do think having a person designated to manage the online participation was key.	

	It was good to have frank discussions on expectations and I hope there are clarity and standardization to come out of it. With more time, I would have liked to have gotten into what some of the expected standards of research might be, especially for qualitative research.
What was satisfying or dissatisfying about the event?	
Food for Peace staff	We identified critically important issues that the community needs to have better shared understanding around, and set the stage for future solutions. Everyone was engaged.
	Being rather new to the system, this event helped me to better understand the perspectives of IPs. I liked the collegial atmosphere in the room, and the fact that the facilitator came with deep experience in the issues (not just directing traffic).
	Given richness and complexity of (resolving) some conflicting data as well as ambiguity as to 'whose authority' it is to treat the many issues, the sessions were practical and positive, offering several perspectives.
	Good facilitation and exchanges between FFP and partners.
	Great start to the session (with the agree/disagree walking around the room exercise); it was great to mingle during the exercise and learn where people stood (literally!). It was also nice to have face time with partners.
	Important conversations were useful and helped FFP and IPs better understand one another's perspectives. Exercises were formulated in a manner that helped participants go into detail.
	It's always good to hear the partners' perspectives. I'm glad they were so open. I think it would have been good to highlight at the end the follow-up that FFP will be doing.
	Too many people attended who did not have adequate experience or knowledge to be able to effectively participate.

Annex D: Level of satisfaction with TOPS facilitation

Implementing partner staff	I don't have any suggestions here. As with previous consultations, I think the facilitation was excellent. In fact, it seems to have even improved over time through experience. I wish all "consultations" or working group sessions were facilitated as effectively.
	Facilitation was excellent.
	Facilitation was good. I liked the rabbit.
	I thought that the facilitation was great, neutral and not favoring one person or another. I would just add items mentioned above.
	Facilitation was great.
	Smaller groups- maybe all Bangladesh or all DRC meetings.
	Laurie did a great job.
	I liked the location, timing (1-5 is ok, 12-4 or 12:30-4:30 better for parents maybe), format and facilitator!
Food For Peace Staff	Great facilitation. We still need to figure out how to crack the nut of getting specifics and keeping the conversation on the trees sometimes, rather than the forest...or even the leaves on the trees
	The voting with dots (stickers) exercise should be organized better. Too many had the same results so you were not sure where to vote. Also should limit the number of dots.
	There needs to be more focus on making these sessions actionable and impactful (i.e., agreements going forward, commitments, action plans, etc.).

Annex E: Pre-consultation summary notes

Recognizing that all discussion themes are interwoven, we’ve tried to group FFP & IP input into manageable main and sub-categories. Perspectives are organized side-by-side to the extent possible. The relationship is much stronger in some cases than it is in others.

Orange Cells = Questions	Green cells = recommendations
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FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
Discussion Point: FFP and IP Roles in Studies Initiated to Understand Context	
<i>What should FFP’s role be in the assessment process and why?</i>	<p>Background: All partners agree that FFP’s approach to assessment is evolving and it is hard to know what to expect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners note that the amount of input and consultation from FFP has significantly increased in the past couple of years. In the past partners were only required to alert FFP that planned to carry out context assessments and formative research. Now FFP reviews several components in planned studies for all DFSAs, including the SoW and methodology. In the R&I model, FFP must review and approve everything - SOWs, methodology, methods, consultants, survey forms, etc.
<i>What should FFP’s role be in the assessment process and why?</i>	<p>Summary answer: Broad guidance on overall study plans, advice on programmatic options and best practices, and to some extent, capacity development for conducting effective assessments.</p>
<p>Some interviewed FFP staff believe that to a certain degree FFP needs to be slightly directive, especially “when it looks like the research will not get us what we want.”</p>	<p>The large majority of partners assert that FFP should be involved in the overall plan, but not the minutia.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All partners appreciate broad FFP input, but desire improvements to FFP approval timelines. “It is helpful for FFP to be involved, so long as there is a reasonable turnaround, a mechanism for discussion, and quick resolution to approval.” Currently, the multiple rounds of revision in response to FFP reviews take a significant amount of time. Feedback should provide substantial contributions, but not editing and wordsmithing. For almost all partners, having FFP involved in all aspects of DFSA research wreaks havoc on the timeline and causes operational delays. In some cases, partners conduct research without receiving final approval from FFP because they could not wait any longer. In addition to delays in approving SoWs to conduct various studies, there are

