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## SUPPLEMENTAL GUIDE 3

# Prioritizing and Selecting Strategic Approaches in USAID Biodiversity Programming



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**Front cover:** Anti-poaching group patrolling a wildlife corridor near Bardiya, Nepal. Photo credit: USAID.

**Back cover:** Gorilla with the Rushegura group in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda. Photo credit: Jason Houston for USAID.

**Prepared by:** Caroline Stem and Vinaya Swaminathan, Foundations of Success; and Marco Flores, USAID.

**Submitted by:** Elizabeth Lauck, Environmental Incentives, LLC

**Submitted to:** Colin Holmes, Contracting Officer's Representative  
USAID Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment  
Office of Forestry and Biodiversity

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# I. INTRODUCTION

This document provides supplementary, in-depth but targeted guidance to assist United States Agency for International Development (USAID) staff and implementing partners as they complete the biodiversity program design process described in USAID's three [Biodiversity How-To Guides](#).<sup>1</sup> These how-to guides have been developed to help design teams, program managers, and implementing partners systematically approach biodiversity conservation design, planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning within USAID's Program Cycle, and in compliance with the Agency's Biodiversity Policy.

This guide supplements *Biodiversity How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming*. Step 4 (Brainstorming Strategic Approaches) in How-To Guide 2 involves generating a suite of potential strategic approaches for a design team to consider. Step 5 in How-To Guide 2 introduces the practice of prioritizing and selecting among these draft strategic approaches but does not provide in-depth guidance on the process and criteria for doing so. This supplemental guide provides more detailed, step-by-step guidance to help program<sup>2</sup> design teams prioritize and select strategic approaches.

This supplemental guide outlines the following steps:

- Step 1: Rate each strategic approach for potential impact and feasibility
- Step 2: Discard ineffective strategic approaches
- Step 3: Rank remaining strategic approaches relative to one another
- Step 4: Choose the “final” set of strategic approaches
- Step 5: Revisit your strategic approaches

This document also includes a series of tips to help guide teams in this important process.

This supplemental guide uses the same fictitious example project – the Grand River project – as used in the three Biodiversity How-To Guides. The Grand River project example's purpose links to a fictitious Country Development Cooperation Strategy component – an Intermediate Result on “Biodiversity conservation for improved well-being of targeted rural communities.” Although fictitious, the example is based on real-life conservation contexts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> USAID has developed three Biodiversity How-To Guides to assist USAID staff in implementing the Biodiversity Policy as they program biodiversity funds: 1) [Developing Situation Models in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#); 2) [Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#); and 3) [Defining Outcomes and Indicators for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#). These How-To guides are based on requirements of the USAID Program Cycle and concepts from [The Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation](#), a set of best practices for adaptive management developed by the [Conservation Measures Partnership](#) (of which USAID is a member) and widely used in the conservation community.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this document, the terms “program” or “programming” are used as general terms to encompass USAID project and activity levels.

<sup>3</sup> The Grand River project example is a teaching example and should not be interpreted as an endorsement of any specific thematic or technical decisions.

## II. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PRIORITIZE STRATEGIC APPROACHES?

A strategic approach is a set of actions with a common focus that work together to address specific threats, drivers, and/or opportunities in order to achieve a set of relevant results. A good strategic approach meets the following criteria:<sup>4</sup>

**Linked** – Directly affects one or more critical factors in the situation model

**Focused** – Outlines specific courses of action that need to be carried out

**Feasible** – Can likely be accomplished in light of the program's resources and constraints

**Appropriate** – Acceptable to and fitting within United States Government regulations and host country and/or site-specific cultural, social, and biological norms

*Determining which actions to take is arguably the most important step in the conservation planning process.* Yet, design teams often develop their conservation programs based on what they know how to do – not necessarily what is most *strategic* to do. Going through an evidence-based prioritization process will help teams systematically assess the potential value of different strategic approaches and select those that are likely to have the greatest impact.



David Marcelo of the Kalahan Educational Foundation discusses various conservation enterprise strategic approaches and land management over time using a handcrafted 3D map at the Kalahan Educational Foundation dorms, Imugan, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Photo credit: Jason Houston.

