



Identifying Evidence and Knowledge Gaps for Designing Development Interventions: Process Lessons from Titukulane in Malawi

Introduction

Programs must tailor their interventions to fit the needs and contexts of program participants to achieve maximum success, even if those interventions are based on previously successful approaches and models. Tailoring interventions requires a comprehensive understanding of socio-economic, cultural and geographic circumstances for program participants, including vulnerable women, men, youth, and the elderly. Usually much of this information, also known as evidence and knowledge gaps (EKGs), is missing, and the program conducts multiple studies and assessments to fill these EKGs.

Refining programs better serves program participants and improves cost effectiveness and program efficiency. In this learning brief we will explore the process of identifying evidence and knowledge gaps as experienced by Malawi's Titukulane Activity, which is a consortium led by [CARE](#), in partnership with [International Food Policy and Research Institute \(IFPRI\)](#) as the Learning Partner, and [Emmanuel International](#), [National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi \(NASFAM\)](#), [Save the Children](#), and [WaterAid](#).

Refinement and Inception Process and Workshops

A broad literature review on different project components was undertaken while developing the program application and initial activity plans. This initial knowledge is used to refine the program by revisiting the Theory of Change (TOC) developed for the Titukulane project and to further identify the critical pathways that should be redefined to achieve the goals of the project. Further, the refinement period is also meant to reevaluate program interventions and EKGs identified during the proposal development to inform adaptations to program approaches and outcomes.

During the start-up phase, two different workshops were conducted, namely, the Gender, Youth and Social Dynamics (GYSD) Consultation and Refine and Implement (R&I) Inception Workshop. One component of the workshops was to identify contextualized knowledge and evidence gaps in the program Theory of Change. Multiple sessions were held for each component with thematic experts presenting their views on



the implementation evidence and knowledge gaps in the intervention design. Finally, using the multidisciplinary insights from the workshop, a comprehensive literature review was done as part of the development of the Statement of Work (SOW) to fill the evidence and knowledge gaps for this program in Malawi.

In addition to these high-level workshops, two internal workshops were helpful for further refining the EKGs. The first one was conducted to prepare for the R&I workshop and was helpful in broadly identifying the evidence and knowledge gaps. The second internal workshop followed the GYSD Consultations and R&I Inception Workshop, and it was to further discuss the EKGs identified during the GYSD and R&I workshops. This workshop brought technical leads together to organize the EKGs into Titukulane planned studies and assessments. It also initiated discussions on how to learn from the past projects in Malawi, including Njira and UBALE, and projects where Titukulane staff have previously worked on. Particularly, learning from Njira and UBALE, the predecessor programs to Titukulane in Malawi, provided valuable information to fill the EKGs and refine the objectives of the field studies.

Specific Outcomes of the R&I Workshop: While the R&I workshop was primarily designed to develop a shared understanding between USAID's Office of Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and Titukulane partners on specific requirements during the refinement period, it was also used to review Titukulane's Theory of Change to identify the key evidence and knowledge gaps to be filled during the refinement period through a set of formative and assessment studies. The workshop proceedings resulted in a prioritized set of evidence and knowledge gaps in the Titukulane TOC and interventions.

Specific Outcomes of the GYSD Consultation: The Gender and Youth Social Dynamics Consultation brought Titukulane partners together to collaboratively understand and address gender, youth and social inclusion and inequity in Titukulane. This Consultation refreshed learning and built understanding on intra-household inequity in access and use of productive assets. Social norms regarding gender and women's voice were explored across program components. Specifically, the key outcomes of the GYSD workshop were as follows: staff became fully acquainted with the approaches of CARE and other key partners, and staff were oriented on how interconnected gender and youth issues are with food and nutrition security, and with the Theory of Change of the Titukulane program. There was also opportunity for new staff to meet and work with others from BHA and those from the region responsible for gender and youth issues which was useful for further program engagement. Finally, staff were also able to identify GYSD Evidence and Knowledge Gaps within the program Theory of Change that would be included in the Gender and Youth Analyses and in other sectoral studies of the program.

Learning from Past Projects

In addition to a literature review of Malawi and other similar to further refine the Evidence and Knowledge gaps. Reviewing the reports of these projects helped further refine the EKGs. For example, in the area of gender inequality, the learning from the evaluations of these two RFSAs suggested that joint decision making improved among men and women of the same household when they were trained together in the same agricultural training workshops. This further helped to reduce the burden on women in field operations related to food and agricultural production activities. Such joint activities also helped to increase women's participation in the

Village Savings and Loan Associations, resulting in increased income in some cases. Women also become more economically independent. Further reduction in intra-household conflict resulted from better mediation of domestic tensions by gender champions. Such lessons are valuable in reducing the need for collecting similar information through new set of formative studies, and for designing a high impact program. Similar learning in other comments and purposes of the TOC was documented by the Technical leads, as part of the preparation of the SoWs.

Preparing Scopes of Work and Ethical Reviews:

The results of the process of identifying the evidence and knowledge gaps has led to a set of 12 studies under Titukulane that will address these EKGs. For each study, the technical leads prepared a Statement of Work for review and improvement by external advisors from IFPRI. Feedback sessions were employed to finalize the SOWs and research objectives. The SOWs were then sent to Malawi's Ethical Review Board for approval before study commencement.¹

Recommendations for Future Programs

- Conduct the Refinement and Inception workshop to provide a basis for a broad consultation on EKGs because it brings various disciplinary experts together to get everyone on the 'same page to speak the same language'. It also facilitates ground-level consultations with the program team who are familiar with the implementation problems in Malawi.
- The identification of EKGs and its relevance need to be made clearer to new staff. This means the R&I workshops need to prepare such staff on how they engage with the CLA process in research in future. Where possible for DFSA programme that will use CLA process, the R&I workshop may also introduce the CLA model and draw experiences from those who worked with CLA in research work that comes from EKGs.
- Assemble a multi-disciplinary team with experts having both field and thematic experience to ensure that there is a multidimensional view on the EKGs for better program design and implementation.
- Technical advisors should support technical leads to ensure quality work. This link ensures that research is effectively translated to ground level program implementation.
- Engage external international experts who are on the frontier of the research and work in their respective country as reviewers to finetune the research gaps in the studies. This step is important as the review identifies 'well defined research gaps' which are the prerequisite for developing quality research questions and field methods to close these EKGs.
- Conduct multiple rounds of reviews and refinement both to build local capacity of the technical leads and the to improve the quality of the studies. This is the foundation for achieving improved focus and the cost effectiveness of refinement studies.

Titukulane is a five-year USAID-funded Development Food Security Activity, running from 2019 to 2024. Titukulane meaning "let's develop together" in Chichewa, supports the implementation and effectiveness of the Malawi National Resilience Strategy (NRS), which is established to guide investments in agriculture, reduce impacts and improve recovery from shocks, promote household resilience, strengthen management of Malawi's natural resources, and facilitate coordination between government institutions, civil society organizations, and development partners. This learning brief was written by Suresh Babu (IFPRI) with contribution from CARE's Andrew Patterson, Anthony Malunga, and Nivo Ranaivoarivelo.

¹ For more information on this, see Titukulane Learning Brief on Ethical Review Process.