

Integrating a Market Systems Approach in Programming

U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy Activity Design Guidance

This is one of several Activity Design Guidance documents for implementing the U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy. The full set of documents is at www.feedthefuture.gov and www.agrilinks.org.

Introduction

The U.S. Government's Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) 2022–2026 calls on the U.S. Government and its implementing partners to foster inclusive agricultural growth for small-scale producers, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and poor households, while increasing access to safe, healthy foods and benefiting the environment. Programming can catalyze this inclusive growth by using a market systems development (MSD) approach that fosters more competitive, inclusive, and resilient market systems. The MSD approach, defined in the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) [A Framework for Inclusive Market System Development](#), is relevant to agricultural and nonagricultural areas, including food systems and water and sanitation services, making it a powerful framework for programming across GFSS objectives. This guidance clarifies concepts and definitions, describes how using an inclusive market systems approach in programming can advance the GFSS, provides relevant activity examples, and identifies resources for design and implementation.

The market systems approach, defined in USAID's A Framework for Inclusive Market System Development, is relevant to agricultural and nonagricultural areas, including food systems and water and sanitation services, and it's context-based so it's flexible by design, making it a powerful framework for programming across GFSS areas.

Terminology and Context

Market systems are spaces in which private and public actors collaborate, coordinate, participate, and compete to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services at local, regional, and international levels. Market systems include multiple interconnected value chains, such as a product and related inputs.

Market system actors include:

- Smallholders and other producers who seek value-added relationships with buyers, profitable end markets, and relevant inputs and services

- Micro, small, medium, and large enterprises that buy, process, and sell agricultural and food products, and provide goods and services that may be specific to food and agriculture (e.g., agro inputs, technical advising for production and processing, food-specific retail, and foodservice) or cross-market (e.g., finance, digital services, logistics, water, and sanitation)
- Workers who provide labor for production and other rural to urban agricultural or food enterprises (e.g., inputs and services)
- Households/consumers who purchase foods and other necessities and whose demand is critical to ensure sustainable and profitable markets
- Policymakers and government units that establish, implement, and enforce policies that affect system outcomes and performance, including business regulation, food safety, quality standards, water and sanitation utilities, and taxation

The MSD approach, as articulated in USAID’s Framework for Inclusive Market System Development, recognizes the importance of market systems in creating sustainable, economic opportunities, expanding trade, and increasing private sector investment in ways that foster long-term poverty reduction and improve dietary quality for small-scale producers, SMEs, and others. It seeks to catalyze market systems that are:

- **Competitive:** System actors are able to effectively innovate, upgrade, and add value to their products and services to match market demand and maintain or grow market share.
- **Inclusive:** Delivering a sustainable flow of benefits to a range of actors, including the poor and otherwise marginalized, as well as to society as a whole.
- **Resilient:** System actors are able to address, absorb, and overcome shocks and stresses in the market, policy environment, resource base, or other aspect of the system.

USAID’s MSD approach focuses on addressing the root causes of poor system performance by identifying leverage points in the system where interventions can drive systemic change. Programming also addresses systemic constraints that can unlock growth in multiple value chains by intervening in, for example, cross-market input supply systems, information services, financial services (including insurance and other means of asset protection), logistics, and the enabling environment.

An MSD implementation approach is grounded in facilitation, cocreating, coinvesting, and co-implementing interventions through local system actors that participate in and affect system performance, including government, civil society, the private sector, academia, individuals, and others. Facilitation leverages market actors’ incentives, such as improved supply and greater investment opportunities, and relationships across market actors, to drive systemic change, instead of directly intervening to deliver services. Programming strives to sustainably develop the capacity of local actors to take advantage of opportunities, respond effectively to shocks and stresses, and solve their own problems. Facilitation is tailored to the context; in a thin market or conflict-affected situation, activities may provide more support to partners than in a more developed market.

Designing Activities

Key Lessons Learned

Past experience in using the MSD approach has generated several lessons:

- We need to understand the incentives and disincentives that drive system behavior to develop programs that engage stakeholders in ways that advance competitiveness, scale inclusive beneficial changes, and avoid unintended consequences, such as entrenching existing power imbalances or increasing the risk of gender-based violence.