<sup>4</sup> Design teams may want to consider other criteria, such as how well the proposed strategic approach contributes to country strategy priorities, political feasibility, or the urgency of taking action.

### III. STEPS TO PRIORITIZING STRATEGIC APPROACHES

This supplemental guide assumes design teams have already completed a situation/problem analysis to understand their context and possibly developed a situation model (see Biodiversity How-To Guide 1: Developing Situation Models for USAID Biodiversity Programming) and brainstormed strategic approaches to help reduce high-priority threats (see How-To Guide 2). At this point, they will be ready to prioritize their strategic approaches following the five steps below. As with other phases in the Program Cycle, it is important that the design team considers available evidence when choosing and rating their strategic approaches.<sup>5</sup>

#### Step 1: Rate each strategic approach for potential impact and feasibility

This first step helps the design team make initial decisions about candidate strategic approaches by rating each strategic approach for two key criteria: “potential impact” and “feasibility.” These criteria and suggested rating categories follow.

**Potential Impact** – The degree to which the strategic approach (if implemented) will lead to desired changes in the program situation. There are two dimensions reflected in this rating: probability of positive impact and magnitude of change. Teams must mentally integrate these into their rating.

- **Low** – The strategic approach will probably not contribute to meaningful threat mitigation or biodiversity focal interest restoration.
- **Medium** – The strategic approach could possibly help mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.
- **High** – The strategic approach is likely to help mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.
- **Very High** – The strategic approach is very likely to completely mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.

*If the team is using Miradi Software, it will calculate these initial ratings.*

**Feasibility** – Degree to which the design team could implement the strategic approach within likely time, financial, staffing, ethical, and other constraints.

- **Low** – The strategic approach is not ethically, technically, OR financially feasible.
- **Medium** – The strategic approach is ethically feasible, but either technically OR financially difficult without substantial additional resources.
- **High** – The strategic approach is ethically and technically feasible, but may require some additional financial resources.
- **Very High** – The strategic approach is ethically, technically, AND financially feasible.

In some cases, a design team may find the criteria of potential impact and feasibility to be insufficient to prioritize strategic approaches and may wish to adjust the criteria to make them more relevant. For example, a design team that has difficulty considering the multiple dimensions of feasibility may decide to split that criterion into “economic feasibility” and “technical feasibility.”

*Although it may be tempting to use many criteria for ratings and rankings, using more than three criteria leads to more work with little or no increase in spread across summary scores.*

If a team does make adjustments, it is important to clearly define the criterion and its rating categories so that team members interpret them the same way. Table 1 on page 7 provides a potential approach to develop an initial summary rating.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the use of evidence, see *Evidence in Action*.

<sup>6</sup> To facilitate design teams in implementing this step, see Discussion Worksheet on Determining Strategic Approaches in the Annex.



Table 1: Summary ratings to assess the potential impact and feasibility of candidate strategic approaches

|             |           | Potential Impact |                |                |                |
|-------------|-----------|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|             |           | Low              | Medium         | High           | Very High      |
| Feasibility | Low       | Ineffective      | Ineffective    | Ineffective    | Ineffective    |
|             | Medium    | Ineffective      | Less effective | Less effective | Less effective |
|             | High      | Ineffective      | Less effective | Effective      | Effective      |
|             | Very High | Ineffective      | Less effective | Effective      | Very Effective |

In a workshop or multi-stakeholder setting, a design team may find that it has many strategic approaches to prioritize, and/or that the team may want to more actively engage participants in the meeting. In this type of situation, it can be very effective to work in small groups to rate sub-sets of strategic approaches against the potential impact and feasibility criteria. These small groups serve as an initial filter to identify good candidate strategic approaches to address high-priority threats and eliminate strategic approaches likely to be ineffective (see Step 2 below). Then, when the broader group reconvenes to discuss and further prioritize strategic approaches (see Step 3 on page 8) shared by the small groups, their discussion can be more focused and productive.

