



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



After-Action Review: Senior Obligation Alignment Review (SOAR)



Bureau for Management

Office of Management Policy, Budget and Performance

March 2019

Executive Summary: Recommendations at-a-Glance with Management Response

Almost all AAR participants understood and could articulate clearly the intent of the SOAR policy. In addition, many Bureaus/Independent Offices (B/IOs) shared that they are now more aware of planned acquisition and assistance (A&A) awards, and B/IOs made changes to planned awards based on comments received during the SOAR approval. The full AAR report includes a comprehensive description of successes, issues, and recommendations. The SOAR Secretariat will update the Agency’s policy and templates consistent with the accepted recommendations below, in addition to other changes agreed to by the Agency’s leadership.












Time









Quality

Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
Issue 1: The lower thresholds have increased workload.				
1.1	Raise thresholds for non-Public International Organizations (PIOs) to \$40-80 million for Assistant Administrator (AA) review, and \$80 million and above for Administrator (A/AID) review. For PIOs, raise thresholds to \$5-10 million for AA review, and \$10 million and above for A/AID review to delegate greater approval authority to Mission Directors.	Front Office		PIOs: \$0-\$10 million approved by AAs; \$10 million and above approved by A/AID. Non-PIOs: No change to thresholds.
1.2	The Agency’s leadership should provide clear guidance on the Agency’s position on working with PIOs.	Front Office	 	 Laid out in the revisions of Automated Directive System (ADS) Chapter 308 of August 2018. Leadership will continue to communicate this to Agency staff.







Issue 2: Current delays in the SOAR approval process could create enterprise risk.













Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
2.1	Meet timelines outlined in the ADS.	Front Office; Planners; Liaisons; Advisors		
2.2	Create a waiver process for time-sensitive activities (including, but not limited to, crisis activities not funded by the International Disaster Assistance account [IDA], activities under the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief [PEPFAR], those funded with expiring funds, and those deemed essential in the event of a lapse in appropriations).	Front Office, SOAR Secretariat		Will create an expedited process for PEPFAR, crises activities not funded by IDA, and expiring funds.
2.3	Establish timeframes for Planners to incorporate comments for all phases of the SOAR process (with a process to request an extension for extenuating circumstances).	SOAR Secretariat		 Planners will have five work days to respond to comments from Liaisons/Advisors and five work days to respond to comments from the Agency’s Front Office.
2.4	Reinforce in trainings and Terms of Reference (see Issue 7) that Liaisons must copy the SOAR Secretariat as required by policy to ensure accurate data to track adherence to deadlines.	SOAR Secretariat, Liaisons, Executive Secretariat		
2.5	SOAR Secretariat should send follow up emails to B/IOs when approval timelines at each stage of the process have lapsed.	SOAR Secretariat		

Issue 3: The SOAR process does not have a consistent feedback loop for Planners, Liaisons, and Reviewers.



Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
3.1	Require that B/IO Reviewers self-identify (name, office, title) and label comments as “substantive” (show-stopper) or “Advisory” (to be considered).	B/IO Reviewers	 Q	
3.2	Socialize that Liaisons are available to help communication efforts between Planners and commenters.	SOAR Secretariat, Liaisons		
3.3	Create a help document or answers to frequently asked questions on best practices to streamline comments, and emphasize that Reviewers focus on A/AID’s priorities (Journey to Self-Reliance, Effective Partnering and Procurement Reform [EPPR], Private-Sector Engagement Policy, etc).	SOAR Secretariat	 Q	

Issue 4: From the Planner perspective, the B/IO review process often does not add value because it duplicates previous technical discussions or results in comments not easily incorporated.





Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
4.1.A	Remove the technical B/IO review from the SOAR process and integrate it into an earlier project-design phase.	Front Office		
OR				
4.1.B	Include a list of staff from B/IOs engaged in the project-design process on the SOAR Document Template to avoid duplicative review during the B/IO review stage.	Planners		
4.2	(If proceeding with 4.1.B) For those that require A/AID’s review, combine the B/IO review with the Advisor review to shorten the process and reduce the back-and-forth with Missions.	SOAR Secretariat		

4.3	Require that Liaisons address any conflicting comments from their B/IO's review so the B/IO is speaking with "one voice."	Liaisons		
Issue 5: Communication and outreach around SOAR process is insufficient.				
Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
5.1	Update the SOAR Document Template to reflect the priorities of the Agency's Front Office better.	Executive Secretariat, SOAR Secretariat, EPPR Team	 Q	
5.2	Update ADS 300man (SOAR Document Template) to include a description of the template and a link to the continually updated version to mitigate confusion around which version to use.	SOAR Secretariat		
5.3	Update the SOAR MyUSAID page with additional training materials and help documents, including the updated SOAR Document Template.	SOAR Secretariat	 Q	
5.4	Outline changes to the ADS, SOAR Document Template, and support documents in a quarterly email to all Liaisons, as well as in an Agency Notices to help Liaisons message to the Missions.	SOAR Secretariat		
5.5	Missions establish a Point of Contact (in the Office of Acquisition and Assistance or Program Office) who can help Planners ensure they are following the process correctly.	Missions	 Q	

Issue 6: SOAR process happens too late in the program-design cycle for Planners to incorporate substantive changes in a timely manner.

Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
6.1	Working with the Transformation Task Team (T3); Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL); and the component parts of the proposed Centers in the Development, Democracy, and Innovation (DDI), Resilience and Food Security (RFS), and Conflict-Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) Bureaus, update ADS guidance to require submission of a SOAR at a specific point in the project-design process (for example, a draft solicitation, scope of work, or concept paper for procurement).	T3, PPL, offices which will make up the proposed Centers in the new technical Bureaus, M	 	The Bureau for Management will continue to discuss this recommendation with T3, PPL, and proposed DDI, RFS, and CPS.

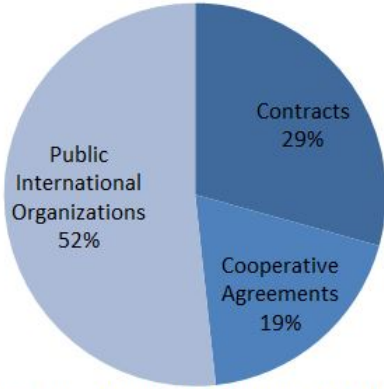
Issue 7: Stakeholders have a varying understanding of the role of the Liaison, Advisors, and SOAR Secretariat.

Recommendation		Owner	Impact	Management Response
7.1	Establish Terms of Reference for Liaisons that encompasses both types of roles (drafting or reviewing) and associated responsibilities/expectations, including the responsibility to adjudicate comments (whether resolving intra-Bureau conflicts or screening and prioritizing comments for a Mission’s response).	SOAR Secretariat		
7.2	Organize quarterly socialization opportunities for Planners, Liaisons, Reviewers, and Advisors to share lessons learned and best practices.	SOAR Secretariat		

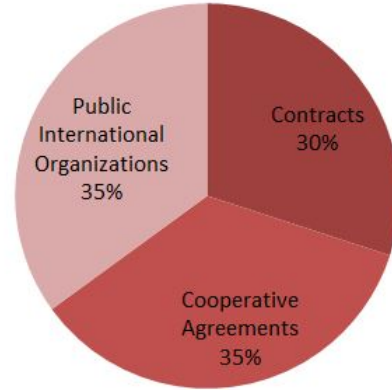
Quick Facts: Senior Obligation Alignment Review (SOAR)¹

SOAR Activities by Threshold Level

Assistant Administrator



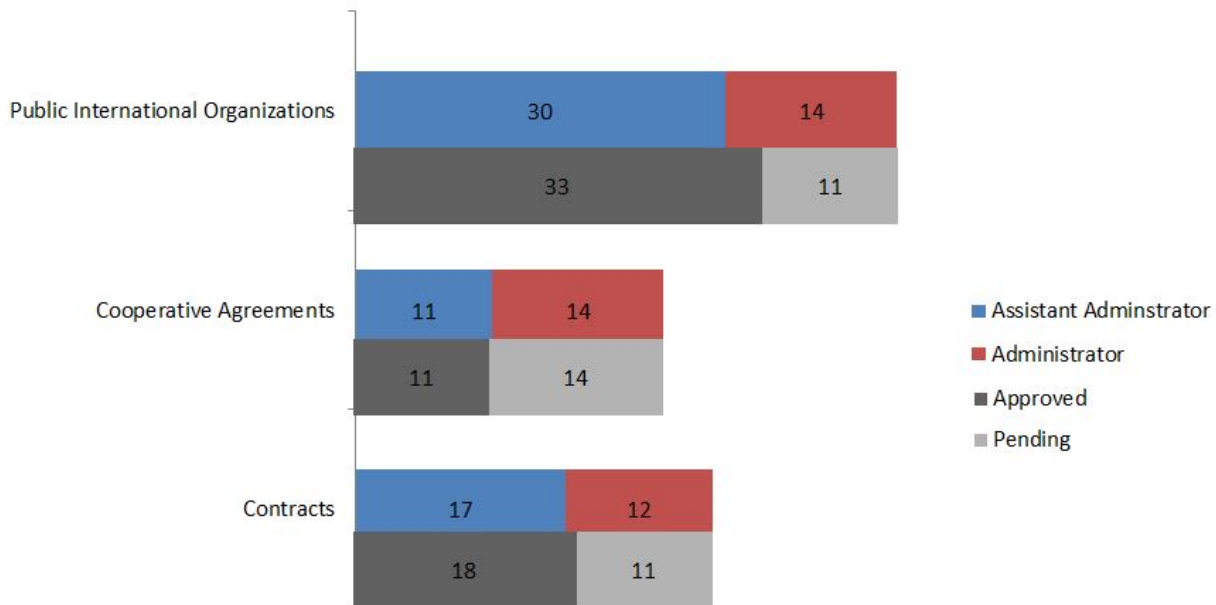
Administrator



*Does not include one Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) and one TBD activity

As of December 21, 2018, the average dollar amount for PIOs reviewed at the AA level was \$1,736,423. The average dollar amount for PIOs reviewed at the A/AID level was \$49,566,048. The total dollar amount for all SOARs was \$2,636,703,004.