- The performance of market systems—including the value they generate and for whom—depends on factors beyond a single sector and its enabling environment. Interrelated market systems and value chains, and contextual factors like natural disasters, affect a given system’s performance.
- For programming to be catalytic, it should focus on facilitating solutions to challenges that strengthen affected interconnected systems, such as those for nontarget commodities and inputs. Using maize as an example, many Feed the Future countries have a high prevalence of aflatoxin in maize, which contaminates animal feed and remains in dairy and meat, impacting nutrition and health. Addressing aflatoxin in the maize system has impacts that extend beyond maize and the food and agricultural system.
- Strengthening resilience at the system level is essential, as continuity of market functions support community and household resilience. USAID has elevated [market systems resilience](#) as a component and goal of programming that uses an MSD approach.

Pathways to Results

As the MSD approach is relevant across sectors and takes a holistic, integrated systems view, we can apply it to achieve intermediate results (IRs) under each GFSS objective and crosscutting IRs, as exemplified in the table.

To advance...	Market systems programming can...	Illustrative Examples
Inclusive food and ag systems that are productive and profitable (Obj 1, IR 1)	Facilitate value-added relationships among buyers, input/service providers, and smallholders; facilitate changes in the enabling environment (e.g., policy) to foster growth and investment; and strengthen inputs and services, including cross-market functions.	Feed the Future activities using a market systems approach, such as the Ethiopia Value Chain Activity (VCA), Uganda Inclusive Agricultural Markets (IAM), and Bangladesh Rice and Diversified Crops (RDC), facilitate value-added linkages between producers and buyers (traders, processors, and retailers) that provide embedded services, such as training or credit.
Strengthened and expanded access to markets and trade (Obj 1, IR 2)	Increase access to information enabling SMEs and smallholders to tap better market opportunities, build actors’ capacities to meet importers’ standards, facilitate trade policy harmonization and investment in market infrastructure, strengthen producer organization, and firm marketing capacity.	<p>The Feed the Future Knowledge-Based Integrated Sustainable Agriculture in Nepal II (KISAN II) Project partnered with two e-commerce marketplaces to help farmers bring agricultural products to market during the pandemic. Within its first year, close to a thousand farmers made online sales of more than 1 million rupees.</p> <p>To increase export market access, USAID and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) supported the Honduran National Plant and Animal Health and Food Safety Agency (SENASA) to adopt a risk-based inspection mode that streamlines procedures, reduces delays, and lowers costs at the main port. SENASA also implemented an online system for export/import certificates and a module for animal products.</p>

Increased employment and entrepreneurship (Obj 1, IR 3)	Facilitate investment and business advisory services to foster market-oriented SME growth; build employer capacity for inclusive, targeted recruiting; build educational institution capacity to identify needs among employers and employees; and tailor curricula.	<p>Feed the Future Uganda Youth Leadership in Agriculture partnered with agricultural sector firms to host ag career days for high school students and establish internships for young adults.</p> <p>Rwanda Employment and Entrepreneurship uses an MSD approach to create more inclusive jobs and align workforce development and entrepreneurship programs with food and agriculture sector needs.</p>
Increased sustainable productivity (Obj 1 and 2, IR 4)	Facilitate local system capacity to develop, disseminate, and promote sustainable productivity-enhancing technologies, scale adoption of climate-smart approaches (mitigation and adaptation practices), and reduce food loss/waste.	<p>The Feed the Future Guatemala Coffee Value Chains (CVC) Project works to increase agricultural incomes through productivity improvement while building resilience and protecting ecosystems through climate-smart agriculture.</p> <p>Bangladesh Livestock Production for Improved Nutrition facilitated training on improved productivity using locally produced fodder and improved veterinary services, and supported the installation of household methane digesters for sustainable manure management and energy.</p>
Improved, proactive risk reduction, mitigation, and management (Obj 2, IR 5)	Strengthen system actors' capacities to anticipate risks and develop tools to address them, and increase adoption of risk-mitigation tools, such as insurance. Strengthen producer household, firm, and systems resilience by increasing connectivity and diversity.	<p>Senegal Naatal Mbay supported climate-smart agriculture training and crop diversification, increased access to rain index insurance and rainfall data, and taught farmers how to use rainfall data to schedule planting and irrigation, helping them address climate-related risks efficiently. The activity also increased women's empowerment, achieving increased Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index scores.</p> <p>Feed the Future Ghana Market Systems and Resilience design integrates risk reduction and systems resilience across its four objectives to decrease risk and vulnerability for producers and agribusinesses, including via business services supports and enabling environment structures.</p>
Improved adaptation to and recovery from shocks and stresses (Obj 2, IR 6)	Strengthen system actors' capacities to absorb and cope with shocks and stressors, and change practices to strengthen resilience to future occurrences.	The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Sustainable Livelihoods and Resilience, which operates in the conflict-affected Eastern region, uses a local cocreation approach to identify mitigation, adaptation, and recovery needs that communities and other system actors want to address together, and is supporting private sector buyers and service providers to reenter the area.
Increased consumption of safe and nutritious foods (Obj 3, IR 7)	Strengthen firms' capacities to develop and market diverse, safe, nutritious foods that meet consumers' needs (inclusive of pregnant and lactating women), expand processing, strengthen household and firm storage, build	The Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing (AINFP) provides capacity building and technical assistance to African SMEs to increase safe, nutritious food production, links processors to smallholders, assists with access to finance, and targets women-owned and -led businesses.