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
	<p>challenging delays in approving the assessment and study reports. Partners feel conflicted about whether they must refrain from making programmatic decisions based on information gathered until they receive FFP approval. If not, they wonder “what is the purpose of the approval process?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to work together, but “collaboration should speed us up, not slow us down” • Almost two-thirds of partners feel as if trust and control are shifting. Statements to this effect include: “USAID wants to maintain more control.” “USAID manages us as a contractor versus an awardee” (1/3 of partners). A few of these partners highlight the distinction between providing “guidance” and functioning in an advisory role, and requiring “approval”. Most partners would like to be able to go to FFP for guidance, but not necessarily for approval on the studies they plan to conduct. • A smaller group of partners has no problem with FFP requiring approvals as long as partners and FFP have consistent, clear, collaborative opportunities for conversation.
<i>What should FFP’s role be in the assessment process and why?</i>	<p>Partners appreciate FFPs consultative role – especially advice on best programmatic approaches in response to findings. “FFP assistance helps us design programs in a way that facilitates quicker PREP approval.” “FFP has been very supportive and proactive”. A few partners described exemplary TDY visits by FFP technical teams that were followed up by several consultative phone calls (notably this did not occur when the partners were planning assessments).</p>
<i>What should FFP’s role be in the assessment process and why?</i>	<p>More than half of all partners believe that FFP’s role should be guidance on assessment practices and to some extent training. Comments shared include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Capacity development workshops are helpful.” • “We need more FFP guidance documents that share best practices” on assessment methods and data use. • “We need more events that bring people together to hear examples of what FFP identifies as best practices” in formative research and context assessment. • “The combination of training offered by TOPS in a workshop setting, plus the deep engagement on M&E plans and in programming decisions has been very useful” • “Annual monitoring workshops are really useful for staff.” <p>Several partners share a polemically differing perspective of FFP’s training role. Comments include:</p>

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “FFP should make sure that capacity development efforts for research are aligned to the partners’ different needs.” “They should be user-driven and not mandatory” • “FFP hosts too many of their own workshops throughout the year. These workshops are a significant time commitment, and at times, they are redundant to processes partners already conduct on their own.” • “Could FFP only organize workshops to address frequently asked questions, or introduce new processes?” • “There should be more south-to-south exchange opportunities in the field that are truly useful to end users.” <p>One partner succinctly explained the middle ground position, shared by several IPs, on FFPs role in training and guidance. Partners would like to be a part of the planning process of workshops, so everyone can agree on what will happen, when, and why. When collaborative planning does not happen the workshops can feel like an imposition even when they are helpful. <i>Additional explanation on pages 13-14</i></p>
<p>Several staff wonder if enhanced communication could reduce how directive FFP is.</p> <p>“If we explain it better from the beginning and if partners can articulate what they are doing and why they are doing, maybe we wouldn’t need to be so directive.”</p> <p>“Achieving food security will require the best thinking of IP and FFP staff as both bring different and important perspectives to the table. It should be about dialogue and thinking together”</p> <p>“I think FFP can do a lot to improve a lot of processes, communication and coordination with partners, as well as training and capacity building when led by staff.”</p>	<p>All partners desire enhanced planning and communication with FFP. Almost all partners believe that enhanced communication might reduce the extent to which FFP needs to review partners’ study and assessment plans. A few assert that while discussions are great opportunities for mutual education and understanding, there will always be turnover, making it difficult to feel certain that verbal agreements will hold during a formal review of written deliverables.</p> <p>Despite challenges and suggestions for improvements, the vast majority of partners assert they have a very good working relationship with FFP.</p>
<p>Related to the theme of communication and coordination, one FFP staffer shared this</p>	

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
perceived internal challenge “we are a bit stovepiped in FFP and becoming increasingly so as we grow. More teams, more staff, more technical staff and more technical guidance, more TDYs, etc. “Much of our guidance (and staff) only last on a portfolio for a year or two.”	
	<i>What are FFP thoughts about the role of the PVO in this process?</i>
	<i>What are FFP’s thoughts about potentially reducing the amount of direct control and oversight it currently exerts on partner efforts to understand context?</i>
	<i>What systems can FFP and IPs put in place to enhance communication and collaborative planning?</i>
Challenge: Improving processes related to context assessment and formative research	
Sub -challenge: Improving SoW approval processes	
	<i>Who within FFP plays a role in reviewing/approving SOWs (M&E, Tech. Leads, AOR, etc.)?</i>
<p>The quality of research to understand context starts with the quality of the SoW. SoWs have to flow out of the work plan and the knowledge gaps that exist.</p> <p>Partners often submit SoWs seen as low quality by FFP. SoWs written by outside consultants tend to be of higher quality, but that is not always the case</p>	<p>All partners desire a more efficient and effective way of moving through the study approval process. “As it stands, SoWs are submitted, we wait a long time for responses, we don’t necessarily agree with the comments, we resubmit... it is a long and involved process which delays implementation of the assessment, therefore delays the results, therefore incorporation of any results into programming. Approval of consultants can’t happen until we have approved SOW and bid out the consultancy.” There are few quality consultants, resulting in a competition for the best. This also leads to implementation delays. It would be helpful to move to a conversation process for review so that we could reach agreement together, once for scope and once for consultant if possible.”</p>
<p><i>Do partners have good guidance on how to create a SoW for research?</i></p> <p>Most interviewed FFP staff agree that it is not the role of FFP to give guidance on how to</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several partners believe that FFP should provide a format-specific SoW. • In contrast, two partners believe they have the capacity to write proper SoWs, and that the intense oversight on SoWs is unnecessary. • Those taking a stance in the middle of these two perspectives explain, “FFP requirements for studies and assessments are evolving, so it may be very difficult to