SOAR Activities by Mechanism and Status



*Does not include one BAA and one TBD activity at the Assistant Administrator level

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all data in the Quick Facts reflect the SOAR Dashboard as of December 21, 2018, before the lapse in appropriations.

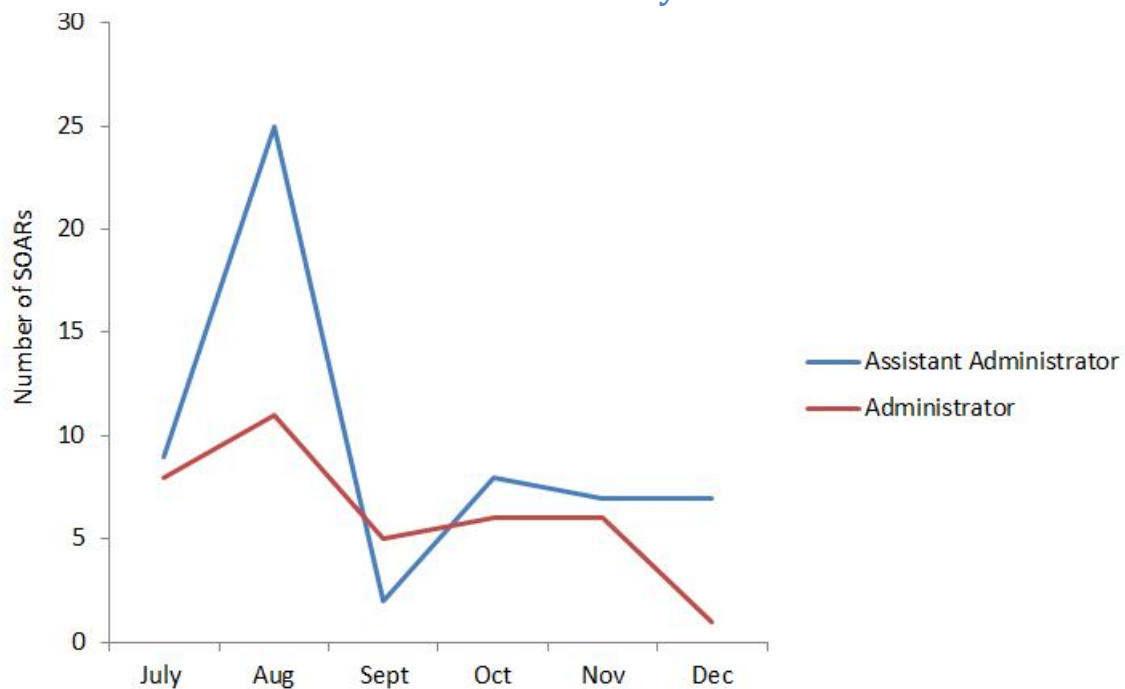
Performance Summary Snapshot

	Average Work Days of Approved Activities (Excluding pauses)*	Average Total Number of Work Days*	Target Work Days**
Administrator Approval Process	41	55	35
Assistant Administrator Approval Process	13	16	16

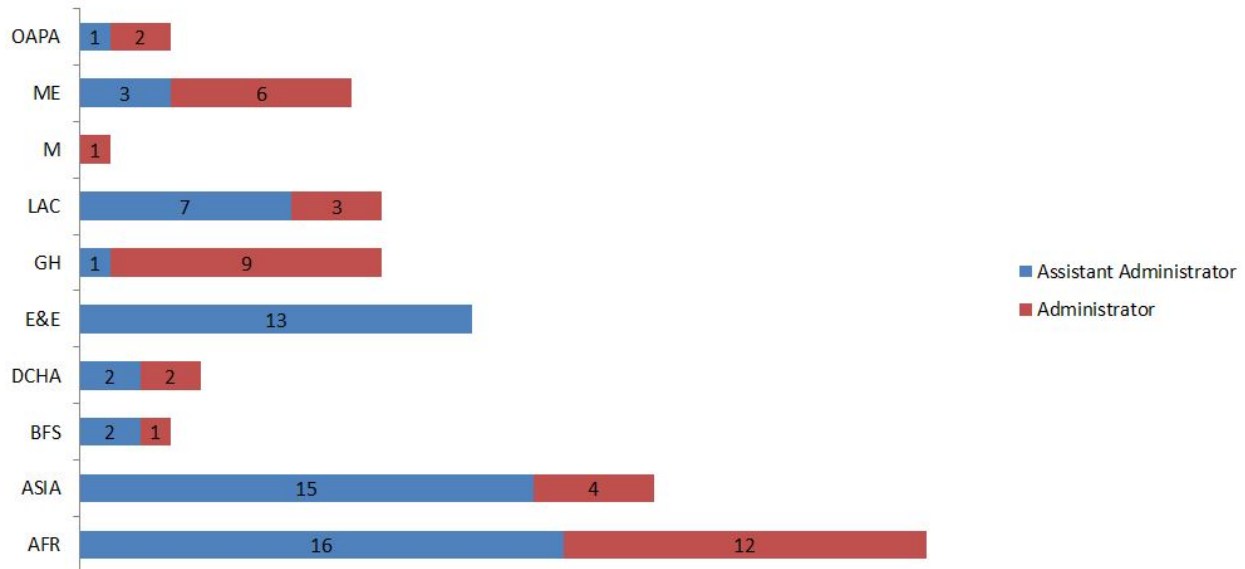
*These averages reflect completed SOARs as of February 7, 2019. While exact data are not available, the delays in the A/AID process appear to be split nearly evenly between the Front Office and Planners as they incorporate feedback between comment periods.

**Target work days only reflect time mandated by current ADS policy (which does not include the time Bureaus and Missions use to incorporate feedback).

SOARs Initiated by Month



Number of SOARs by Bureau



Contents

Executive Summary: Recommendations at-a-Glance with Management Response ii

Quick Facts: Senior Obligation Alignment Review (SOAR) vii

 SOAR Activities by Mechanism and Status vii

 Performance Summary Snapshot viii

 SOARs Initiated by Month viii

 Number of SOARs by Bureau ix

Background 1

What did we intend to do? 2

 Policy 2

 Process 3

 Figure 1: Intended Process for SOAR Review at the Assistant Administrator Level 3

 Figure 2: Intended Process for SOAR Review at the Administrator Level 4

What actually happened? 5

 Policy 5

 Process 7

What went well? 10

 Policy 10

 Process 11

What can be improved and how? 12

 Issue 1: The lower thresholds have served to disempower the field and increase workload 12

 Issue 2: Current delays in the SOAR approval process create enterprise risk 12

 Issue 3: The SOAR process does not have a consistent feedback loop for Planners, Liaisons, and Reviewers 13

 Issue 4: From the Planner perspective, the B/IO review process often does not add value because it duplicates previous technical discussions or results in comments not easily incorporated 13

 Issue 5: Communication and outreach around SOAR process is insufficient 14

 Issue 6: SOAR process happens too late in the program design cycle for Planners to incorporate substantive changes in a timely manner 15

 Issue 7: Stakeholders have a varying understanding of the role of the Liaison, Advisors, and SOAR Secretariat 15

Conclusion 15

Appendix 1: SOAR Document Template 16

Appendix 2: Interview Coding Methodology 21

Appendix 3: Interview Themes Mentioned in Participant Interviews by Percentage 22

Appendix 4: List of Participants 23

Background

The [Senior Obligation Alignment Review \(SOAR\)](#) is the Agency's policy and process for engaging senior leadership in the review of proposed high-dollar-value Acquisition and Assistance (A&A) awards. The SOAR emphasizes incorporating the Agency's Transformation principles of self-reliance, leveraging new resources, co-collaboration/co-design, and broadening the partner base into planned awards.

The Administrator announced the SOAR policy and process on June 27, 2018, through an Executive Notice, revising the Acquisition and Assistance Review and Approval Document (AARAD) process. Along with major process changes, the SOAR lowered threshold amounts for review at the Assistant Administrator (AA) and Administrator (A/AID) levels, as well as which types of awards will be reviewed.

The SOAR process applies to:

- New A&A solicitations, including contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, Leader with Associate Awards, associate awards, indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contracts, and Task Orders issued under IDIQs, whether via a competitive process or otherwise;
- Interagency agreements; and
- Proposed new cost-type agreements and program contributions with Public International Organizations (PIOs) executed by a Contracting Officer/Agreement Officer (CO/AO), an Assistant Administrator (AA), or a Mission Director, whether via a competitive process or otherwise.

The SOAR process does not apply to:

- Other solicitations and agreements (e.g., Government-to-Government, bilateral development partner agreements, and host-country contracts);
- Instances in which an exception to competition signed by the AA or Administrator (A/AID) documents how the proposed award addresses the areas covered by the SOAR review; and
- Proposed awards and PIO agreements for Food for Peace emergency food aid, urgently needed humanitarian assistance, or urgent activities of the Office of Transition Initiatives.