	capacity for food safety policy and practices, integrate production diversification, and facilitate behavior change that increases women’s decision-making about production, income, and food allocation.	Feed the Future Ethiopia Food and Agricultural Systems Transformation prioritizes economic and nutrition outcomes, seeking to achieve inclusive, ag-led growth and increased consumption of healthy diets via partnerships and investment in production, processing, logistics, food safety regulations/compliance, and marketing.
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1. Implementation Approach: Locally Led, Systems-Based, and Inclusive

Activities using an MSD approach should foster agriculture and food systems that are more competitive, inclusive, and resilient, that can function, grow, and adapt without continued donor support and deliver inclusive benefits to an increasing number of people. Good practices include:

- **Facilitate.** Through facilitation, practitioners catalyze sustainable and scalable changes in market systems by helping system actors understand the incentives to lead such change and providing right-sized support to do so. This can include strengthening relationships among market actors, sharing expertise, and articulating the business case for new business models that integrate embedded services or diversify suppliers and staffing. Implementers minimize their direct intervention in the system and engage at a level that is appropriate to the context, as noted earlier. In all contexts, USAID and implementers should define an explicit end goal and exit strategy.
- **Include cross-market services.** Allocate resources to strengthen cross-market services provided by public and private sector actors, such as business development services, finance, inputs, technical advisory, mechanization, or logistics. These services play a critical role in strengthening market systems and attracting increased, long-term investment.
- **Tackle the enabling environment.** Activities using MSD are increasingly incorporating enabling environment work, addressing both formal regulations and informal norms, which underlie things like gender norms and the systems of contracts and property that affect production and market outcomes. For example, changes in policies, regulations, and informal norms may be needed to improve access to input, output, and service markets, reduce the digital divide, increase incentives to meet standards for food safety and external markets, enforce agreements, attract financing, foster inclusion, and increase the number and diversity of firms across the agriculture and food system (see the GFSS policy guidance). The private sector is an important stakeholder in policy and regulatory decision-making, so fostering dialogue among the private sector, government, and civil society is important in this work. Target enabling environmental changes that incentivize systemic change (e.g., food safety and quality grading) while removing constraints and disincentives (e.g., cumbersome processes for input approval and firm registration, and misaligned industry standards) and address informal rules that hinder inclusion and equity (see the GFSS Trade Guidance).
- **Leverage partnerships with market actors, both private sector and public.** To drive sustainability and local ownership, activities should seek out and convene market actors who are respected, entrepreneurial, and willing to innovate, integrate inclusion, and scale successful approaches across their business/organizational models. In line with USAID’s Private Sector Engagement (PSE) Policy, activities and Missions should prioritize cocreation and coinvestment with such partners who can lead interventions, such as expanding into new markets, providing services or products that benefit smallholders and SMEs, and developing and marketing affordable, safe, healthy foods that are storable and desirable. While PSE can be more challenging in thin and conflict-affected markets, activities have done so successfully by articulating a strong business case and providing partners with slightly higher support (e.g., technical assistance and grants).
- **Adopt “push/pull” approaches.** A common misconception of MSD is that it is relevant only for