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
write a SoW, though there may be room for setting quality standards/expectations.	write a SoW that meets the latest expectations.” This situation highlights the necessity and importance of early communication and conversation.
<i>Would it be useful for FFP to set standards/expectations more clearly?</i>	Having more clarity on the approval process and criteria is high priority for all partners. Partners need to understand exactly what it is FFP expects. Partners emphatically state that specific criteria and guidance would make the standards and expectations transparent to all, and make it easier for partners to submit solid SoWs on the first attempt. “.... we must have a transparent set of criteria of what will be denied and/ or approved.”
There is a need for greater consensus within FFP itself regarding the degree to which FFP should be directive regarding SoWs and personnel identified to carry out the work. Some say FFP should provide clear direction, making sure that the questions to be answered are priority information gaps, and that the study design and procedures proposed are likely to result in valid and relevant findings. Others believe that it is incumbent on the partner to develop an acceptable SoW.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Almost half of all partners request more clarity on FFP expectations for consultants. “We believe we have submitted strong candidates, but they are rejected. Please lay out the selection criteria and provide clarity on why a candidate is rejected” ● More than half of partners expressed a fear of limited objectivity in the approval process for SoWs and study reports. “Different reviewers have different standards and delve into different levels in their reviews and demands for revision.” “When there is no clear guidance on approval criteria, you may end up with a friendly FFP person, or someone who is more difficult.” Working with more than one FFP reviewer often leads to confusion, as it is clear there is not a FFP standard to which all are adhering.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Which items are critical to have upfront approval on?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 	Recommendation: IP consensus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● FFP provides clarity on SoW criteria so that the quality improves and approvals are timelier.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 	Recommendation from 1/3 of partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partners and FFP collaborate immediately after an award to determine what elements of research need approval.
An internal challenge noted by several FFP staff is that the only people with eyes on all the studies are the CBOs. There is no key technical research person within FFP with a broader view across the knowledge gaps that partners are exploring.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A large majority of partners agree that comments shared by different FFP reviewers on partner study findings are often contradictory. Comments submitted by FFP and Center for Resilience are also, at times, conflicting. Both situations make it difficult for partners to respond in a way that satisfies all reviewers and create cascading challenges. Recommendations: IP consensus

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
<p>One perspective shared states that while AORs/CBOs are technically in command, some believe it doesn't play out that way in reality. AORs and CBOs need to get buy-in and support from the technical teams, both for quality control and because management tends to vet decisions through them. When many people of similar or more senior rank are involved in a process or portfolio a form of paralysis can step in (especially for staff eager to get input from as many people as possible).</p>	<p>It would be helpful to all concerned if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One person could oversee the FFP review, consolidating comments, eliminating conflicting remarks before sharing with partners, and facilitating rapid resolution of conflicts and issuance of approval. • If all offices who review an assessment coordinate their efforts, rather than conduct the reviews separately. When multiple offices contribute to a review, a lead office should carry out the same function as lead reviewer described above.
	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS (no IP consensus yet):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the lead office/lead reviewer clear to all from the outset. • Could FFP clarify the role and purpose of other USAID branches in reviewing DFSA formative research plans? For example, provide clarification of the C4R's role in "advice and consent", even though approval should come from FFP.
	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS (no IP consensus yet):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a structured feedback matrix or other tool to stay focused on the concerns/corrective action plan. • If FFP involves other USAID offices in the SoW reviews (i.e., Center for Resilience or Global Health) engage those offices to help develop the SoW criteria.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some cases, FFP provides comments on the SoW, but there is no follow up from the partners. 	<p>Partners have mixed opinions with respect to whether the USAID reviews result in better products and processes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several partners claim that USAID reviews consistently result in better products. "They have expertise we don't have in house. We appreciate working with them and always learn a lot". One IP states asserts that FFP's research and technical expertise is not "necessarily different from or better than what we have in house, but they often have more knowledge and expertise on things like congressional priorities, other political/strategic considerations, etc." FFP also has "a line of sight into what all partners are doing which is of value."

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the other hand, one-third assert that what the partner receives is only slightly improved and is not a balanced tradeoff for the significant delay it causes. Other partners experience the reviews as a manifestation of the challenge mentioned earlier –different reviewers/ different standards. “Some reviews help and some don’t”. Some partners have trouble understanding FFP research recommendations. “We were not even sure if the questions were directed at our organization and our specific DFSA because they were so vague.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timing of approvals has not gone well. There are many delays in the approval process due to many separate assessments, each with a separate SoW. Factors contributing to problems with approvals and timing exist within FFP and within partner processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing the approval timelines is high priority for all interviewed partners. Most are frustrated by the many steps in the approval process and agree “Approval timelines are our biggest challenge.” FFP and the Center for Resilience review at separate times (see bullet above on limited coordination of approval processes), which can add an additional month to the approval process. One partner described a case where the FFP formative research approvals took 1.5 years.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 	<p><i>What process can be put in place so that FFP and partners agree on review and approval timelines?</i></p>
<p>Sub -challenge: Improving the coordination of study timing</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than half of all partners feel that FFP could be more understanding and aware of program constraints that could undermine the quality of studies. “The only way to capture some information is through primary fieldwork. In many cases, this type of research takes so long to for FFP to approve, that by the time partners get to the field, conditions are undesirable and not conducive to thorough research (e.g. Ramadan, rainy season, etc.)” In contrast, one partner strongly disagreed with the position stated above and shared that their experience has been much different. “FFP officers are very aware and sensitive to program constraints and conditions”.
	<p>Recommendation from 1/3 of partners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners and FFP decide together soon after the award when is the best time to collect data and schedule approvals to make this possible.