When the SOAR process is applicable, AAs approve the issuance of planned A&A awards with a total estimated cost between \$20 and \$40 million, and the A/AID approves awards estimated at or above \$40 million. In addition, the SOAR process includes cost-type agreements with, and program contributions to Public International Organizations (PIOs). AAs review and approve solicitations, competitive, and non-competitive awards for agreements and program contributions to PIOs below \$5 million, and A/AID reviews and approves those above \$5 million.

After six months of policy implementation, the Bureau for Management's Office of Management Policy, Budget and Performance (M/MPBP) organized an After-Action Review to solicit feedback on successes and recommendations for improvement of the SOAR policy and process.² M/MPBP conducted 20 interviews from November 13, 2018, to December 14, 2018. Participants in the interviews included representatives from the Bureaus for Global Health (GH); Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA); Food Security (BFS); Economic Growth, Education and Environment (E3); Africa (AFR); Asia; Europe and Eurasia (E&E); Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs (OAPA); Middle East (ME); Latin America and Caribbean (LAC); Policy, Planning, and Learning (PPL); Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU); Office of General Counsel (GC); the Office of the Executive Secretariat (ES); Bureau for Management's Office of Acquisition and Assistance (M/OAA); M/MPBP; and Missions. The discussions focused on four questions, which form the basis of this report:

² In the Executive Notice announcing the SOAR, the Administrator noted that the Bureau for Management will conduct an After-Action Review help to assess the impact and inform future revisions.

1. What did we intend to do?
2. What actually happened?
3. What went well, and why?
4. What can be improved, and how?

In addition to holding the After-Action Review interviews, M/MPBP reviewed SOAR policy in ADS 300; supplemental guidance; Agency Notices; data from the SOAR tracker and dashboard maintained by the SOAR Secretariat; Bureau-specific data provided by SOAR Liaisons; Mission Director Survey results provided by the T3 team; and summary of conclusions provided by ES from SOAR meetings between the Front Office and B/IOs.

What did we intend to do?

Policy

As the Agency strives to end the need for foreign assistance by advancing self-reliance in partner countries, there has been a renewed focus on A&A development, design, and execution. In line with this effort, the SOAR policy engages senior leadership to ensure USAID reflects the strategic principles outlined in the Agency's Transformation, including the Agency's first-ever [Acquisition and Assistance Strategy](#) and the principles of Effective Partnering and Procurement Reform (EPPR), in planned A&A awards. These principles include diversifying the partner base to include underutilized partners from the private sector, faith-based and community organizations, and small businesses; using more adaptive approaches to partnering and procurement, especially in the crisis response context; emphasizing collaboration and co-creation; and structuring procurement processes to link design to implementation. Further, the SOAR process helps support USAID's Agency Priority Goal of increasing the use of collaborative and co-creative approaches by 10 percentage points in terms of dollars and awards by the end of FY 2019.

The SOAR also helps to implement the Agency's [Private Sector Engagement Policy](#) by creating the opportunity for activity Planners to consider private sector engagement and partnering in pre-solicitation design. The SOAR emphasizes engagement, collaboration, and partnership with private-sector actors to design and implement strategies and projects of shared interest and value. This includes cross-Agency collaboration to promote co-creation approaches, design market-based solutions, and develop private sector partnerships when appropriate.

ADS Chapter 300 Agency Acquisition and Assistance (A&A) Planning operationalizes these strategic principles with three main objectives:

- (1) Ensuring that senior leadership knows about the major upcoming Agency acquisition and assistance solicitations and proposed cost-type agreements and program contributions with PIOs;
- (2) Ensuring that leadership oversight on topics such as: a) excessive use of sole-source contracts, or over-reliance on indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contracts (IDIQs) and/or large umbrella awards; b) cost-effectiveness; c) increasing the use of local and/or small U.S. organizations; d) sustainability; and e) advancing collaborative approaches in USAID partnering, such as co-financing, co-design, and co-collaboration; and
- (3) Ensuring that Planners, drafters and Reviewers focus on a variety of topics that are key to state-of-the-art development programming and/or priorities of the Administrator.

The SOAR is also meant to allow cross-cutting functional Operating Units to examine proposals prior to solicitation, encouraging creativity and innovation. While SOAR provides oversight on the use of mechanisms and proposed results, and is also meant to encourage innovative approaches to provide long-term sustainable outcomes. The SOAR is also intended to promote more rigorous project design, and establish greater linkages between Washington and field activities.

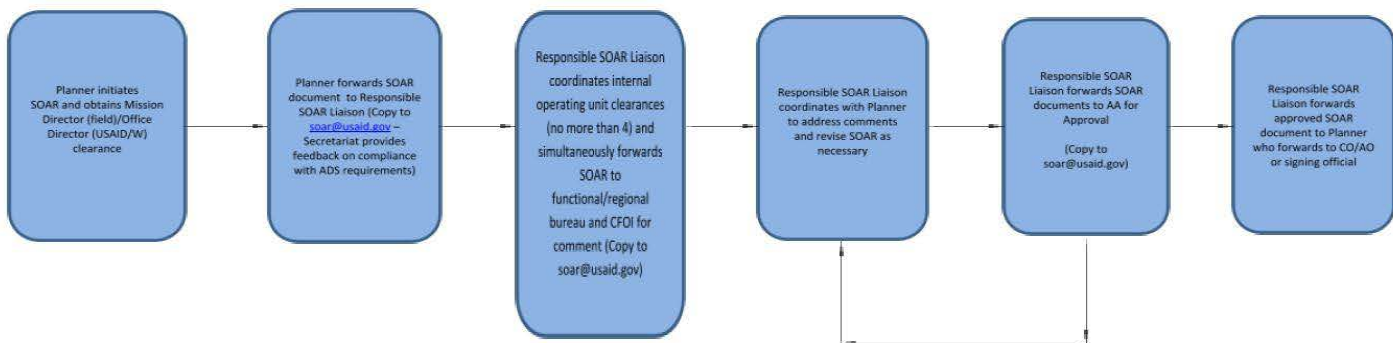
Process

The intended process for the SOAR has two distinct approval levels determined by the planned amount of the activity. AAs approve A&A solicitations between \$20 to 40 million and PIOs below \$5 million. The A/AID approves A&A solicitations \$40 million and above, and PIOs \$5 million and above. There are currently four main roles related to the SOAR process. These include Planners, SOAR Liaisons, SOAR Advisors, and the SOAR Secretariat. Below is a brief overview of each role’s primary responsibilities:

- **Planners:** Develop and submit the completed SOAR Document Template, and are typically the individual who will become the C/AOR for the activity. Planners work on SOARs at both the AA and A/AID level.
- **SOAR Liaisons:** Serve as the primary point of contact for the SOAR process in each B/IO. Liaisons coordinate the review of the SOAR package once received for action, collect feedback and comments from the OUs, and coordinate with the designated Planner to make revisions. Liaisons work on SOARs at both the AA and A/AID level.
- **SOAR Advisors:** Provide substantive input and advice on SOARs to B/IOs and the Front Office to ensure that the documents reflect Agency priorities, and do so by completing the SOAR Review Form. SOAR Advisors only work on SOARs going for approval at the A/AID level.
- **SOAR Secretariat:** Staffed by M/MPBP, monitors compliance with review timelines, provides policy guidance, and ensures SOARs are consistent with the required format. The SOAR Secretariat also manages the SOAR mailbox and continually updates the SOAR dashboard. The SOAR Secretariat monitors SOARs at both the AA and A/AID level.

The current SOAR process for AA approval is visualized in the supplementary guidance to ADS 300 below:

Figure 1: Intended Process for SOAR Review at the Assistant Administrator Level



(Source: [ADS 300sad](#), [SOAR Document Flowcharts](#))

Once OUs determine that a planned activity falls within the SOAR mandate, the Planner must use the [SOAR Document Template](#), which contains three parts: (1) standard descriptive data (limited to 3 sentences per column); (2) the justification for the award (limited to 5 pages); and (3) the approval to proceed with a solicitation, or a proposed cost-type agreement or program contribution with a PIO, whether a noncompetitive award or the result of a solicitation (in the form of an Action Memo). For the current SOAR Document Template in the ADS, please see Appendix 1.

The intended process for AA level approval starts when a Planner sends a complete SOAR Document Template to their Bureau’s SOAR Liaison and the SOAR mailbox, which is managed by the SOAR Secretariat in M Bureau. The SOAR Secretariat then reviews the SOAR for basic adherence to the policy, focusing on page limits and formatting.

The level of the SOAR Liaison review differs by Bureau, but all Liaisons from the originating Bureau share the SOAR package with Pillar Bureau Liaisons (in GH, E3, BFS, DCHA), the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives (CFOI), and relevant Regional Bureaus, who have five days to respond with comments. Pillar Liaisons have discretion about which Office Units should review SOARs, and send the package accordingly. However, this process varies by Bureau, with some Liaisons sending SOARs out to each OU within their Bureau, and some only sending out to OUs they deem relevant for the specific activity. At this stage, the originating Bureau shares the SOAR draft via Google documents to Reviewers to encourage commenting and dialogue. This phase of the review is intended to create a peer-to-peer feedback mechanism that allows USAID/Washington to provide Planners with what the ADS calls “comments that must include substantive solutions.” Reviewers do not provide clearance, only comments.

Then the SOAR Liaison works with the Planner to consider comments, and make any necessary revisions to the document within three days. After this, the AA has three days to clear. If the AA’s schedule is not conducive to meeting the three-day deadline for official reasons, the B/IO can extend the three days or delegate approval to an Acting AA.

