

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Context Analysis and Flexible Partnership in South and Central Syria

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The production of tomato paste, part of a temporary employment project aimed at helping people make a living, while also increasing food security, in besieged areas in Syria. *Mercy Corps partner in South Syria.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

The humanitarian consequences of the Syrian war have been far-reaching, and nascent civil society and community-based organizations have had to rapidly develop the capacity to partner with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver aid.

Mercy Corps' South and Central Syria (SCS) program supports local NGOs and community-based organizations to provide food assistance, non-food items, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), livelihoods support, and limited activities in child protection and education. Implemented with funding from three donors,¹ SCS takes a partner-led approach, whereby partners propose projects based on their local knowledge of what is needed and what is possible. Over time, aspects of this approach have evolved. For example, Mercy Corps has moved from working largely through umbrella groups and international NGOs to working more directly through smaller community-based organizations and informal networks of activists and volunteers. Additionally, as the SCS team came to recognize that many partners did not consider methods beyond in-kind distributions, Mercy Corps started to

¹ An \$11 million grant from the U.K. Department for International Development (July 2014–June 2016) for food assistance, WASH, non-food items, and livelihoods; a \$3.5 million grant from the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (October 2015–September 2016) for WASH and non-food items; and a \$1.4 million grant from Canada's Department of Global Affairs, Trade, and Development, now called Global Affairs Canada (March 2014–February 2016), covering child protection and education.

offer more strategic guidance to help partners think through alternative approaches, such as livelihood activities and pre-positioning.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

As traditional tools and processes for managing programs proved to be inadequate in addressing current challenges in complex and volatile environments, Mercy Corps took advantage of the opportunity to create agile systems and think strategically in the Syrian context.

This task has been significant. The team works through partners using remote management. Security risks make traditional compliance procedures too rigid and dangerous for an active conflict zone. Moreover, a nuanced understanding of rapid shifts in context is essential for supporting effective programs and responding to emergencies.

The SCS program deliberately built internal capacity to understand the Syrian context, analyze conflict dynamics, and forecast future events in order to support a more agile and strategic response, in part by forming the Humanitarian Access Team. This team draws on Syrian networks, social media reports, the knowledge of Syrian staff on the team, and observations of implementing partners to develop ongoing analysis and program recommendations.

The capacity for this contextual awareness took a long time to develop. The Humanitarian Access Team initially formed as a security team and was given space to learn during its first six months. The team developed an in-depth understanding of the dynamics in Syria and produced conflict analyses, but was not expected to provide any value for programmatic decision making during this period. Ultimately, the very presence of a team focused on context analysis and “big picture” understanding of the conflict influenced strategic debates and decisions.

The Humanitarian Access Team supported a shift away from the reactive model typical of humanitarian aid toward a more anticipatory approach that prepares for likely scenarios. This has been particularly important as the number and severity of sieges has increased, with humanitarian aid often arriving too late. Forecasting allows SCS to pre-position food baskets while access is still possible, ensuring that aid is ready for release when certain triggers occur.

Having this detailed understanding of the Syrian context has increased the feasibility of the requests Mercy Corps makes of partners and improves communication. The team is also able to offer more strategic advice to partners, exploring alternatives to in-kind assistance (food baskets or non-food items) such as providing vouchers or supporting localized livelihoods strategies alongside emergency activities. However, analysis alone would be insufficient to drive the adaptations that SCS has been able to make. Constant collaboration and diligent efforts are required from every department and team member.



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Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

Undoubtedly, the Humanitarian Access Team's dedication to building a deep and nuanced understanding of the local context and each partner's capacities helped Mercy Corps become a trusted partner and improve its responsiveness to partner needs and changes in its operating environment.

In a striking example, the Humanitarian Access Team's knowledge of a local court system in northern Homs helped the SCS program advise a local partner that was encountering problems with armed groups stopping shipments of aid. The partner sought extra funding to hire armed security for their distributions — a request that Mercy Corps felt could further fuel a cycle of violence. Knowing that the local court system was functioning fairly well and respected by communities, Mercy Corps suggested that the partner raise the issue with the court and ask for mediation support. Within a week, the court decided in favor of the partner and aid reached the besieged area.

The team's agile response in emergencies is also due to early recognition that Mercy Corps' standard compliance procedures were often unworkable in the Syrian context. For example, requirements such as collecting three quotations for procurements over a certain value are impossible to satisfy where there are limited suppliers and where partners could be put at risk holding or transferring such documentation. Early partners might say they could provide certain documentation, only to reveal later that it was impossible to obtain.

This led the SCS program to adapt financial and compliance processes and develop robust alternatives, such as a matrix of supporting documentation, to work with partners to identify what is feasible. Basing requirements on what is feasible has created a more honest relationship between Mercy Corps and its partners.