## Step 2: Discard ineffective strategic approaches

Once the team has a summary rating for each strategic approach, it should eliminate any that are rated as “ineffective,” as these strategic approaches are likely to have little impact and/or are not feasible. The team should also seriously consider taking forward strategic approaches rated as “very effective” or “effective.” The gray area will be for those strategic approaches rated as “less effective.” Sometimes that rating might reflect certain assumptions and conditions that, if met, could move the strategic approach into the “effective” range (or conversely, if not met, could lead to an ineffective strategic approach). Figure 1 shows the initial rating the Grand River project design team did for strategic approaches to address overfishing (see How-To Guide 2).

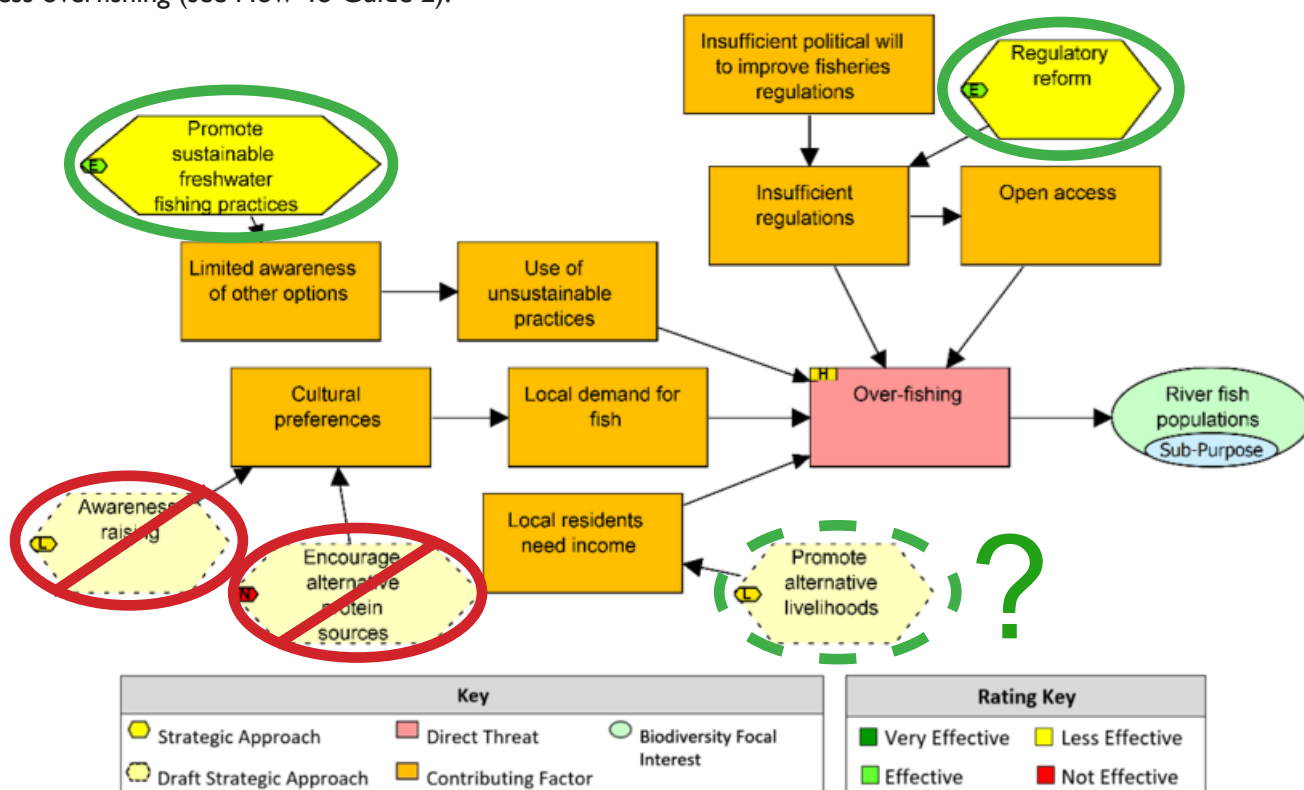


Figure 1: Initial prioritization of draft strategic approaches to address overfishing in the Grand River project example.

## Step 3: Rank remaining strategic approaches relative to one another

The design team now has a narrowed list of potential strategic approaches across all high-rated threats. However, it is likely this list is still more ambitious than what the team can accomplish with its resources. The team should do another prioritization process, assessing strategic approaches relative to one another. They could do this informally through a discussion process, or they could do a more formal relative ranking, assigning each strategic approach a relative numeric value. Regardless of the process chosen, the design team should clearly document the rationale behind its decisions.