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	Two partners stressed the importance of laying proper groundwork for research with the community – the initial message is so important for helping communities understand why actions resulting from the research will take time. Laying this groundwork takes time—time that does not always align to FFP deadlines.
	Half of all partners also stress that timelines for ARR and PREP do not align well to research efforts. Without flexibility on ARR and PREP timelines, there is pressure to submit less robust findings because the data are not yet available.
Sub -challenge: Improving reporting processes	
	Reviews of individual assessment reports are overflowing with questions. One example described how each of the partner’s many research reports received four pages of questions. When FFP sends multiple questions, many partners feel they must check off everything before taking step one.
	Close to half of all partners assert that most feedback on the research reports is not helpful. There are many nitpicky questions. Sometimes FFP asks the same questions multiple times – as if no one has read the responses or revisions. Often FFP questions are ones the partners have already considered. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Partners should not have to interpret the meaning of FFP comments, and FFP should want partners to understand clearly what is most important, and what is merely a question for consideration. ○ When partners do not answer the original question to FFP’s satisfaction, it may be that the partner does not understand the type of response FFP is looking for. It could be helpful for FFP to clarify more precisely, what they want to know.
	Helpful comments are those that ask for a deeper explanation of contextual parts of the report or ask partner to better contextualize the findings. Also questions that probe for learning that can be utilized and/or shared.
	<i>What systems can be put in place to streamline this process?</i>
	<i>Could FFP more carefully consider what type of comments are helpful and essential?</i>
Challenge: Making the most of R&I and other inception workshops that identify knowledge gaps	
There is limited coordination before the R&I (or other) inception workshops where FFP and	Most partners shared that FFP and IP technical HQ staff all want intense investigation into their own sector. This results in the DFSA carrying out 10-11 separate assessments. They

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<p>partners identify information gaps and research priorities. When determining the key questions, at times, it turns into a free-for-all with sticky notes. This process is supposed to translate into formative research, but something gets lost in the translation. The result is not comprehensive studies to fill information gaps, but many isolated studies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In some cases, the sticky-note / TOC exercise results in many information gaps that are not filled. <p>FFP staff share that IPs seem to view additional assessments required by FFP as a non-strategic additive approach. IPs do not feel there is focus to the inquiry because FFP technical leads may not agree on how things should progress.</p>	<p>explain that this is not efficient. It is a time burden on staff and DFSA participants. It is not conducive to comprehensive and integrated analysis of the issues and can make integrated response difficult.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Inception/M&E workshops should facilitate consensus on priority research questions explicitly linked to key breakthroughs and leverage points in the TOC.” • Another shares that “both types of studies are needed. More integrated SBCC, for example, and other more rapid and focused studies such as barrier analysis, or market and value chain assessment.” • One partner expressed that in a couple of cases, all the thematic studies were coordinated, but this is not the norm for them. <p>Almost half of all partners express dissatisfaction with the start-up TOC revision workshops conducted by FANTA and FFP. “They are not well-thought out or well-organized.” These workshops more often result in frustration and confusion rather than an improved understanding of TOC pathways.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One partner strongly disagrees with these statements, but offers, “this can be the case when the M&E lead on the award does not seem to be representing the same perspective as the M&E team lead or the FANTA staff person. Overt disagreements are honest, but leave partners confused about how to move forward and whose perspective “rules”.” • Another partner adds, “The workshop at the beginning of project needs to be reconsidered. It is premature to expect new staff who are just learning about the project to revise the TOC before any research is done. Also, it very distracting from getting project startup established. There is already a well thought out TOC in the proposal. This should be sufficient for year 1, allowing projects to focus on hiring and training staff, conducting research, selecting participants, etc. If a workshop in year 1 is deemed necessary by FFP, it would be more useful if it was focused on understanding the TOC – what it means, how it is used as a management tool, etc. rather than refining and revising before research is conducted. In the second year, when research is done, context is better known, participants have been selected, and feedback is being received from implementation experience, then, the TOC should be reviewed.”
	<p><i>Where in the assessment process can we combine thematic studies? How do we do a better job of sending fewer teams?</i></p>