small-scale producers and firms with existing assets. Yet, market systems approaches can also benefit vulnerable populations, building capacities for market engagement (“push”) and expanding economic opportunities (“pull”). This can be achieved by collaboration and coordination across the portfolio, such as linking market development activities with adaptive social protection and risk management programs that focus on reaching and boosting the means of the poorest populations, while integrating climate-smart agriculture, sustainable productivity, asset creation, nutrition, and market engagement.

- **Deliberately explore opportunities for women, youth, and marginalized groups.** Programming is more likely to benefit women, youth, and other marginalized groups when it deliberately searches for ways to better link them to markets. Efforts such as policies to improve land tenure, facilitation to promote market-based skills development, support to create savings groups, aggregate production, and other evidence-based collective arrangements can help women, youth, and other marginalized groups overcome constraints to engaging in and benefiting from market systems as producers, business owners, and workers.

2. Measure Results

Facilitation presents particular challenges for monitoring and evaluation: there’s the additional unpredictability of outcomes in relying on others to change their behavior, and interventions tend to be slower than direct delivery, may work at different levels (households, firms, value chains, and enabling environments), and may evolve over time. Measuring results in this context may involve efforts to:

- **Use collaborative learning and adaptive management.** Shared learning and adaptive management are essential to succeed in dynamic contexts, like systems, and facilitate change through market actors. In an adaptive management approach, the activity has ongoing systems to evaluate how well interventions are leading toward expected results (including systemic change), and uses this learning internally and externally to adapt approaches. To drive sustainability and scale, it’s essential to incorporate shared learning with external partners and other stakeholders, such as regular pause-and-reflect sessions, and disseminate learning more broadly. See USAID’s [Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting \(CLA\) Toolkit](#).
- **Measure systemic change.** In using a market systems approach, implementing partners still need to use output or outcome indicators, which are important to holding activities accountable for measurable results. However, to learn how our interventions are supporting transformative changes, we also need to use monitoring approaches that capture systemic changes; that is, changes in economic behavior, relationships, and other measures of local actors’ ability to be more competitive, inclusive, and resilient and benefit from market participation. Possible approaches include the use of results chains, custom systems indicators, and non-indicator-based approaches, such as network analysis and outcome mapping. Consider how system resilience will be measured and monitored and used to identify learning priorities. See the GFSS guidance on monitoring and evaluation and [Market Systems for Resilience: A Framework for Measurement](#).

3. Keep Solicitations High-Level and Flexible/Nonprescriptive

Agriculture and food systems, like all market systems, are dynamic and complex. Thus, activities that use an MSD approach should be designed with flexibility to enable adaptation, such as taking advantage of new opportunities, addressing emerging challenges, and refining strategy and tactics in response to learning. In solicitations, consider not specifying target value chains/sectors, and instead letting offerors/applicants propose them. Keep the program description or Statement of Work (SOW) high level, stating desired outcomes and high-level intervention areas and omitting lists of specific interventions that can constrain proposed solutions or implementation. Limit any stated indicators and targets to required Feed the Future indicators, and select only a small number of high-level targets (e.g., at the IR level). Use the activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plan to detail lower-level results and indicators

to provide space for monitoring adaptation over the life of the activity.

Design Guidance

There is no single way to approach design that uses an MSD as pathways (intervention tactics); markets, actors, and challenges vary by country and context. There are, however, some proven, field-tested steps:

1. Begin with the GFSS Interagency Country Plan

Programming should align with and link to the objectives in each country's respective GFSS Interagency Country Plan, targeting aspects of the agriculture and food systems where systemic change is most needed. No single activity can address every issue in the Country Plan or a target system. Consider where each new activity fits within the overall portfolio in terms of contributing to the Country Plan and GFSS-wide objectives, and how activities would coordinate to achieve overall objectives collectively.