*To do a relative ranking and keep the process manageable, the candidate list should have no more than 12 strategic approaches.*

The design team will need to first define the criteria they use to rank the candidate strategic approaches. Three criteria are manageable for a team, and they usually allow for a good spread among summary rankings. The first two criteria should be potential impact and feasibility. For the third criterion, useful options include:

- **Niche or gap the strategic approach would fill:** Extent to which the strategic approach will fill a gap not addressed by another program or organization. Here it is important to consider where the team can add the most value. This may mean filling a gap by implementing an entirely new strategic approach or filling a gap by providing additional resources to an existing approach implemented by another group.
- **Urgency:** Importance of taking action now. Sometimes there will be important considerations that could affect the timing of a strategic approach. For example a team may decide it is more urgent to implement a strategic approach that could help influence where infrastructure is sited, if they know the government is in the process of developing recommendations and would benefit from immediate input.

In the Grand River project example, the design team had narrowed down to nine strategic approaches for all identified threats. The team then ranked each strategic approach by potential impact, feasibility and niche/gap (Table 2). With nine strategic approaches, the relative scale went from 1 (lowest ranking) to 9 (highest ranking). For example, the team saw regulatory reform as having the greatest potential impact (and gave it a 9) and awareness-raising about jaguars as having the lowest potential impact (a ranking of 1).

*It is often easiest to identify the strategic approaches at either end of the spectrum and then fill in the rankings for the middle afterward.*

Note that this example includes some strategic approaches for lower-rated threats, despite the general guidance that teams should focus on higher-rated threats when defining strategic approaches (see How-To Guide 2). This is, in part, for teaching purposes to give the reader a range of examples. In addition, in real-world situations, teams sometimes develop a limited number of strategic approaches for lower-rated threats because these approaches could help ensure stakeholder buy-in or because they keep low-rated threats low.

Table 2: Example relative ranking for the Grand River project.

| Strategic Approach                                  | Potential Impact | Feasibility | Niche/ Gap | Total      |
|---|------------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| Promote sustainable freshwater fishing practices    | 8                | 8           | 7          | 23         |
| Regulatory reform                                   | 9                | 2           | 9          | 20         |
| Support land use planning                           | 7                | 6           | 5          | 18         |
| Promote better livestock management practices       | 6                | 7           | 3          | 16         |
| Promote alternative livelihoods                     | 4                | 5           | 6          | 15         |
| Conduct awareness raising about jaguars             | 1                | 9           | 2          | 12         |
| Support eco-certified timber programs               | 3                | 4           | 4          | 11         |
| Improve legal capacity for combating wildlife trade | 2                | 3           | 8          | 11         |
| Implement payment for ecosystem services program    | 5                | 1           | 1          | 7          |
| <b>Totals</b>                                       | <b>45</b>        | <b>45</b>   | <b>45</b>  | <b>133</b> |



## Step 4: Choose the “final” set of strategic approaches

A relative ranking is a tool to narrow a design team’s list of candidate strategic approaches, but the team will need to use its knowledge of their development context to inform the analysis and final decisions. The design team should have a discussion about the ranking results and consider other filters that may inform their final choices. For example, local Government or USAID priorities and interests may require implementing a lower-ranked strategic approach. Or perhaps a team might take on a lower-ranked strategic approach because it offers the opportunity to show an early success which may be necessary for building momentum and buy-in and for the broader success of the longer-term program. Factors such as available funding, political climate, and/or new knowledge about the program context may warrant the revisiting of the “final” strategic approaches.

*Narrowing down a set of strategic approaches is an iterative process, and design teams will often find that they need to shift some priorities at a later point.*

Using the Grand River Project example, the design team may decide to implement the top four strategic approaches (see Table 2), but it may also bring in a lower-ranked strategic approach, such as “improve legal capacity for combating wildlife trade” because combating wildlife trade is a top priority of the United States Government.