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<p>At times partners do not bring adequate technical staff to the R&I (or other) inception workshops where FFP and partners identify knowledge gaps. This also happens at the follow-up workshops where teams modify the TOC based on formative research findings. Partners often send personnel with limited expertise. Some HQ staff attend, but not for all sectors. With a few exceptions, it seems that partners do not engage HQ staff unless there is a problem.</p> <p>When partners do bring high-level staff they are very helpful as neutral 3rd parties.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost all partners state that HQ technical leads attend the initial start-up workshops where teams identify information gaps with FFP and weigh into SoWs for formative research. • Two IPs state that HQ technical leads usually review final tools, but they are not always involved from the start. • Almost all partners agreed that HQ technical leads, including MEAL, play an instrumental role throughout the formative research process, both when research is commissioned externally or when it is carried out in-house. Technical leads are involved in designing the specific studies e.g., Gender/ Agriculture systems, Markets, Health and Nutrition, WASH, IEE. • HQ technical leads also play a key role in helping ensure that recommendations emerging from formative research are (when relevant and feasible) incorporated into the activity design during the project cycle. For one partner, learning partners are starting to fill this role as well, but they don't always have expertise in specific sectors, such as WASH. • Several partners explained when FFP feedback comes in very late, HQ tech leads are not always available to respond (due to competing obligations). One outcome of this is that the HQ technical staff end up mostly providing remote assistance.
<p><i>Are there any organizational barriers to sending HQ tech staff to help with these processes?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
<p><i>How well is FFP articulating what we want to get out of research?</i></p> <p><i>Several FFP staff agreed that FFP has not done a good job of explaining what formative research is and what the expectations are.</i></p>	<p>During inception workshops, the vast majority of partners want clarity on FFP suggestions versus FFP requirements. What is negotiable and what is non-negotiable? What is within the realm of partners' decision-making control? Partners would like FFP to clearly state the DFSA must fill these information gaps" or "the DFSA may wish to explore these gaps."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Partners do their best to address FFP comments, but if there is a comment they cannot address they often feel blocked from moving forward. Sometimes, depending on the AOR and the Mission, partners feel they have more flexibility in whether or not they address every comment in the response document. ○ Several partners request that more attention be devoted to a learning/research agenda across projects and sectors for greater ultimate applied learning.

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<i>What type of consultative process and input from SMEs and within FFP would assist FFP to develop a list of 3-5 'rich , food security and resilience type questions, as a logical extension of FFP's strategy and reflective leading thought in the industry, that could capture the types of high-value, formative research topics of interest to FFP over next 5-10 years?</i>	<i>Could FFP show us where we could have done a better job in determining key questions?</i>
<p>One FFP perspective is that FFP could improve efforts to set calendars or benchmarks for what we want from partners for planning purposes. FFP can be late sending out guidance on the goal, agenda, who should attend etc. In some cases, the content is not as effective or relevant as it could be. Often these challenges are due to extraneous issues but not always. One factor perceived to be contributing to this challenge is the reliance on a very small technical team to do so much.</p>	<p>A large majority of partners agree that from the beginning, there should be a consistent technical team (same set of people throughout the process), with a point person to determine the most relevant questions and information gaps. One partner strongly disagrees with this position asserting that it is not about having consistent technical staff involved, but rather having staff with the right skills (e.g., research capacity) involved early in the process, so they can help develop the SoW and ensure that appropriate assessments are initiated to frame questions.</p>
Challenge: Enhancing the capacity to conduct assessments and formative research	
<p>“there is limited understanding [among partners] on what formative research is, as well as qualitative research, what it is, how it is done well, and how results should be used.” [FFP staff are] “not sure that it is FFP’s direct responsibility to strengthen IP capacity in this area, but FFP does need to support strengthening capacity among the IP community. It will be critical that these capacity building efforts are sound.”</p>	<p>A number of partners assert that different FFP staff have conflicting opinions on the capacity of partners to conduct research. Some FFP staff have a supportive attitude and others give the impression that partners do not know the first thing about conducting qualitative or quantitative research. This is frustrating. Others indicate this particular challenge has not been a problematic area for them.</p> <p>Recommendations: no IP consensus yet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If FFP could articulate required competencies for different kinds of research it might help partners determine whether they are able to conduct some assessments with in-house leadership, or whether they should seek external experts. • Clarity about standards and expectations could help this situation. “It will also help to ensure that the relevant FFP staff have similar training and levels of capacity and a way to standardize their expectations.”