2. Identify Desired Systemic Changes

Designing activities starts with articulating the desired systemic changes—which translate to the purpose and IRs of the activity. Throughout the design process, it is essential to consult and collaborate with local actors to inclusively define desired changes that are mutually beneficial. Which systemic change can we help drive through facilitation that contributes to sustainable impacts? Articulating these requires us to understand the underlying constraints for system performance, and the untapped opportunities in local agriculture and food systems, that are relevant to the GFSS as initially examined for Country Plan development. The analysis that further informs this understanding should be iterative, with a higher-level analysis informing the initial activity design, followed by a more in-depth analysis post-award to inform the work plan for implementation. A few pointers:

- **Target underlying constraints, not surface constraints or symptoms.** Technical fixes may work in the short run—producers may get access to inputs or training, for instance—but won't necessarily address underlying constraints of why they can't get those inputs or training through the market in the first place. Therefore, after identifying market failures and other constraints preventing the agriculture and food system from being as competitive, inclusive, and resilient as it could be, we need to understand what's behind these constraints. Why haven't market actors had the incentives to resolve these constraints on their own? Why haven't youth and women participated? What is the risk environment, and what is preventing smallholders and other market actors from investing in increasing and protecting productive assets in the face of shocks and stresses? What is the nature of the disadvantages they face? Why hasn't the government invested in critical infrastructure or other relevant public goods? If the constraints can be addressed in programming, how can we ensure programming contributes to the development of sustainable market systems instead of generating dependency on development assistance?
- **Prioritize constraints and opportunities based on potential for greatest impact.** Taking a market systems approach doesn't mean we seek to work in every part of the system. Instead, we are strategic and keep our programming manageable by focusing on issues in the system where our investments will have the greatest impact. USAID's (2016) [5Rs Framework in the Program Cycle](#) provides guidance on setting system boundaries.

3. Define the Evidence-Based Theory of Change

Given the many possible pathways through which a market systems approach can contribute to sustainable reductions in poverty, hunger, and malnutrition, we need to provide an evidence-based rationale for how our proposed activities are expected to do so. This theory of change should address questions such as: Which GFSS IR(s) are we advancing through the activity purpose? Whom are we

trying to benefit and through which pathways (including entrepreneurship, employment, and/or agricultural production)?

This theory of change should be built upon a set of assumptions that include probable operating environment changes, a good understanding of the system's enabling environment, and other shocks or stresses derived from a risk analysis. However, it may evolve over time as our partners learn more about the agriculture and food systems in which they are working.

Programming in Practice

The Feed the Future Bangladesh RDC Activity (2016–2021) used an MSD approach to improve incomes, food security, and nutrition in Southern Bangladesh (21 districts, 138 subdistricts) by facilitating increased productivity through the adoption of improved practices and inputs, and fostering linkages to better markets. RDC worked in rice production systems, fostering diversification with higher-value, nutrient-rich crops. The activity enabled flexible value chain selection, with the solicitation specifying only rice as a target commodity and asking offerors to propose others to integrate. USAID finalized value chains after award per implementer analysis and Mission consultation, settling on groundnut lentils, maize, mung bean, sesame, and sunflower. This ensured value selection was based on the market context and actors' needs at the time of implementation.

