

U.S. FOOD AID WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY - WHY MONITORING AND MEASUREMENT MATTER MORE THAN EVER

REFLECTIONS FROM ETHIOPIA'S RESILIENCE LEARNING ACTIVITY August 2025

The Horn of Africa sits at the crossroads of climate disruption, conflict, and economic uncertainty. Across Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya, humanitarian needs are high—and rising. Communities are navigating cascading crises: droughts and floods, currency shocks, inflation, food insecurity, conflicts, and displacement. In this environment, development and humanitarian donors and project implementers face an urgent question: **how can we ensure the integrity and accountability of emergency response and resilience-building food aid in the face of compounding shocks, stresses, and urgent need?**

In Ethiopia for example, the U.S. government has made one of its largest and longest-standing resilience investments globally—channeling resources into food security, humanitarian assistance, and emergency response. But without the support to track, measure, and learn from these investments, good intentions may go untested, food aid may be misdirected, and opportunities for course correction may be missed.

This is why USAID and many other development partners have strategically funded monitoring and learning interventions such as the Resilience Learning Activity (RLA), that ensure accountability and deepen outcomes through measurable impact.

MEASUREMENT AND INNOVATION IN FOOD AID PROGRAMMING: WHAT RLA WAS BUILDING

From 2022 until early 2025, LINC implemented the USAID Ethiopia Resilience Learning Activity (RLA) in partnership with JaRco, TANGO International, and others. RLA served as a strategic platform to strengthen measurement, accountability, coordination, and effective targeting and scaling across USAID's humanitarian food assistance and resilience-building investments. RLA provided critical monitoring, evaluation, research, and analytical support to lifesaving humanitarian assistance projects funded by the US government in Ethiopia. Through large data analysis and data-driven targeting, RLA improved the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian food assistance and resilience-building investments, reducing waste, and preventing misallocation of resources, and making the US safer, and more prosperous.

RLA provided support to both U.S. government personnel and the projects they fund in Ethiopia to ensure data quality, define and harmonize indicators, and report on impact. RLA facilitated processes for the review of programs and activities, including data quality audits, evidence syntheses, and joint workplan reviews. RLA helped projects to anticipate and respond to shocks such as famine and conflict, routinely updating GIS mapping and coordination databases to ensure that humanitarian aid ultimately reached populations most in need.



Photos courtesy of Resilience Learning Activity.

One of the most important pieces of work undertaken by RLA, together with **TANGO International**, was the design of a multi-project, multi-geography **Food Systems Resilience Measurement Tool**. This initiative first established a typology and categorized each of the US government’s food assistance programs (programs which continue to-date, including the CRS-implemented Joint Emergency Operations Program – JEOP, and Resilience and Food Security Activities - RFSA) according to their focus and objectives (e.g. emergency food distribution, productivity support, famine prevention). We then mapped out a “food systems resilience pathway” for each category of programming and identified specific indicators for monitoring and reporting. Finally, we established acceptable measurement approaches, ranging from quantitative panel surveys to observational and qualitative approaches. An overview of the tool is available [by clicking here](#).

Alongside this, RLA implemented an ambitious **innovation and up/down-scaling component, led by JaRco**. This component didn’t just identify promising practices, but it facilitated replication and scaling of local innovations that showed real results; and correspondingly identified interventions that appeared to be failing and encouraged redirection of resources.

In our measurement and scaling initiatives, the goal was not to evaluate individual programs. It was to understand what makes communities and households more resilient to shocks and stresses—across regions, food systems, and types of interventions—and to inform programming in real time. Our measurement framework and monitoring approach was specifically calibrated to food systems given the centrality of food to the resilience of communities, households, and systems.

Together, these components drew on:

- A structured **learning agenda and indicator matrix** that identified core output and impact indicators, co-created with over 150 stakeholders over six months;
- Field-driven insights from communities of practice in areas such as market systems, nutrition, and early warning systems;
- **Recurrent monitoring surveys** to measure changes over time in the resilience of particular populations and direct food aid to those most in need;
- Innovation competitions, validation workshops, and evidence-sharing events;
- A system of **dashboards, mapping tools, and online knowledge resources** connecting evidence to decisions.

This wasn’t theoretical work. It was built to answer urgent questions for implementers and donors alike:

- What makes some households, communities, and individuals bounce back faster than others?
- Where are shocks most concentrated—and how does our food aid need to adjust to particular regional circumstances?
- How can we better target limited food aid by sequencing, layering, and integrating humanitarian assistance in a strategic way?
- What food security interventions are actually improving absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacity, and how?
- What innovations are ready to be replicated, and how can we drive that adaptation?
- What interventions are simply not working, and require redirection or discontinuation?

THEN IT WAS HALTED

In early 2025, RLA—along with thousands of other USAID-funded activities—was terminated. The measurement framework tool was finalized, the learning agenda and indicators were developed, communities of practice were guiding coordination efforts, the innovation dissemination model was active, and training sessions were building capacity in monitoring, analytics, and results-based management.

And then it all stopped.