Figure 2: Intended Process for SOAR Review at the Administrator Level

(Source: [ADS 300sad](#), [SOAR Document Flowcharts](#))



The intended process for A/AID approval follows the same process outlined for the AA level up until the final step for AA approval. At this stage, before getting AA clearance, the SOAR documents go to the SOAR Advisor group, which is comprised of senior staff from PPL, the Lab, and M/OAA. The SOAR Advisors review the documents from a higher level policy perspective to ensure that Transformation priorities are reflected in the SOAR by completing the [SOAR Review Form](#).

The Advisors have three days to provide comments, but do not provide clearance. After the Advisor review, the SOAR package goes back to the Liaison and Planner to incorporate the comments. Then, the AA has three days to clear and it is then returned to the Liaison and Planner to incorporate any feedback, edits, and/or changes. The SOAR package then goes for clearance to OSDBU, GC, and AA/M, which have three days to clear. After clearance, the SOAR Liaison sends the package to ES for A/AID approval. Within ES, the SOAR Senior Advisor, Deputy ES, ES, Deputy Chief of Staff, Chief of Staff, and Deputy A/AID review the documents and make edits. The Front Office has the discretion to request a meeting with Bureau leadership and those involved in the SOAR to clarify any issues or concerns. Once the Front Office stakeholders clear, the package moves to A/AID for approval.

What actually happened?

The SOAR is one of the first policies and processes to incorporate A/AID's priorities across the Agency's planned A&A portfolio. USAID issued the SOAR policy under an expedited ADS clearance process whereby the policy did not go out for Agency comment and clearance prior to issuance. While many participants said that their B/IO or Mission informally heard about the SOAR policy before it was announced, the lack of an Agency-wide clearance process contributed to a number of questions. Many Missions and B/IOs went to the SOAR Secretariat in M/MPBP for guidance. In the first month of SOAR implementation, the SOAR Secretariat answered 317 emails sent to the SOAR mailbox. Additionally, the SOAR MyUSAID page has averaged approximately 110 page views per month.³

In addition to the expected learning curve with any new policy and process, B/IOs and Missions felt that the timing of the SOAR rollout was challenging because the Agency introduced it close to the end of the fiscal year, which increased the amount of SOARs that went for approval. Additionally, the policy was effective immediately upon issuance, with no grandfathering in of solicitations already in the works. In August, the amount of SOARs sent for approval at both the AA and A/AID level spiked (see Quick Facts Summary for visualization). Further, the SOARs added to the volume of tasks that program offices face at the end of the fiscal year. Many noted that this will be a recurring challenge going forward for the SOAR process.

Policy

Almost all AAR participants understood and could articulate clearly the intent of the SOAR policy. In addition, many Bureaus shared that they are now more aware of planned A&A awards, and B/IOs made changes to planned awards based on comments received during the SOAR process. This includes changes to the type of mechanism, changes in scope, and changes in total estimated values of planned A&A and PIO activities. Although exact data are not available, an analysis 10 summary of conclusions from SOAR meetings with the Front Office contained questions which could have led to substantive changes to proposed awards.

Many participants were aware of or already implementing elements of A/AID strategy that are emphasized in the SOAR process, including the Journey to Self-Reliance and Effective Partnerships and Procurement Reform (EPPR) principles. For example, one Mission shared that they have seven awards developed through co-creation that are either complete or in progress, and are actively reviewing their procurement strategy to explore how to further align business with EPPR principles.

However, participants also shared other perceptions and assumed intentions of the SOAR beyond the Agency's stated intent. The list below highlights the range of participants' perceptions or assumptions regarding the ultimate intent of the SOAR:

- To give Washington insight into how the field is utilizing resources;
- To reconsider the large awards the Agency has made in the past;

³ Monthly page views data is from August 1, 2018 through February 12, 2019.

- To create more thoughtful design because leadership thinks the Agency is not being critical enough in its approach;
- To introduce an additional layer of scrutiny for PIOs or have a chilling effect on their use;
- To align a decentralized Agency with centralized, changing priorities;
- To ensure that expert input is considered for large value procurements;
- To give leadership visibility on large procurements that might get scrutinized in the press; and
- To give the Front Office an opportunity to influence mechanism options.

Further, many Bureaus and Missions think that the SOAR runs counter to A/AID messaging about empowering the field. As one Mission shared, “The new SOAR process adds a significant administrative burden to the field and DC, while only serving to further erode Mission Director authorities.” Another Mission noted that the SOAR, along with other Washington-based requirements, “provides a disincentive for risk-taking and thinking big.”

“From the field perspective, there is a contradiction between the desire to be flexible and adaptable in the field and the reduction in Mission Director authority (e.g., the SOAR process).”

In addition, the lower threshold amounts, as compared to the predecessor AARAD process, are also resulting in an increased level of effort for those who have a role in the SOAR process, especially Liaisons in Bureaus with a high volume of SOARs. During the SOAR rollout, many B/IOs did not initially understand the resources required to fulfill the Liaison role and some do not have contingency plans for gaps in coverage.

All Bureaus with a high volume of SOARs (9 and above to date) have either one full-time employee dedicated to the SOAR Liaison role, or multiple Liaisons that split responsibilities. One regional bureau has four Liaisons split between two subregions with an approximate 25 percent level of effort for each Liaison. Another Bureau with a high volume of SOARs shared, “The amount of LOE in terms of resources turned out to be even more than we thought it might be, and we had an initially high estimation. It is at least 2 full time employees’ worth of time just in our Bureau. This does not include the work that goes into writing SOARs themselves or the amount of time that Liaison supervisors must also devote to managing the process.” In contrast, Bureaus with lower volumes of SOARs shared that the estimated level of effort for Liaisons ranges between 5-25 percent.

Given that the policy was effective immediately, initially Planners submitted SOARs that represented programs designed during an intensive Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), Project Activity Design (PAD) process, or Bureau-specific strategic plan approved months before the SOAR rollout. Planners and Liaisons shared that many activities, especially in the beginning months of the SOAR policy, were too late in the design cycle to incorporate substantive changes in a timely manner. Further, SOAR Advisors shared that they are unclear how developed activities are when they review SOARs. Planners also shared that they try to perfect the SOAR before submission when that is not the policy’s intent. Senior leadership involved in creating the SOAR process is aware of this challenge and encourages Planners to send drafts as early as possible. However, current SOAR policy does not require Planners submit early in project design process, instead offering guidance: “Processing the SOAR document for pre-solicitation, or the proposed PIO agreement, does not require a full draft solicitation or proposed agreement. OUs should proceed early in the planning process once the CO/AO receives a draft concept or statement of work or program description, an evaluation or selection criteria, and Federal Government cost estimate.”

Lastly, many participants did not fully understand each role involved in implementing the SOAR, which can cause confusion around the policy’s intent. Even though there is a description of the SOAR Liaison in the policy and many think the role is critical and fully responsible for the consultation process, there is no existing terms of reference that

outlines comprehensively Liaison roles and responsibilities. Additionally, the Liaison role differs significantly depending on whether or not the Bureau is predominantly drafting or reviewing SOARs. Further, many Planners and Liaisons do not fully understand the role of the SOAR Advisor group and SOAR Secretariat. For Advisors, it is unclear whether or not their input is taken into consideration during the review process. For the Secretariat, stakeholders do not always copy the SOAR mailbox, which hinders their ability to accurately track performance metrics as outlined in the policy.

Policy Issue Summary:

- The lower thresholds have served to disempower the field and increase workload.
- SOAR process happens too late in the program design cycle for Planners to incorporate substantive comments in a timely manner.
- Stakeholders have varying understanding of the role of the Liaison, Advisors, and SOAR Secretariat.

Process

As of December 21, 2018⁴, total dollar value for all SOARs reviewed was approximately \$2.6 billion. Since the SOAR launch, Planners sent 58 SOARs for approval at the AA level. Of these 58 SOARs, 17 are contracts, 11 are cooperative agreements, and 30 are PIOs. The average dollar amount for PIOs reviewed at the AA level was \$1,736,423. The largest volume of SOARs came from the Bureau for Africa, Asia, and Europe and Eurasia (see Quick Facts Summary for visualization). The process at the AA level largely met customer service standards for timelines stated in the SOAR policy, with an average number of work days for approved activities at 16 days⁵ against a target of 16 days⁶.

At the A/AID level, Planners sent 40 SOARs for approval since the launch of the policy through December 21, 2018. Of these 40 SOARs, 12 are contracts, 14 are cooperative agreements, and 14 are PIOs. The average dollar amount for PIOs reviewed at the A/AID level was \$49,566,048. The largest volume of SOARs came from the Bureaus for Africa, Global Health, and Middle East. The process at the A/AID level is not meeting customer service standards for timelines stated in the SOAR policy, with an average number of work days for approved activities at 55 days⁷ against a target of 35 days⁸. While exact data are not available, the delays appear to be split nearly evenly between the Front Office and Missions incorporating feedback between comment periods.

All interview participants from Bureaus and Missions who had SOARs go to the A/AID level said that delays in the SOAR approval process create enterprise risk. Participants shared that delays caused by the SOAR process impede Missions from obligating resources in a timely manner, strain partner relationships, and create stress for Planners looking to implement activities within a specific strategic time frame. This includes time-sensitive PEPFAR activities that are already subject to the excepted procedures package (EPP) developed by the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator (OGAC) and USAID to address time lags to award. In addition, Missions and Bureaus tasked with emergency response activities that were not exempt by current SOAR policy said that the approval process delayed their ability to respond to crises in a timely manner. More specifically, interview participants shared the following examples:

- A Bureau shared that the lag in approval time makes it challenging to manage implementation and results.

⁴ The AAR team used data through December 21, 2018, before the lapse in appropriations. All data come from the SOAR dashboard, maintained by the SOAR Secretariat.