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<p><i>Who (activity staff or consultants) is conducting research to understand context? And why?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partners' practices of hiring international consultants to conduct research for understanding context are diverse. Some always do, some never do, some do occasionally. ● Partners elect to use consultants or learning partners for two main reasons. Staff may not have capacity and/ or they do not have the time. ● A few partners state that if they have internal expertise in a sector, there is no need to go outside. One partner frequently collaborates with universities when they need a consultant. Another conducts some small-scale formative research through collaborative efforts of in-house KM, M&E and technical teams- but commissions the majority of formative research to consultants given their scope, breadth, and the time and skills they have to undertake research. ● One partner explains, "the cost of maintaining in-house expertise is high." FFP demands vast areas of expertise from M&E to DRR and WASH to markets, environment, nutrition and gender. There are very few organizations who are willing to have a sufficient pool of experts in all areas needed, available to support programs w/or without direct billable time."
<p><i>Do assessment and formative research teams have sufficient capacity?</i></p> <p>Limited in-country qualitative skills present challenges for conducting high quality assessment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Almost all partners agree that field staff capacity to conduct research greatly varies by region, and that the role of HQ and regional support is to consistently strengthen capacity. ● Aside from geographic differences in staff capacity, almost all partners report mixed views of field capacity across their organization to carry out high quality qualitative or quantitative research. One-third of partners share that field staff are good at collecting data but still struggle with analysis. ● Two partners assert that they have excellent expertise in the field. They have strong M&E teams who are able to pull together strong research teams. They incorporate frontline staff who they train to observe and interact with participants to learn about issues and their visions. One partner believes that barrier analysis conducted by their own country staff is of very high quality.
<p><i>Do partners believe that studies are done well and by the right people?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All partners state that the quality of consultants and the findings they produce is inconsistent. Some deliver rich findings, but other consultants entirely miss the mark. Several partners report receiving low quality data from external consultants, or hiring consultants who end up needing a lot of coaching.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Qualitative research is not always done as well by consultants as partners expect it to be done. “Many consultants don’t turn in great deep dives.” One partner explains, we often “outsource to a local firm. Even when the firm has experience in qualitative research, they do not do it well. Often, there is not dynamic analysis, just descriptive, and many data collectors tend to think in quantitative terms, are impatient, want to get people to give the right answers, rather than having an understanding of learning from the responses” ● Partners generally perceive that gender studies are high quality, but have not been as satisfied with the depth of findings in value chain assessments and formative research for SBCC. ● Two partners assert that the quality of all their in house research is overwhelmingly more satisfactory and thorough compared to that of consultants. Despite this, one of these partners continues to engage consultants because of time constraints and to guarantee external validity.
<p>The quality of research is highly dependent on who it is contracted out to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some external consultants hired to help activities understand context are good at collecting data, but poor at interpreting data. ○ The quality of partner studies varies- some studies require a very specific type of expertise, and without that level of expertise, quality problems arise. 	<p><i>Does FFP trust the capacity of consultants over that of implementing partners? This is unclear to partners.</i></p> <p><i>Does FFP view strengthening the capacity of field staff to conduct formative research a priority for partners? In the past, at times FFP has suggested that IPs should contract (rather than try to develop) adequate research capacity.</i></p>
<p>Partners propose to FFP that they have the capacity to conduct high quality research, but then, more often than not, they must seek external assistance. If consultants with specific skills are not available, some projects have had to revise the originally proposed studies and conduct sub-par studies.</p>	
<p><i>Could there be a list of quality consultants?</i></p>	

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<p>FFP has an expectation at start up for internal HQ technical assistance to guide formative research and other studies, but this rarely seems to happen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FFP hopes that field staff will be highly involved in research, but also that they will be guided and supported by technical expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Almost all partners agree the role of HQ and regional support is to consistently strengthen capacity. Almost all partners state that HQ technical leads, including MEAL, play an instrumental role throughout the formative research process, both when research is commissioned externally or when it is carried out in-house. Technical leads are involved in designing the specific studies e.g., Gender/ Agriculture systems, Markets, Health and Nutrition, WASH, IEE. Partners across the board feel it is important for field staff to be directly involved in the research – the more staff and more often the better. Involvement builds capacity and there is a concerted effort among partners to strengthen capacity. Additionally, partners assert that involvement builds a deeper understanding of context and stronger relationships with community members, traditional, and government authorities. In a few cases however, staff have not been involved when international consultants conduct the research.
<p><i>Are there any organizational barriers to sending HQ tech staff to guide and support the research teams during fieldwork?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">
	<p>Two partners report that field staff are not convinced that participating in the research is the best use of their time. “We need to be able to demonstrate to field staff the value addition of research. It can be a hurdle trying to show that the research is relevant. In general, once we complete a study, the field staff are more interested. This is a culture we are trying to change.”</p>
	<p>Almost half of all partners stress that staff need time built into the schedule to strengthen their capacity to conduct research, analyze findings, and share back with the community for validation. FFP submission timelines do not always allow for this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff should be on board in the refine year to interact- we need to build in time for staff to strengthen their capacity. If we receive an award September 30, it takes 3-6 months to hire people. We must obtain gender balance in contexts where not always easy to do so. This coincides with the planning period for research design.
	<p><i>Could partners get pre-approval on hiring that is contingent on funding? This will allow us to strengthen research capacity before we must conduct the research.</i></p>
<p>Sub-challenge: Improving coordination of FFP capacity development efforts</p>	