This left Ethiopia's humanitarian food aid projects continuing on, but operating without a shared system for monitoring, evaluation, coordination, and scaling support. Large-scale humanitarian and food distribution efforts continue to this day (e.g. JEOP, RFSAs)—but without the monitoring, measurement, coordination, research, and accountability backbone that RLA built.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This isn't just an operational gap. **It's a strategic risk.** Not long ago, in 2023, the U.S. government suspended food aid in Ethiopia due to diversion and misuse. In 2025, food assistance continues, but now without the mechanisms to help detect risks, prevent fraud, and ensure accountability.

On July 16, 2025, the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa reaffirmed its strong commitment to food assistance in Ethiopia in this [press release](#). The U.S. officially transitioned food delivery in the north from WFP to JEOP, led by Catholic Relief Services—ensuring support to over 1.2 million people across Afar, Amhara, and Tigray. “There is no reduction in U.S. food assistance—only a more focused and coordinated way of delivering it,” U.S. Embassy representative, Tim Stein, stated. This continued investment is vital. But coordination, measurement, accountability, and appropriate scaling remain essential companions to delivery.

As the United States scales-back its own personnel on the ground and moves to regional or remote oversight models, the need for monitoring, data analysis, and coordination are even more pronounced. When resilience investments aren't measured, we can't know what's working or where to adjust. When humanitarian aid isn't monitored, it can go missing.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Despite its early closure, RLA delivered important advances in our understanding of food systems resilience in Ethiopia, and practical approaches to measurement and appropriate targeting, scaling-up, and scaling-back of humanitarian and food aid programming. These include:

1. A robust monitoring and measurement system promotes aid effectiveness and U.S. interests: Working with TANGO International, RLA developed a practical Food Systems Resilience Measurement tool that enables donors and third-party monitors to assess how different interventions interact to build resilience, their efficiency, and effectiveness.

→ This approach avoids fragmented reporting and allows for real-time analysis of what's working, where, and why. Assistance is programmed, and redirected, in a more coordinated, data-driven way so that it is delivered to people in need, when they need it avoiding waste and promoting efficiency.

2. Diverse approaches to food aid require customized measurement approaches: Food aid programs continue in Ethiopia, and they continue to be diverse in their focus. While some programs are oriented on post-disaster response, others focus on conflict, resilience-building, famine, and otherwise. Additionally, different programs focus on different actors (e.g. households, communities, markets, sectors, and infrastructure). Correspondingly, monitoring and evaluation practices require customization to capture what is, and isn't, working.

→ RLA's Food Systems Resilience Measurement tool articulated four different categories of humanitarian food aid programming, specific indicators, and measurement methods for each. Given RLA's premature closure, this tool has so far gone unimplemented.

3. Coordination of food aid is essential and must combine cutting-edge technology and real-time visualization with good old-fashioned human interaction: RLA employed a small arsenal of approaches to ensure that food aid was coordinated. These tools helped program managers understand, for example, when and where it was appropriate for emergency food assistance projects just as JEOP, to enter and exit, whom programming should be handed off to, and how.

→ Communities of practice and learning events on topics such as early warning systems drew hundreds of participants from scores of projects and initiatives. Although RLA has been officially closed, we continue to support the online presence of the RLA Portal, Resilience Partners Dashboard, and mWater platform. We are however currently unable to continue updating dynamic GIS maps and other coordination tools that are essential for real-time coordination purposes, especially those that are so important in response to human and natural disasters.

WHAT COMES NEXT

The momentum behind RLA's work may have been interrupted—but **the need for measurement, coordination, scaling and hand-off support has only grown**. In a context where humanitarian crises are ongoing and resilience remains both a policy goal and a lived reality, the systems we build to understand, adapt, and improve are more essential than ever.

The Resilience Learning Activity leaves behind not just unfinished work, but a strong foundation: a tested framework for measuring food systems resilience across projects and geographies, tools for facilitating coordination of food aid, and validated innovations ready for wider application.

There is now an opportunity for others to carry this work forward—by strengthening measurement, lifting up promising local practices, and creating space for field-driven learning to inform programming.

Organizations like LINC, JaRco, TANGO, and Acacia Global remain committed to this mission and stand ready to contribute where our experience can help:

- Supporting the uptake of the Food Systems Resilience Measurement Framework tool and associated third party monitoring methods such as recurrent monitoring surveys and qualitative approaches;
- Sharing replicable models and insights generated through regional collaboration;
- Working with implementers, funders, and policymakers to embed learning and innovation into ongoing resilience efforts;
- Reactivation of important tools for coordination, such as the RLA Portal, dynamic GIS maps, the mWater platform, among others.

This is not about restarting a project; it's about resuming a mission. If we want humanitarian food aid and resilience programming to be effective, we must invest in the systems that make monitoring, evaluation, adaptation, and accountability possible.

EXPLORE MORE FROM RLA

Explore RLA's multi-media resilience resources and materials by visiting our [project page](#) on the LINC website. To learn more, contact Patrick Sommerville at psommerville@linclocal.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This white paper is the joint collaboration of several leading experts in food security, humanitarian assistance, and resilience programming, all of whom have been central to the success of the Resilience Learning Activity in Ethiopia, including: Patrick Sommerville (Managing Partner, LINC), Bersabeh Beyene (Founder, Acacia Global), Tim Frankenberger (President, TANGO), Tsegahun Tessema (President, JaRco), and Aaron Spencer (Regional Partnership Lead, Global Green Growth Institute).