⁵ This is the average number of work days for approved SOARs, measuring from start to finish date. This metric gives the most complete picture of how long the SOAR process takes, including delays.

⁶ This metric does not include the time not mandated in current SOAR policy (i.e. the amount of time it takes Planners to incorporate feedback).

⁷ This is the average number of work days for approved SOARs, measuring from start to finish date. This metric gives the most complete picture of how long the SOAR process takes, including delays.

⁸ This metric does not include the time not mandated in current SOAR policy (i.e. the amount of time it takes Planners to incorporate feedback).

- A Mission was engaging in a co-design with three partners but a delay with SOAR is creating uncertainty around this collaboration.
- A Bureau noted that they are struggling to schedule pre-solicitation conferences because the SOAR process creates uncertainty with procurement scheduling, which will ultimately affect their ability to broaden their partner base.
- A Bureau shared that a donor partner threatened to pull out of a PIO because of the long approval process.
- A Mission said that the SOAR delays are adding to their pipeline and will prevent a follow on activity from having critical overlap with the current project.
- A Mission shared that one activity requires an Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) license and this might expire before the SOAR process is complete.

Participants also highlighted gaps in the process at both the AA and A/AID level that impede meaningful collaboration during the process, or delay approval of SOAR documents. In order to accurately track delays, the policy stipulates that Liaisons must copy the SOAR mailbox when SOARs move from one stage to the next. However, not all stakeholders copy the SOAR mailbox when there is an update, which prevents the Secretariat from monitoring and flagging SOARs that are exceeding the mandatory timeframes outlined in the ADS.

Most interview participants did not know whether or not the B/IO technical review results in a significant change to pre-solicitations or proposed PIO agreements that better reflect A/AID priorities. Reviewers provide comments via Google documents, and some Planners “resolve” comments without including a response. In addition, some Reviewers have statutory positions and provide comments that reflect USG regulations, but are unsure whether or not their comments have been considered. The policy does not require a Planner to respond to comments, and the practice varies across Missions and Bureaus. For instance, some Bureau Liaisons create separate trackers for SOAR comments to help track and share this information with Reviewers, though this is not a standard practice. As a result, while B/IO Reviewers appreciate the opportunity to review, some question whether it’s the best use of their time if Planners do not incorporate their feedback without explanation.

On the other end, all Missions and some B/IO Planners found it challenging to communicate that they have addressed a comment, especially when they do not know who or what office is providing the feedback. Reviewers do not always provide their name and the office they represent while providing a comment. Most Planners shared that they do not have the time to provide an explanation for whether or not they have accepted a comment, and cannot incorporate all comments within the five-page SOAR Document Template limit. In addition, many Planners and Liaisons noted that while commenting in Google Documents is the most efficient way to carry out the process, quality control over comments is virtually impossible.

While the current process stipulates deadlines for review and clearance, the policy only stipulates deadlines for one part of the process that incorporates comments. The policy stipulates that Liaisons and Planners have three days to consider comments and make necessary revisions from the B/IO review. However, the policy does not mandate the number of days Liaisons and Planners have to incorporate feedback at later stages, including comments from the SOAR Advisors and Front office. This gap can also contribute to delays. For example, some Missions shared that high-level site visits or crises on the ground can cause delays in incorporating feedback. Additionally, there is no stipulated time to incorporate SOAR Advisor comments into the documents. One Bureau with a high volume of SOARs created a two-day internal deadline to incorporate Advisor comments to address this concern.

Mission and Bureau Planners also shared that, from their perspective, the B/IO technical review process often does not add value, further exacerbated by the challenge of not having the time to communicate directly with Reviewers while adhering to policy deadlines. Many Missions felt that B/IO Reviewers are often not familiar with the Mission’s portfolio and provide suggestions that are already happening or not financially feasible. Missions also noted that the B/IO review can duplicate discussion which already happened during the project design phase. Related, B/IO

Reviewers noted that the intent of creating more integrated activities that reflect Washington expertise and priorities might be better placed earlier in the design phase. As one participant summarized, “The central problem is that we have the SOAR review at the end of the program development process, when significant investments of time and other resources have already been made, rather than at the initial design stage, where basic flaws in concept or approach could be easily addressed.” This reality has a negative impact on the intended purpose of enabling collaboration across Bureaus and incorporating expert input from Washington. One Mission shared that many Reviewers do not perform their reviews through the EPPR lens, which is at odds with their view of the intended policy.

Some Liaisons from Regional Bureaus also felt that Pillar Bureaus do not speak with “one voice” and have had instances where two separate commenters from the same Bureau provide comments that are conflicting or confusing. As one Liaison shared, “we are struggling to figure out the best way to be receptive to comments. The intent of the review process is to have the best possible document before going to the Front Office, and not every reviewer understands this premise.”

Further, many Liaisons and Planners said they do not understand the utility or value of the SOAR Advisor Form, especially when they receive substantial comments from the Front Office. Conversely, there was no tracking historically of how Planners integrated comments from the SOAR Advisor Form into the SOAR Document Template, and the Secretariat included a column in the Form to address this gap. Advisors also noted that they do not know if or how Planners and the Front Office receive and incorporate their comments.

All Missions and Planners shared that it is often difficult to know which versions of the SOAR documents or guidance to use, and that they have experienced delays because of miscommunications around the SOAR Document Template and the process. This is due to inherent challenges with communicating centralized guidance to decentralized field offices. For example, even though the SOAR Secretariat has continually updated the SOAR Document Template and guidance documents in Google Drive since the launch of the policy, it has not updated formally the actual ADS chapter. The Secretariat noted that this is because they wanted to accumulate revisions to do all at once. Further, SOAR Liaisons are not always able to track or ensure that each Planner in the Mission is using the updated documents.

While the SOAR Secretariat communicates changes to Liaisons and field personnel who email the SOAR mailbox, not all stakeholders communicate directly with the Secretariat. This is because some B/IOs did not want the Secretariat to communicate directly with Missions, so the process does not require it. This puts the onus on Liaisons to communicate changes to the SOAR Document Template and other guidance materials, but some are not aware of the latest changes or how best to communicate to Missions who have not reached out for guidance. Some Liaisons also felt that updates to the documents should be outlined in official announcements, like Agency Notices, to help messaging to the Missions.

Updating the SOAR Document Template: Cash Benchmarking Example

The original version of the SOAR Document Template included a question about cash benchmarking. Many Missions and Bureaus going through the SOAR process found this confusing, and went to the Bureau for Policy Planning and Learning (PPL) evaluation team for guidance. PPL worked with the Lab to revise the SOAR Document Template to include a question about cost effectiveness as a whole, which is more familiar to the Agency, with cash benchmarking as an example. Multiple SOAR Liaisons noted the cash benchmarking question as a pain point during interviews, and representative of the larger issue of whether or not the SOAR Document Template reflected A/AID priorities.

In addition, many participants said that the information requested by the Front Office during the review process was unexpected given the questions and amount of detail included in SOAR Document Template. Many participants

noted that the requests from the Front Office ask for even more detail than what is included in the SOAR Document Template, and that it is difficult to go into this level in the SOAR Document Template because of page limits. ES shared 10 read-outs from SOAR meetings with the Front Office, which the AAR team reviewed. Although the Front Office had program-specific requests for each SOAR review, the most common requests are captured below:

Common Requests from Front Office SOAR Reviews
Linking program to Journey to Self-Reliance and/or other Administration priorities
Justifying using an international versus a local organization
Creating pathways to direct funding for local entities
Sharing how the program was devised and if the Planner used co-creation
If a follow-on, stating what was learned. For a PIO follow-on, explaining what is different this time and why are we working with this partner again.
Clarifying how data collected in project will be used and/or shared
Breaking down funding for the initial obligation (specifying amounts, where the money is coming from, and accounts)
Explaining the end state for the activity

While the current SOAR Document Template and guidance documents relate to some of these questions, those who draft and edit SOARs think that the SOAR Document Template should reflect better Front Office requests to mitigate delays in the SOAR approval process. One Bureau with a high volume of SOARs shared that “comments that come at the end of the process seem to be unpredictable and surprising. If there is a way to create a clearer message on the types of themes the Front Office is looking for, that would be extremely helpful.”

Process Issue Summary:

- Current delays in the SOAR approval process create enterprise risk.
- The SOAR process does not have a consistent feedback loop for Planners, Liaisons, and Reviewers.
- From the Planner perspective, the B/IO review process often does not add value because it duplicates previous technical discussions or results in comments not easily incorporated.
- Communication and outreach around the SOAR process is insufficient.

What went well?

Policy

Many Bureaus shared that they now feel more aware of planned A&A awards than before. One Pillar Bureau is proactively improving the SOAR process internally by identifying more efficient ways to give comments, and expanding their technical outreach to Missions. Their Bureau leadership is also looking into ways to anticipate effectively upcoming SOARs in their technical purview, and work more closely with field staff on the design process before the SOAR process. This reflects the stated intent of the SOAR, creating more collaboration between Bureaus and across geographic and technical sectors. As one participant shared, “One of the SOAR goals was greater inclusivity in the design process. To some extent this process is getting people to talk across Bureaus.”

Some participants shared that the SOAR policy and process are contributing to a desired shift in Agency culture to align better with A/AID priorities and strategies. One Advisor shared that he/she “strongly believes that the SOAR process is being heard, wrestled with, and applied.”