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<p>One perspective is that FFP could improve efforts to set calendars or benchmarks for what we want from partners for planning purposes. FFP can be late sending out guidance on the goal, agenda, who should attend etc. In some cases, the content is not as effective or relevant as it could be. Often these challenges are due to extraneous issues but not always. One factor perceived to be contributing to this challenge is the reliance on a very small technical team to do so much.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners would like to be a part of the planning process of workshops, so everyone can agree on what will happen, when, and why. When collaborative planning does not happen the workshops can feel like an imposition even when they are helpful. • Partners do not always receive sufficient advance notice about when FFP workshops will take place. Timing changes wreak havoc when staff have to travel. When staff from outside the country must obtain visas and tickets it becomes even more difficult. Additionally, implementation plans get disrupted by last minute demands to have staff show up at events that IPs did not know about. • Several partners shared that after the initial TOC revision workshop, there is not sufficient time to conduct all the necessary research that will allow the M&E workshop to take place on time. In one case, it was only a month and a half.
	<p>Recommendation: “A coherent understanding of the purpose, intended outcome, timing, intended inputs and outputs, and follow up of each workshop would be helpful and allow everyone to plan better”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners need more clarification of how they can best prepare for each workshop. • They desire clearer expectations of what work DFSAs must do post-workshop. • They need a better understanding of how each workshop feeds into the next. Partners stress-“There must be a logic to the sequencing.” Effective timing and sequencing of workshops can ensure that “information gets properly digested, shared and utilized.” If a gender workshop is planned in one month, and an M&E workshop in the following month with 5-6 weeks between, is that simply for the convenience of FFP or is there specific work to be done by partners and FFP in between to improve time use in the second workshop?”
	<p>Recommendation: No IP consensus yet Improve scheduling coordination for FFP training events so they do not compete with deliverable deadlines and requirements. Often it is difficult to get all things done in a quality way because of competing demands.</p>
	<p>One-third of all partners state that TOPS activities feel more valid when FFP officers are present in the workshops. FFP participation in TOPS events suggests they endorse whatever processes or skills are introduced and thus, the content is more trusted by partners.</p>
<p>Challenge: Identifying and using appropriate tools and methods to fill information gaps.</p>	

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<p><i>What range of methods are partners using?</i></p> <p>All interviewed FFP staff believe that methods used by partners are mostly surveys and barrier analysis. It is rare to see participatory rural appraisal or participatory learning and action.</p> <p><i>Which methods provide partners with a deep understanding of local contexts? Are any methods less extractive than commonly used methods?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large majority of partners mostly rely on literature reviews and qualitative methods to understand context. Specific methods mentioned include FGDs, key informant interviews, barrier analysis, and multiple PRA/ PLA techniques, including community consultation, participatory mapping, community mapping, etc. One partner attempts to use barrier analysis as often as possible. • Quantitative assessments mentioned include STRESS by Mercy Corps, which they believe is well-aligned to the R&I model. ACIDI-VOCA conducts rapid resilience assessments, market system analysis, user market studies, and social network analysis. • There is a widespread belief that participatory qualitative methods are not as acceptable to FFP as quantitative methods...perhaps FFP views them as not rigorous enough. Most partners perceive that FFP is concerned that midterms as well as partner formative research and context assessments are not quantitative enough and wonder if this is an accurate perception? • One partner strongly disagrees with this perception, stating “FFP has consistently encouraged us to do qualitative research.” • All partners would like to discuss the range of qualitative and quantitative assessment methods that are acceptable to FFP and are feasible for partners. They enjoy carrying out consultative participatory fieldwork and feel they are pretty good at it.
	<p><i>Can there be support for DFSAs in terms of sharing questionnaires, approaches, templates, methods, so that we do not have to re-invent the wheel each time?</i></p>
<p>Surveys and barrier analysis frequently result in shallow findings. Not enough attention is placed on learning about real problems, critically examining and articulating logical pathways to achievement, or identifying existing capacities.</p>	<p>A number of partners assert that there should be less focus on attribution and more on contribution and learning. “We need to find an alternative to RCTs or additional “gold standard” approaches to measuring the hard to measure” such as complex social change, transformation, social capital building, or empowerment.</p>
<p><i>Do partners also feel findings are shallow?</i></p>	
<p><i>What stops partners from conducting deeper research?</i></p>	
<p>Generally, barrier analysis conducted by partners is of low quality. FFP has serious questions about the barrier approach overall</p>	<p>The majority of partners believe that FFP views barrier analysis is a preferred method to understand the reasons for behaviors. They wonder if FFP views methods other than barrier analysis as acceptable.</p>

