



# TAKING THE TIME TO FINE-TUNE: REFINEMENT PERIODS

## “How-To” Guide for Using Refinement Periods



### What is a refinement period?

A specific post-award phase, often three to 12 months<sup>1</sup>, that precedes activity implementation and focuses on capacity strengthening, planning, and learning with a new partner.

The refinement period allows the prime partner (and sub-partners in some cases) to:



Review existing literature and **conduct formative research** on evidence and knowledge gaps.



**Engage meaningfully with the community** to enable participation and feedback, enhance M/B/OU understanding of local needs, and create shared ownership and accountability.



**Explore the operational and policy environments** to better understand how to mitigate challenges and leverage opportunities.



**Conduct co-creation<sup>2</sup>** to access expertise across a variety of organizations,<sup>3</sup> test and validate new ideas, build consensus, and catalyze collective action and commitments.



Use small-scale **operational research** to pilot strategies for implementation and coordination.



**Refine the theory of change and the implementation plans** through consultations.



**Prepare for implementation** through hiring, staff training, and procuring goods and services.



Address special award conditions through **capacity strengthening** of systems and processes.


<sup>1</sup> The time frame depends on the needs of the activity, the local context, and the partners—at the discretion of the Agreement or Contracting Officer (AO/CO).  
<sup>2</sup> [Co-Creation: an Interactive Guide](#)  
<sup>3</sup> Participants may be any type of individual or organization: civil society, private sector, government, youth, persons with disability, faith-based organizations, academic institutions, beneficiaries, donors, or other.



## Deciding How and When to Use a Refinement Period

Refinement periods must be written into award language. They can be announced in a Request for Information or Concept Note to allow potential partners to plan accordingly, or they can be added later if the M/B/OU determines closer to award time that they could be valuable.

## The Continuing Application Approach

Some M/B/OU's choose to build in a **decision point**  between the refinement period and full implementation of the activity in case the refinement period reveals implementation is not possible, positive outcomes are unlikely, or partner capacity strengthening is not progressing as planned.

### Continuing Application Steps:

- 1** Award establishes a refinement period (Phase I) with clear objectives, specifying that activation of Phase II depends on availability of funds and Phase I program effectiveness.
- 2** M/B/OU monitors progress toward Phase I objectives; at end of phase, partner presents results.
- 3** M/B/OU assesses results against objectives and decides whether to proceed to Phase II (full implementation). 
- 4** If decision is positive, M/B/OU formulates objectives for second phase and requests a revised program description and detailed budget from partner.
- 5** Partner submits revised materials.
- 6** M/B/OU requests additional revisions or accepts submission and awards a second phase.



## Benefits of a Refinement Period

USAID and the new partner can build a **stronger, more productive and meaningful working relationship** by co-investing time into capacity strengthening for better, more sustainable solutions.







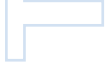

### Getting to an Award Faster

The refinement period can be beneficial to:

AO/CO	USAID Activity Planner	Implementing Partner
Can reduce procurement action lead time because some usual pre-award work shifts to post-award.	Speeds up design, because some intervention details are researched and finalized after award.	Allows for invoicing during final stages of activity design, which can benefit partners with limited resources.

### Mitigating Risk

With the continuing application, USAID mitigates the risk of working with new partners by limiting the initial dollar amount of the award to the cost of the refinement period.

-   Be specific with deliverable requirements, and budget appropriately.
-   Clearly communicate the continuing application process and expectations to partners.
-   Be realistic with timelines: A three-month refinement period may not be enough time for a recipient to complete all required activities to advance to Phase II.
-   Be strategic in monitoring and evaluation of refinement period outcomes.



## Additional Resources

- + [Sample Award Language When Using the Continuing Application Approach](#)
- + [How-to Note on Collaborative Activity Redesign](#)
- + [The Refine and Implement Pilot: USAID Food for Peace's Approach to Adaptable Mechanisms](#)

This document is a product of the Partnerships Incubator, a USAID-funded project of Kaizen, a Tetra Tech company. The Incubator works hand-in-hand with USAID to strengthen partner engagement, lower barriers to partner understanding, and improve the capacity of partners to work with USAID—all to multiply the Agency's development impact around the world.