The rating and ranking techniques described in this guide should be sufficient for most teams to make final selections of the strategic approaches they will undertake during implementation. However, sometimes, a team may need to use voting techniques where strategic approaches are similarly rated, and team members do not agree about which to take forward – this may be the case when working with larger groups where consensus is often harder to achieve. One way to maintain a focused and productive discussion, while giving every team member a voice, is to use individual voting techniques (e.g., dot voting, short questionnaire). The final tally across all strategic approaches can aid the group discussion and decision on final strategic approaches.

As a final check for this step, it is helpful for the design team to revisit its suite of strategic approaches in the context of the situation model, identifying which parts of the model the different strategic approaches would influence. This will help ensure that key drivers that need attention are addressed by one or more strategic approaches. If the design team finds key drivers that are not addressed, they can discuss potential partners or collaborations to fill these gaps. This final check also helps the team step back and reflect upon their proposed program as a suite of strategic approaches that will work together to influence the current situation within their biodiversity program scope.

## Step 5. Revisit strategic approaches regularly

A prioritization process will help a team dramatically reduce the number of proposed strategic approaches. However, it is important to be open to adapting, as needed. For example, a design team may need to modify, postpone, or abandon strategic approaches due to funding constraints or delays or shifts in institutional priorities. Or, the program context may change, requiring consideration of new strategic approaches and/or an adjustment to the preliminary strategic approach prioritization. Revisiting a suite of strategic approaches is a healthy part of adaptive management and can be done during annual pause and reflect or workplanning processes.

## IV. RESOURCES

Conservation Measures Partnership. 2016. [Classification of Conservation Actions and Threats](#). Version 2.0.

Foundations of Success. 2009. Conceptualizing and Planning Conservation Projects and Programs: A Training Manual. Step 2A, pp. 73-83. Foundations of Success, Bethesda, MD.

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USAID. 2016. [Automated Directive System \(ADS\) Chapter 201. Program Cycle Operational Policy](#).

USAID. 2016. [Biodiversity How-To Guide 1: Developing Situation Models in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).

USAID. 2016. [Biodiversity How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming](#).

**DETERMINE STRATEGIC APPROACHES****Step 4 (from Biodiversity How-To Guide 2)**  
**BRAINSTORM STRATEGIC APPROACHES**

In this step, you should brainstorm potential strategic approaches that will help address one or more of the factors (priority threats and drivers) affecting the biodiversity focal interest(s). See pages 14 to 15 in USAID Biodiversity How-To Guide 2.

In the previous step, you isolated high-priority threats – and the drivers behind them – from your situation model. Now, consider which strategic approaches could significantly reduce a direct threat and improve the status of a focal interest. With your team:

- a. Begin by reviewing one of the priority threats and its drivers. Discuss with the team which key factors the team could and should focus on to ultimately reduce the threat.

NOTES:

- b. With open minds, identify a wide range of potential strategic approaches to address these key factors.

NOTES:

- c. Using notecards or another sheet of paper, group, nest, merge, edit, or clarify strategic approach ideas, as needed.

\*This discussion worksheet is to be used with *Biodiversity How-To Guide 2: Using Results Chains to Depict Theories of Change in USAID Biodiversity Programming* and *Supplemental Guide 3: Prioritizing and Selecting Strategic Approaches in USAID Biodiversity Programming*.



## Step 5 (from Biodiversity How-To Guide 2)

### PRIORITIZE AND SELECT DRAFT STRATEGIC APPROACHES

After agreeing on the number and variety of strategic approaches to consider, you will likely need to prioritize them. This worksheet will help you prioritize your strategic approaches through the absolute rating and relative ranking processes, using the criteria of potential impact and feasibility. See page 16 in USAID Biodiversity How-To Guide 2 and pages 6-8 in Supplemental Guide 3 for more guidance on this step.

#### Review Rating Criteria

For an initial strategic approach rating, consider the potential impact and feasibility of each approach:

**Potential Impact** – The degree to which the strategic approach (if implemented) will lead to desired changes in the program situation. There are two dimensions reflected in this rating: probability of positive impact and magnitude of change. *Teams must mentally integrate these into their rating.*

**Feasibility** – The degree to which the design team could implement the strategic approach within likely time, financial, staffing, ethical, and other constraints.