Process

Almost all participants noted that the SOAR policy and guidance documents help to outline deadlines and expectations. Many participants also felt that the inclusion of clear, time-bound deadlines in the SOAR policy was an improvement from the previous AARAD process. The AAR team analyzed data from AARAD trackers for 2017 and 2018⁹. The analysis found that the AARAD clearance process at the A/AID level took an average of 55 days, not counting for the time before clearance at the AA level. Participants who also had a role in the AARAD process shared that it did not emphasize deadlines like the SOAR, and there was no formal Secretariat in place to track each AARAD and report on whether or not the process was meeting policy deadline requirements.

Staff had consistently positive feedback for the customer service provided by the SOAR Secretariat. They expressed appreciation for the Secretariat's responsiveness to questions on clarification of the policy and process, and the Secretariat's role in creating and updating guidance documents. In response to initial questions sent to the SOAR mailbox, the Secretariat developed 33 FAQs, which has since expanded to 38 additional FAQs. The Secretariat also worked to consolidate templates and guidance where appropriate, including the SOAR Document Template and SOAR Review Form.

"The SOAR Secretariat and SOAR Advisor in ES have been very responsive and transparent. They come back quickly with clear answers, and have been a great resource during the process."

Participants also provided consistent positive feedback for the SOAR Advisor in ES, who plays a critical role in communicating Front Office changes before Administrator approval. Missions and Bureaus especially appreciated the follow up emails sent after Front Office meetings that outlined read outs clearly and succinctly.

Participants shared that the AA process is largely meeting expectations, including the outlined customer service standards in the policy. Participants said that Bureau leadership investment and messaging played a key role in making sure that staff are following the process and meeting deadlines. Many B/IO Liaisons shared that the SOAR has also resulted in engaging conversations with Bureau leadership that include clarifications and changes to SOARs, as appropriate.

At the A/AID level, SOAR Advisors created an organized internal process to keep to their three-day deadline for review. They have not missed a deadline, even with a surge of SOARs at the end of the fiscal year.

The SOAR Secretariat also created a SOAR Dashboard, a Tableau visualization that Bureaus and Missions can reference to see real-time updates with regard to customer service standards outlined in the policy. Some participants felt that this tool is a helpful reference that increases transparency compared to the previous AARAD process. The Agency can also leverage data from the SOAR Dashboard for mandatory reporting requirements, such as the requirement to notify the Committee on Appropriations 15 days prior to Indefinite Quantity Contracts above certain thresholds.

Almost all participants shared that the SOAR Liaison role is critical to the process. One Advisor shared that the Liaison is "fully responsible for the consultation process and has to know the equity holders and manage the deadlines. They also hold the key to cultivating additional Washington interest in the SOAR review process." One Liaison succinctly summarized the role into three main components: coordination, advice, and compliance. Even though the level of

⁹ The AARAD data only contained accurate numbers for approvals at the Administrator level.

effort varies between Liaisons depending on the volume of SOARs the Bureau drafts and reviews, most Liaisons felt that they have a better grasp on the process six months into implementation.

In Bureaus with a high volume of SOARs, Liaisons are seen as indispensable. Although Liaison supervisors often do not have a formal role in the process (other than filling in as an alternate when needed), many shared that they feel as though the Liaison role cannot be simply added to an already existing portfolio or job description and needs full-time support. This is because the Liaisons need time to not only review SOARs for adherence to policy and guidelines, but also to shepherd SOARs in accordance with deadlines outlined in policy. In addition, multiple Missions shared that they received all, if not most, of their SOAR guidance and information from their Bureau Liaison.

For most Pillar Liaisons, the role is centered on distributing the SOAR package for comments and making sure deadlines are met, which many feel is not overly burdensome and fits organically within their existing portfolio. One Pillar Bureau shared that because the SOAR is similar to other clearance processes, they are able to leverage their existing resources and did not have to create a wholly new process.

What can be improved and how?

Issue 1: The lower thresholds have served to disempower the field and increase workload

Despite a clearer, time-bound policy, the current SOAR thresholds for planned A&A awards and PIOs have led to an increased level of effort and reduced Mission Director authority. Missions and Bureaus shared that the SOAR runs counter to A/AID messages about empowering Missions, and contributes to a perceived lack of trust between AID/W and the field. The policy also launched close to the end of the fiscal year, which led to a large volume of SOARs during a busy period for many program offices. Many participants shared that the inclusion of PIOs is perceived as a way to discourage OUs from using this mechanism.

Recommendation 1.1: Raise thresholds for non-PIO to \$40-80 million at the AA level, and \$80 million and above at the A/AID level. For PIOs, raise thresholds to \$5-10 million at the AA level, and \$10M and above at the A/AID level to delegate greater approval authority to MDs. Based on an analysis of FY 2017 and 2018 data from the Global Acquisition and Assistance System (GLAAS), this could lead to an estimated 50 percent fewer planned A&A SOARs and more than 80 percent fewer PIOs to review at the AA level. At the Administrator level, this could lead to estimated 60 percent fewer A&A SOARs and 30 percent fewer PIO SOARs. The average dollar value of PIO awards reviewed by A/AID, at approximately \$50 million, is well above the recommended revised threshold.

Recommendation 1.2: Agency leadership should provide clear guidance on the Agency's position on working with PIOs. This will help Bureaus and Missions align PIO activities more closely with the Agency's policy, and improve the quality of SOARs submitted. If USAID included PIOs in the SOAR policy in response to the Inspector General's PIO audit, the Agency should message this to Bureaus and Missions.

Issue 2: Current delays in the SOAR approval process create enterprise risk

Current approval timelines outlined in the ADS have not always been met, which leads to programmatic and reputational risk for planned A&A and PIO activities. Missions and Bureaus shared that emergency response activities that are not currently exempt from the process are held up by the SOAR process. Two examples include activities not covered by Humanitarian Assistance (HA) funds that are responding to crises in Venezuela and Myanmar. PEPFAR activities are also subject to SOAR, which can impede the Agency's ability to implement HIV/AIDS activities in a timely and vigilant manner in response to crises. Missions and Bureaus also shared that delays affect partner relationships and hinder timely obligation of funds.

In addition, the ADS does not dictate the time Planners have to incorporate comments except after receiving B/IO comments, even though there are time limits on the Reviewers in the policy. Stakeholders with a role in the process have not always copied the SOAR mailbox when SOARs move from one stage to the next, even though the policy requires this. As a result, the SOAR Secretariat is unable to track accurately delays and send subsequent reminders when needed.

Recommendation 2.1: Meet timelines outlined in the ADS. If these timelines are not feasible given time and resources, update them to reflect an accurate expectation for activity planning purposes.

Recommendation 2.2: Create a waiver process for time-sensitive activities. This waiver will include, but not be limited to, crisis activities not funded by HA, PEPFAR activities, activities funded with expiring funds, and activities deemed essential in the event of a lapse in appropriations.

Recommendation 2.3: Establish timeframes for Planners to incorporate comments for all phases of the SOAR process (with a process to request an extension for extenuating circumstances).

Recommendation 2.4: Reinforce in trainings and terms of reference (see Issue 7) (TOR) that Liaisons must copy the SOAR Secretariat as required by policy to ensure accurate data to track adherence to deadlines.

Recommendation 2.5: SOAR Secretariat should send follow up emails to B/IOs when approval timelines at each stage of the process have lapsed.

Issue 3: The SOAR process does not have a consistent feedback loop for Planners, Liaisons, and Reviewers

Reviewers, including SOAR Advisors, often do not know whether or not Planners incorporated their feedback into the SOAR document after commenting. This is also the case for clearing offices. On the other end, Missions and Liaisons often do not know who is providing comments (e.g., rank, statutory position) and how or whether to respond to some comments, especially when they feel the comment does not merit a response. Further, Planners find it difficult to address and incorporate comments while keeping to the five-page limit.

Recommendation 3.1: Require that B/IO Reviewers self-identify (name, office, title) and label comments as “substantive” (show stopper) or “Advisory” (to be considered). While the policy would still not require Planners to respond, it is considered best practice to communicate with Reviewers on if/how a Planner will incorporate any substantive comments.

Recommendation 3.2: Socialize that Liaisons are available to help communication efforts between Planners and commenters.

Recommendation 3.3: Create a help document or FAQ on best practices to streamline comments, and emphasize that Reviewers focus on A/AID priorities (Journey to Self-Reliance, EPPR, Private Sector Engagement, etc.).

Issue 4: From the Planner perspective, the B/IO review process often does not add value because it duplicates previous technical discussions or results in comments not easily incorporated.

B/IO Reviewers are not always familiar with Mission portfolios and provide suggestions that are already happening or are not feasible. Sometimes this is because a specific B/IO reviewer was not involved in the technical consultations during project design, even if members of their B/IO were. B/IO Reviewers want to provide technical input earlier in the design phase to have more influence. Further, Missions shared that Bureaus are not always speaking with “one voice” when it comes to comments, which causes confusion and delays. Many Liaisons and Planners shared that do

not see the value in the SOAR Advisor comments. Participants thought that combining B/IO and Advisor review would be helpful, especially to mitigate going back to the field twice.

Recommendation 4.1.A: Remove the technical B/IO review from the SOAR process and integrate into earlier design phase. The new streamlined Country Development Cooperation Strategy guidance specifies intensive technical dialogue should occur during the project/activity design phase. If the B/IO technical review is moved to an earlier stage, relevant B/IOs could participate when activities are less developed and feedback is more influential and easily incorporated. The SOAR process could then focus exclusively on policy issues and avoid technical feedback that is duplicative or unfeasible.

OR

Recommendation 4.1.B: Include a list of staff from B/IOs engaged in the project design process on the SOAR Document Template to avoid duplicative review during the B/IO stage.

Recommendation 4.2 (If proceeding with 4.1B): For SOARs requiring A/AID-level review, combine the B/IO review with the Advisor review to shorten process and reduce back and forth with Missions.