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<p>as well as the quality of analysis and recommendations coming out of many of the barrier analysis studies we review. Partners often provide quantitative reporting for barrier analysis results. In these cases, FFP questions the validity of findings. Few activities explain how and why they select do / non-doer behaviors.</p>	
<p>In some cases, partners use rigorous research methods, but the research does not align to R&I refinement.</p>	
<p><i>Who is doing systems analysis and at what level? What methods are used?</i></p>	
	<p><i>What methods, tools, and types of assessments are acceptable to FFP and are feasible for partners?</i></p>
	<p><i>Who within FFP has the final say on validity of / preference for specific research methodology?</i></p>
	<p>Can FFP provide guidance on minimum research standards?</p> <p>A few partners expressed “We’ve heard several FFP representative say they don’t trust any annual survey that a partner conducts. If FFP does not trust our results, do they agree with us making changes based on the data?” If they approve a SoW, but don’t trust the data resulting from a study, there are many complications. What do they trust? If there are certain criteria that they believe are missing, we need to understand what those are so that we can ensure to fill those gaps.”</p>
<p>Challenge: Improving the use of study findings</p>	
<p>How are partners using findings from context assessments and formative research and applying it to program decision-making?</p>	<p>The use of formative research is a “humongous pain point” for more than half of all partners who share that the capacity to conduct research and make use of the findings without HQ assistance is often low. For example, “When we recruit a gender person, they do not always have the ability to use results. M&E teams struggle too.”</p>
	<p>Half of all partner agree with the following statement “In some of our programs, staff receive the findings, but they don’t use them because programming has already started.”</p>

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<i>Are the context assessments helping partners to prioritize? Why or why not?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One non-R&I partner highlights the potential value of the R&I model to remedy this problem. It would allow “us to do all the baselines, assessments, formative research, gender analysis, etc., etc.) before we are pressured into implementation, in a way that allows us to actually digest and utilize all that great contextual and important information for detailed planning and implementation.” Supporting this statement, the only partner to share a very positive experience related to data use is an R&I partner “we had the luxury of receiving results of formative research during the refinement year while design questions were still being finalized. We have had smooth and useful experience of doing assessments and feeding into the program design.”
<i>Are the context assessments helping partners to prioritize? Why or why not?</i>	<p>Factors partners identified as potentially preventing data use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For a couple of partners, MEAL teams conduct the research, at times with HQ technical leads, but sometimes not. Several partners share that very few staff read the reports. A few agree that if staff do read about the findings, there can be a low level of trust if implementers have not been involved throughout the process. If the findings validate what they thought...there is no change. If they disagree with findings, they may not believe it. One partner shares “This isn’t only true of field staff. When results are too good or too bad, there is often a belief that the research team made mistakes. This is where there is a need for capacity development of implementers in general around what the results are, what they mean and how they get used. This is difficult to do at an FFP event, because the people in attendance might not be the right audience. This would be really useful to do in-house in small manageable pieces, but it is difficult to find the time and to spell out what actions need to be taken as a result given, the heavy administrative and reporting workload.” • For several partners, reports are not always translated. One reason this does not happen is because translation is so time-consuming. • KLM capacity in many countries where partners work is not nearly as strong as M&E. The idea of using data to change the activity is often not an available skillset. • USAID doesn’t use the data we collect when they recommend changes to an activity. They use the baseline and their own research. • One partner explains “analytical education levels are low in most of the countries where we work, limiting critical thinking required for analytical and strategic thinking.”

FFP Perspective/ Questions to partners Source: 8 FFP Staff (TLP, CLA, GEO)	Partner Perspective or Question/ Recommendation to FFP Source: 54 staff from all 12 implementing partner organizations
<p><i>How are partners using findings to define or modify the TOC?</i></p> <p>Findings from the context assessments / formative research are seldom feeding into the TOC. Partners and FFP should be questioning the TOC not just confirming it.</p> <p>Partners spend a lot of time modifying the presentation of the TOC diagram but this does not seem to translate to changes in implementation. Output to outcome links may not change.</p>	
	<p>For almost half of all partners, there have been challenges with some of FFP’s intervention recommendations that resulted from research findings. They share that USAID recommendations do not seem to take context into consideration, or at times the size and capacity of each activity. In one example, after an IEE, USAID identified a number of activities that could only be implemented with very specific monitoring, yet the DFSA did not have physical access to conduct that level of monitoring.</p>
	<p>Recommendation: broad IP agreement Could FFP consider having a sensitization piece on using data and adaptive management at the M&E workshop that takes place right after an award?</p>
	<p>Recommendation: No IP consensus yet Perhaps there should be one question in documents that partners submit to FFP along the lines of “how are you using this data?”</p>
	<p>Recommendation: No IP consensus yet FFP and partners should strategize together along these lines. What are some of the best, less time intensive and most productive ways of really making sure that data/information actually gets used in all the ways that it can (for improved performance, for thought leadership, for advocacy, for improving the SOTA, etc.).?</p>
<p>Challenge: Context-specific activity design</p>	
<p>In many cases, it appears that the activity design follows the CSI and/ or the desk review</p>	

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<p>word for word. Partners need to do more fieldwork to inform activity design.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For, example, FFP would like partners to define the determinants of malnutrition within the local context –at sub-regional levels. Nutrition causal analysis can be done post-award. <p>Many partners seem to use an approach that is not context specific. Interventions look similar in very different parts of the world. In some cases, it appears as if partners are trying to adapt the community to their approach rather than building out from the existing issues in a community.</p>	
<p><i>Are partners designing activities based on a context assessment or based on the CSI? / Desk Review? Are activities written or designed?</i></p>	
<p><i>Do partners believe they have the capacity to carry out additional fieldwork during the design phase?</i></p>	