RDC facilitated implementation through market actors, providing technical assistance, facilitating linkages, and, where needed, cost-share grants to buy down risk. Its technical assistance leveraged local actors, staff expertise, international research expertise such as the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Peanut, and regional study tours. RDC's grants used self-selection and a cocreation process, using an Annual Program Statement (APS) to source proposed solutions to activity-identified constraints to inclusive growth, such as access to markets, advisory services, improved planting materials, agro inputs (e.g., inoculant), and finance. The APS integrated inclusion particularly focused on women and youth. RDC cocreated activities with market actors who proposed concepts that were in line with RDS objectives and appropriate and feasible in the context. Across its lifespan, RDC worked with 43 private sector actors to implement 80 interventions on input access, output market linkages, mechanization services, finance, and information and communication technologies (ICT). These partnerships included innovative, multi-company collaborations, such as linking a bank to local agrodealers to facilitate access to credit for smallholders. The bank extended loans to agrodealers who then extended credit to smallholders. Agrodealers used a digital app to track farmers' credit repayments, creating individual credit histories that farmers could then use to apply for loans directly from a bank. Some partnerships integrated nutrition, such as engaging Chaldal, a large retailer, to source and promote zinc rice and host a cooking competition that used ingredients from RDC and other USAID Bangladesh Feed the Future activities focused on livestock and horticulture. RDC also leveraged partnerships to help actors address shocks and stressors, such as cyclones that increase soil salinity (increasing access to appropriate seed) and the COVID-19 pandemic (supporting Chaldal in upgrading its delivery management network while maintaining safe, hygienic practices and establishing an online portal to deliver food aid packs for donors and aid organizations who order the packs at cost).

RDC integrated CLA extensively, holding regular pause-and-reflect sessions, taking stock of intervention outcomes with partners then applying learning to refine interventions, as appropriate, and disseminating learning to inspire broader scaling. It integrated systems-oriented MEL, such as using outcome harvesting to identify systemic changes—and some unintended consequences—associated with the activity, including increased value-added supply agreements between buyers and smallholders, consumer purchasing of zinc rice, and access to inputs and mechanization services. RDC enabled 1,074,811 farmers to access new and improved products, services, and market channels (against a target of 500,000),

expanded commercial outreach in all 21 districts, and expanded output markets (buyer engagement) in 71 percent of districts and 36 percent of subdistricts.

The Feed the Future Mozambique Agricultural Innovations (Inova) Activity had objectives common to many Feed the Future programs: to increase equitable growth and incomes in the agriculture sector by driving systemic change that would increase the competitiveness of value chains with potential to drive long-term, sustainable, inclusive growth; expand the number of enterprises that can compete and upgrade their products and services; and improve relationships and linkages between those firms and other market participants throughout the agricultural market system.

Taking a market systems approach, Inova partnered with producers, businesses, and policymakers to explore ways to improve production and increase sales of cash crops vital to Mozambique's economy. Central to Inova's work was the cocreation of system probes, by partnering with local private sector firms to develop innovative and inclusive agribusiness models and demonstrating their viability to potential stakeholders. By encouraging private sector partners to invest in new business practices across three portfolios (input distribution, supply chain, and support services), the activity created a pathway for local actors to address inefficiencies in Mozambique's agriculture sector.

For example, the team worked with Casa do Agricultor, a national ag input supplier—plus more than 150 smaller input retailers—to develop Rota Certa, a preorder system that systematizes ordering, payment, and weekly delivery of the products the retailer ordered. This mechanism could allow 13,000 smallholder customers of regional input dealers in Casa do Agricultor's network, along with approximately 480 farmers linked by village-based agents to other input suppliers, to order, pay, and receive inputs without having to travel to urban areas or engage in more than one face-to-face interaction with a village agent.

Inova reached more than 100,000 individuals (mostly smallholder farmers), increasing their voice, choice, and control of accessible inputs and improved productivity; engaged more than 100 local businesses to improve access to formal market buyers/sellers for/to smallholder farmers; and leveraged \$1.8 million from the private sector, enabling partners to generate \$56 million in sales.

The market systems approach is well-suited to support shock-responsive adjustments because of its flexibility and locally led qualities. It relies on relationships with market actors, which can be quickly leveraged to respond to shocks like COVID-19. Market relationships helped Inova address a variety of COVID-19 impacts, including supply chain and retail system disruptions in urban markets, for the benefit of smallholders. For example, Inova partnered with AppLoad, a local software company, to launch an e-commerce application. The firm's application serves as a matchmaking platform, pairing private users who need to transport goods with participating trucking companies—think Uber for small freight loads. In response to the crisis, AppLoad launched a free “Trading Room” product within the app to drive demand for logistics services by helping buyers and sellers of agricultural products conduct their business, since physical markets were shut down.

Additional Resources and Tools

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For further assistance related to these Activity Design Guidance documents, please contact ffguidance@usaid.gov.