Recommendation 4.3: Require that Liaisons address any conflicting comments from their B/IO's review so that the B/IO is speaking with "one voice."

Issue 5: Communication and outreach around SOAR process is insufficient

Stakeholders are unclear about Front Office requirements and expectations for the SOAR. Many Liaisons noted that the SOAR Document Template needs to better align with what the Front Office wants to see. With EPPR underway, it will be critical to have a template that reflects Administration priorities as they relate to procurement reforms.

There is currently no formal governance structure for rationalizing changes to the SOAR Document Template, and Planners and Liaisons are not always aware when changes occur, causing them to use outdated templates in the ADS. Relatedly, all Missions shared they've experienced delays because of miscommunications around templates and the process.

Recommendation 5.1: Update the SOAR Document Template to reflect Front Office priorities better. This may include updating for additional information commonly requested by the Front Office.

Recommendation 5.2: Update ADS 300man (SOAR Document Template) to include a description of the template and a link to the continually updated version to mitigate confusion around which version to use.

Recommendation 5.3: Update MyUSAID page with additional training materials and help documents, including the updated SOAR Document Template.

Recommendation 5.4: Outline changes to ADS, SOAR Document Template, and support documents in a quarterly email to all Liaisons, as well as in an Agency Notices to help Liaisons message to the Missions.

Recommendation 5.5: Missions could consider establishing a POC (in the OAA or program office) who can help Planners ensure they are following the process correctly. Mission POCs would be responsible for actively communicating with the SOAR Secretariat and ensuring they are up to date on the process, guidance, and templates to avoid miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Issue 6: SOAR process happens too late in the program design cycle for Planners to incorporate substantive changes in a timely manner.

Missions perceive that SOAR does not add value to activities already vetted through the PAD process. Planners often try to be too careful to craft the perfect SOAR when this is not the intent. Substantive changes which come during the SOAR approval process can significantly delay procurements and damage morale as staff feel like they wasted time during project design. For Advisors, it is unclear how developed the activities are when they review the SOAR.

Recommendation 6.1: Working with T3, PPL, and the component parts of the proposed Centers in the DDI, RFS, and CPS Bureaus, update ADS guidance to require submission of SOAR at a specific point in the project design process (for example, a draft solicitation, scope of work, or concept paper for procurement). Submission of the SOAR could occur after collaborative technical discussions in the project/activity design process, which could take the place of the current B/IO review stage of the SOAR process (see recommendation 4.1A). If USAID requires SOARs submission at an early phase of the design process, it should still allow Planners to move forward with early actions on pre-solicitation activities, such as pre-solicitation engagements, requests for information, and other early actions to prevent any unintended delays.

Issue 7: Stakeholders have a varying understanding of the role of the Liaison, Advisors, and SOAR Secretariat

There is a description of the SOAR Liaison in the policy, but no existing terms of reference even though many think the role is critical and fully responsible for the consultation process. Additionally, the Liaison role differs significantly depending on whether or not the Bureau is predominantly drafting or reviewing SOARs. Further, Planners and Liaisons did not understand the role of the SOAR Advisor group.

Recommendation 7.1: Establish a terms of reference for Liaisons that encompasses both types of roles (drafting or reviewing) and associated responsibilities and expectations. The SOAR Liaison TOR should explicitly outline the responsibility to adjudicate comments. For Liaisons that coordinate Bureau comments, this includes resolving intra-bureau conflicts and ensuring version control when many OUs review the SOAR package. For Liaisons that coordinate drafted SOARs, this includes screening and prioritizing comments for the Mission's response, and providing clear communication to reviewer if comments are incorporated or considered.

Recommendation 7.2: The SOAR Secretariat can organize quarterly socialization opportunities for Planners, Liaisons, Reviewers, and Advisors to share lessons learned and best practices. These meetings can also give stakeholders the opportunity to proactively identify and address any challenges.

Conclusion

The SOAR is resulting in more senior leadership awareness of planned A&A and PIO activities and pre-solicitations that better reflect A/AID priorities. While these outcomes reflect the stated intents of the policy, OUs submitting SOARs see the policy and process as disempowering and an increase in workload, on top of other functions they are performing in support of Administration priorities. Participants also shared that delays in the process are creating programmatic, reputational, and human capital risk. Additionally, certain steps in the approval process are seen as a low-value exercise that do not contribute substantially to planned A&A or PIO activities. By addressing these findings, the Agency will strengthen its response to the President's Management Agenda, specifically Cross-Agency Priority Goals 6 ([Shifting from Low-Value to High Value Work](#)) and 11 ([Improving Management of Major Acquisitions](#)). Further, the recommendations in this report will help the Agency design, plan, and execute activities that support countries in their journey to self-reliance.

Appendix 1: SOAR Document Template¹⁰

PART 1 – STANDARD DESCRIPTIVE DATA

(No more than 3 sentences per column)

Activity Name	
Bureau/Office/Mission	
Contract/Grant/Cooperative Agreement/Public International Organization (PIO) grant	
Total Estimated Cost/Amount	
Describe any cost-sharing, leveraging or funding in parallel to the USAID-funded activity, including in-kind funds. If none, please explain why.	
Duration of the agreement(s)	
What countries are involved, if known?	
What is the expected number of “prime” awards?	
What problem(s) does the proposed award address?	
What are the desired outcomes and the projected results?	
(If applicable) What provisions are being made, if any, for the involvement of local in-country organizations?	
(If applicable) What provisions are being made, if any, for the involvement of U.S. small business and/or minority-serving institutions?	

¹⁰ The AAR team pulled *ADS 300man Instructions and Template for SOAR Document* on February 15, 2019, the version in place during the AAR analysis. USAID released revisions to the instructions and template on March 5, 2019.

(If applicable) What provisions are being made for the engagement or involvement of institutions of higher education?	
(If applicable) Are any of the types of organizations from the previous three questions expected to apply as prime contractors/recipients, or expected to be subcontractors/sub-recipients?	

PART 2 – JUSTIFICATION

(The justification must be no more than five pages. Documents that exceed the page limit will be returned for revision. Annexes will not be accepted.)

There is no fixed format for the questions below, since the nature of activities can differ. Some questions are mandatory, and others are as applicable. Operating Units must only address Mandatory Questions 1 and 5 for cost-type agreements or program contributions with PIOs. For the “as applicable” questions, Operating Units should exercise judgment in determining which questions to address meaningfully, and refrain from including boilerplate language that provides little value. Operating Units should include a discussion of any other items not mentioned below that they deem significant to the approver(s).

Mandatory:

1. **Approach:** How did the Operating Unit develop its approach to addressing the problem?
 - How does the proposed approach support priority Administration goals and the Administrator’s vision of helping countries become self-reliant?
 - How is the approach advancing collaboration and co-creation in USAID’s partnering (e.g., co-design, concept papers, statements of objectives)?
 - What steps is the Operating Unit taking to broaden opportunities to enhance competition (e.g., industry days, requests for information, pre-solicitation conferences)?
 - Does the proposed approach mobilize other public- and private-sector resources to increase development impact with the potential to carry forward beyond USAID’s funding?
 - How does the proposed approach measure, incentivize, and improve results (e.g., milestones, fixed amounts/prices, performance-based incentives)? Does the approach include cash-benchmarking, and if not, why not?
 - How is the award incorporating flexibility and adaptive management (e.g., modular design, option years)?

[If a PIO Agreement, ONLY answer the following question] Why is support to a PIO a better approach than direct Agency awards that are more-collaborative in nature?

2. **Use of Evidence:** What has been the use of evidence (e.g., evaluations, scientific research) and assessments and/or analysis (e.g., political economy, cost-benefit) in designing the activity? Are any evaluations or research projects planned to facilitate learning from this activity? If so, what type(s) of evaluation(s) or research project(s)? Will the evaluation(s) include cash-benchmarking? Will baselines and/or control groups be created? If not, why not, given this is a high-dollar-value activity?

3. Past Activities: How does the activity build on past activities?

- If this is a follow-on award not based on a thorough review of the initial award, please explain why not.
- If this is a follow-on award, explain how will the new award demonstrate the following:
 - (a) the inclusion of lessons learned from the previous award to inform better program design;
 - (b) an expanded level of results that builds on previous work; and/or
 - (c) increased sustainability of development assistance and impact.

4. Innovation: To the extent known at this stage, how is the award applying or considering innovation?

Possibilities include the development, adaptation or scaling of new interventions, processes or approaches; the integration of digital technologies to drive greater efficacy and project outcomes; collaboration with new partners to advance the evidence-base, apply learning and adaptation, introduce design-thinking, and/or embody more-iterative and agile approaches; scientific research that leads to a new intervention or body of knowledge related to the development problem; or new methods of partnering with the private sector, local entrepreneurs and in-country actors.

5. Sustainable Results: How is the activity designed to deliver results that can be achieved beyond U.S. engagement or sustained beyond the life of this activity? How, if at all, will this activity work to increase the capabilities of host governments, local partners (non-governmental organizations, private industry, institutions of higher education), and/or the availability of local resources so as to one day enable the country and/or local actors to either undertake similar work, or maintain the results achieved through this activity over time?

[If a PIO Agreement, ONLY answer the following questions] How will the Operating Unit assess the impact of the award? How will support to a PIO advance sustainable results as discussed above?