Next, use the rating criteria and the ratings matrix for effectiveness of potential strategic approaches from Supplemental Guide 3:

#### POTENTIAL IMPACT

- **Low** – The strategic approach will probably not contribute to meaningful threat mitigation or biodiversity focal interest restoration.
- **Medium** – The strategic approach could possibly help mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.
- **High** – The strategic approach is likely to help mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.
- **Very High** – The strategic approach is very likely to completely mitigate a threat or restore a biodiversity focal interest.

#### FEASIBILITY

- **Low** – The strategic approach is not ethically, technically, OR financially feasible.
- **Medium** – The strategic approach is ethically feasible, but either technically OR financially difficult without substantial additional resources.
- **High** – The strategic approach is ethically and technically feasible but may require some additional financial resources.
- **Very High** – The strategic approach is ethically, technically, AND financially feasible.

Table 1: Matrix for Calculating Summary Ratings of an Absolute Rating

|             |           | POTENTIAL IMPACT |                |                |                |
|-------------|-----------|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|             |           | Low              | Medium         | High           | Very High      |
| FEASIBILITY | Low       | Ineffective      | Ineffective    | Ineffective    | Ineffective    |
|             | Medium    | Ineffective      | Less Effective | Less Effective | Less Effective |
|             | High      | Ineffective      | Less Effective | Effective      | Effective      |
|             | Very High | Ineffective      | Less Effective | Effective      | Very Effective |

## Absolute Rating of Strategic Approaches

Fill out the table below with your team's brainstormed strategic approaches. Use the four-point scale (low, medium, high, very high) and definitions above to rate each strategic approach for potential impact and feasibility. Next, use the matrix above to help determine the summary ratings (ineffective, less effective, effective, very effective) for each strategic approach. See pages 6-7 in Supplemental Guide 3 for additional guidance.

| STRATEGIC APPROACH                  | POTENTIAL IMPACT | FEASIBILITY   | SUMMARY               |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| <i>(Example: Regulatory Reform)</i> | <i>High</i>      | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Less Effective</i> |
|                                     |                  |               |                       |
|                                     |                  |               |                       |
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|                                     |                  |               |                       |

## Discussion Points

These summary ratings provide the basis for further discussion and analysis of your potential strategic approaches. Which strategic approaches could USAID support that would (1) have high potential for impact AND (2) be feasible? If you have more than eight strategic approaches, you may also want to do a relative ranking (see Relative Ranking table on next page).

## Relative Ranking of Strategic Approaches

Your absolute rating should have narrowed your list of potential strategic approaches across all high-rated threats. However, if your list is still more ambitious than what you can accomplish, you can do another prioritization process to assess strategic approaches relative to one another within each criterion category. A formal relative ranking assigns each strategic approach a relative numeric value.

First, define your criteria. Using three criteria tends to work well – it is a manageable number for your team to rank, and it usually allows for a good spread among summary rankings. The first two criteria should be potential impact and feasibility. Useful options for a third criterion include:

- Niche or gap the strategic approach would fill
- Urgency

Start with your first criterion – potential impact – and identify the strategic approach likely to have the greatest potential impact. Assign that strategic approach the highest rank possible (e.g., if you have eight strategic approaches, assign an “8” as your ranking). Identify the strategic approach likely to have the least potential impact and assign a “1” as your ranking. Continue to fill in the remaining rankings, focusing on the extremes and working your way toward the middle. Repeat this process for each criterion. Add up the rankings across each row to get the overall ranking for each strategic approach. See Table 2 on page 8 in Supplemental Guide 3 for the relative ranking performed by the Grand River project example design team.

| STRATEGIC APPROACH | POTENTIAL IMPACT | FEASIBILITY | [THIRD CRITERION] | OVERALL RANKING |
|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                    |                  |             |                   |                 |
|                    |                  |             |                   |                 |
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## Discussion Points

Discuss your team’s results! Use your knowledge of context to inform your analysis and final decision-making. What other filters might inform your final choices?





U.S. Agency for International Development  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20523  
Tel: (202) 712-0000  
Fax: (202) 216-3524  
[www.usaid.gov/biodiversity](http://www.usaid.gov/biodiversity)