As Applicable:

- 1. Size of Activity:** [For IDIQs/Leaders with Associates awards only] How did the Operating Unit determine the dollar value of the activity? How did the Operating Unit give consideration to country-specific awards or multiple smaller global activities in which a set of smaller awards might provide more opportunity for context-specific responses and small/local/different organizations to compete compared to one large mechanism for multiple activities? If a large activity, are there any provisions or incentives to enable small/local organizations to participate in the award? Is there any upper limit on the size of Task Orders or associate awards?
- 2. Scale:** What is the scale of this activity? If not country-wide how would it be possible, if successful, to scale the outcomes to eventually affect the entire country or all affected areas of it? How can lessons and impact reach beyond the target country or countries?
- 3. Cross-Sectoral Synergies:** Does this activity offer any unique synergies with work done in other sectors in the same country or location (whether by the United States, the host government or other actors)? How, if at all, does the activity contribute to cross-cutting goals in a Mission Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) or Operating Unit's strategy or Project Appraisal Document (PAD) -- such as democracy and governance; engaging faith-based

actors; women's empowerment; peace- and state-building; engaging youth; protecting human rights; and/or resilience?

4. **Risks and Unknowns:** What particular risks or unknowns (e.g., relating to security, the sustainability of development outcomes, scalability, political economy, etc.) need to be flagged? What actions are planned to mitigate such risks? Submissions should only identify and discuss real risks that senior management should discuss, as opposed to presenting "straw men" simply to respond to the topic.

Clear, relevant explanations will maximize the chances that the activity will be approved quickly, and without additional review by the approver (Administrator/Assistant Administrator, depending on the size of the activity). Anticipating any questions that could be asked and covering such matters in this submission is helpful (e.g., if a follow-on, and selection of instrument type is changing from acquisition to assistance, or vice versa).

All SOAR requests must be accompanied by an Action Memo addressed to the Administrator (for acquisition and assistance awards at or over \$40 million and Public International Organization (PIO) grants at or over \$5 million or to the relevant Assistant Administrator (for acquisition and assistance awards under \$40 million and PIO grants under \$5 million). The Action Memo must request approval or disapproval of the SOAR document and provide a short summary of the request.

Front Office Clearance Request

ACTION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR MARK GREEN

Subject: Senior Obligation Alignment Review Document for (activity name)

Drafter: Bureau/ Office: Name, ext., after hours: (number)

Approved: AA/Bureau Name – Name

Date Received by ES: *(only include for planned awards ≥ \$40 M or PIO ≥ \$5 M)*

<u>Clearances</u>	<u>Clearance Status</u>	<u>Date</u>
<i>(No more than 4 bureau-level clearances)</i>		
Bureau/Office: Name	Cleared	XX/XX/XX

Additional required clearances for planned awards ≥ \$40 million or cost-type Agreement or program contribution to PIO ≥ \$5 million:

AA/M: Name	Cleared	XX/XX/XX
OSDBU: Name	Cleared	XX/XX/XX
GC: Name	Cleared	XX/XX/XX

FO Approval

ES: Name _____

DCoS: Name _____

CoS: Name _____

DA/AID: Name _____

A/AID: Name **For Signature**

Appendix 2: Interview Coding Methodology

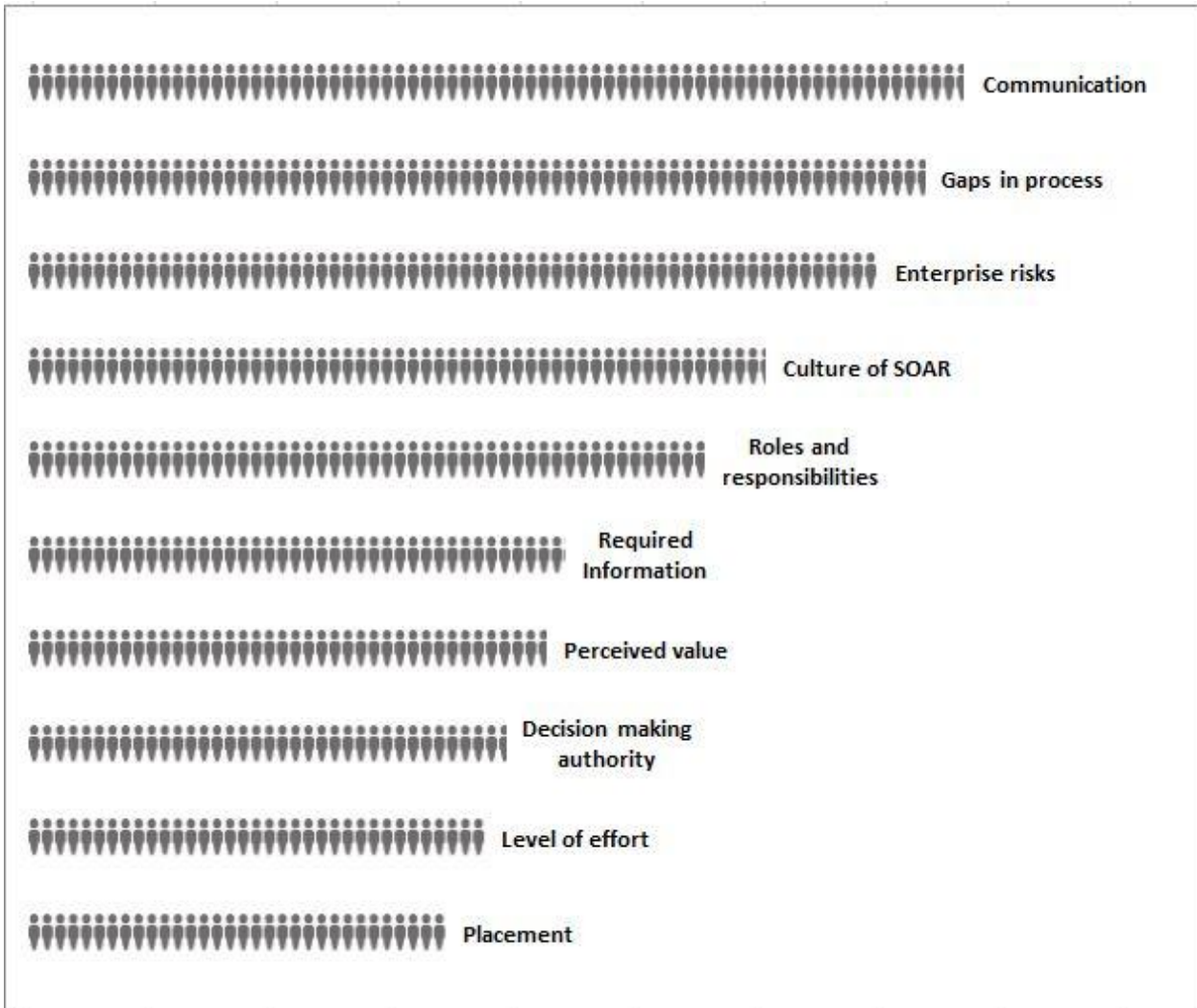
The AAR team organized interview participants into five groups that represent a distinct role or perspective on the SOAR. The five main groups were: SOAR Liaisons and supervisors (from Pillar and Regional Bureaus), SOAR Advisors (from PPL, M/OAA, and the Lab), Clearance Offices (from GC and OSDBU), Key Positions (from the SOAR Secretariat, ES, and M/OAA), and Field (Missions). After the interviews, the AAR team then developed 10 common themes to code the interviews. Themes and definitions are provided below:

Theme	Definition
Culture of SOAR	Leadership establishing a vision for the Agency through the SOAR process
Perceived value	Value of SOAR policy and process (positive and negative)
Gaps in process	Identifying where policy or process has gaps
Roles and responsibilities	Issues with roles/responsibilities being unclear
Decision making authority	How current threshold amounts affect decision making authority
Placement	Placement of SOAR in overall design process
Level of effort	Workload
Required Information	Requirements outlined in policy, templates, and support documents
Communication	Communication as process - how information is shared and/or received
Enterprise risks	Delays that prevent the Agency from effectively managing planned portfolios; affect co-creation initiatives and/or partnering opportunities; and/or result in frustration/dips in staff morale

Below is a table of the top four themes cited by interview participants and the groups that discussed these themes during AAR interviews.

Theme	Interview Participants
Communication	Liaisons, Advisors, Clearance Group, Key Positions; Missions
Gaps in Process	Liaisons, Advisors, Clearance Group, Key Positions; Missions
Enterprise Risks	Liaisons; Key Positions; Missions
Culture of SOAR	Liaisons, Advisors, Clearance Group, Key Positions, Missions

Appendix 3: Interview Themes Mentioned in Participant Interviews by Percentage



Appendix 4: List of Participants

Name	B/IO
Frederick Bielke	DCHA
Moyra McNamara	GH
Jeff Evans	GH
Ben Gustafson	GH
Alana Marsili	AFR
Sarah Marvor	DCHA
Laura Schulz	E3
Tania Alfonso	BFS
Bonita Jones	E3
Angela Lozano	AFR
Luisa Moran	LAC
Meghan Hanson	DCHA
Tracy Quilter	LAC
Michelle Bahk	ME
Brendan Barcelo	OAPA
Valerie Chien	ASIA
Olu Smoak	ASIA
Al Decie	E&E
Randy Tift	M/OAA
Mark Walther	M/OAA
Carissa Page	PPL
Lisa Whitley	PPL
Melissa Patsalides	PPL
Daniel Handel	Lab
Ruth Buckley	M
Jenna Giandoni	M
Erik Pacific	ES
Danielle Jean-Pierre	GC
Kimberly Ball	OSDBU
Nairobi Mission	
Colombia Mission	
El Salvador Mission	
Nepal Mission	
Burma Mission	
*The AAR team also incorporated input from the Indonesia, Jordan, and Ukraine Missions from T3's Mission Director Survey.	