The willingness to be flexible with financial documentation requirements is accompanied by an expectation of improvement. Capacity development, always a core focus of SCS, has shifted from one-off training to regular coaching, facilitation support, and peer meetings. This approach has proved to be more effective and appreciated by partners.

Likewise, the program's solutions to compliance challenges and security analysis were possible as a result of a dynamic team with an evolving structure. Departments have grown organically and roles have evolved in response to emerging needs. For example, the finance and compliance team grew from two staff to seven. This large team size (relative to a total team of 22) reflects the unusual level of effort devoted to building partners' finance capacity. Such growth is unlikely to occur in programs that design rigid organization charts at inception.

While significant autonomy from external interference during the first year and a half gave the program time to experiment, make mistakes, and improve, the SCS team also benefited from strong leadership from an operations manager who brought an inquisitive mindset and years of experience with Mercy Corps, and engaged in strategic problem solving for the program. For example, he developed a way to allow Mercy Corps to hire Syrians, despite a regulatory environment that sought to prevent this. Careful recruitment, including a conscious drive to hire more Syrians, led to a team of people with diverse and complementary skills who are willing to try doing things differently.



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This adaptive process of learning and evolution creates a space for the SCS team to work in ways appropriate to the context, quickly responding to partner needs with clear answers, while understanding when and how to escalate issues for headquarters or donor approval. In turn, the team's clear understanding of its decision-making authority helps partners understand their own latitude for rapidly responding to context shifts and emerging needs.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

The inception of the SCS program was somewhat clandestine. Given general fears that sharing information might put activities inside Syria at risk, very little was communicated about the program within Mercy Corps or externally. This secrecy, combined with the fact that many of the early SCS team members were new to Mercy Corps, contributed to the separation of the program from headquarters, which helped it craft a different way of working.

Unfortunately, these factors also isolated the program from headquarters' resources and prevented cross-learning with Mercy Corps programs elsewhere. Mercy Corps is an organization that relies heavily on informal networks and internal relationships to access the support and quick approvals that can enable adaptive management. This isolation constrained the SCS program's ability to make requests to headquarters, resulting in missed opportunities to deal with issues related to technical areas, compliance, and donor relations.

Separation from program activities also hindered the team's ability to present information whose form or content could be easily used by the program team. Mercy Corps struggled with large amounts of potentially unreliable data. Vast amounts of secondary information on humanitarian needs in Syria proved to be a huge burden for information management and analysis. Having information available, but not transformed into actionable analysis, is a missed opportunity.

More recently, key staff visits to Mercy Corps headquarters and the addition of a humanitarian director with significant Mercy Corps experience have fostered better internal relationships and connections. Increased cross-team collaboration since late 2015 has also resulted in greater usability of the Humanitarian Access Team's products. The team has been working with the Information Management Team to overlay humanitarian data with conflict analysis. Reports increasingly incorporate scenario forecasting and recommendations.

While the SCS program's donors have largely supported its unique partnership approach, approval processes still remain a challenge. Certain OFDA requirements, such as its extensive process for approving all new partners and sub-grants, reduce Mercy Corps' ability to respond to the volatile Syrian conflict. The burdens and delays imposed by the process prevent SCS partners from initiating new activities in a timely manner. Furthermore, restrictions limit the pool of partners that the program can engage under OFDA funding, exhaustive processes for short-term vehicle procurement waivers put partners at risk, and departmental barriers within USAID limit the number of sectors OFDA supports.

Although DFID allows for notification, rather than approval, of new partners and sub-grants, leading to nimbler responses to developments in Syria, challenges to rapid responses remain ongoing. In June



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2016, the Humanitarian Access Team shed light on a worsening situation in eastern Ghouta, as armed opposition groups clashed with government forces, prompting widespread displacement. Although SCS was aware of the escalating emergency, it was unable to respond in a timely way: not enough funding remained under its DFID grant, and OFDA's partner pre-approval would not have moved quickly enough.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

As SCS continues to apply its learning and understanding of the Syrian context, programs such as its flexible financial approval processes are continually adapted according to feedback from partners to ensure effective impact.

Most notably, one of the program's longest-standing partners saw the strength of the flexible approval process when an emergency started in northern Homs. Observing widespread displacement, the partner requested permission to move activities into a new area. Mercy Corps rapidly gave permission, first communicating it informally so that activities could start and then following up with a formal approval process.

This nimble reaction was only possible due to the relationship of mutual trust that had been built between the partner and Mercy Corps. Over the prior year and a half, the SCS team had invested considerable time in supporting the partner's organizational development, with a staff member visiting the partner's offices twice a week during a particularly intensive period of support. This extensive engagement gave Mercy Corps confidence in allowing the partner greater freedom in decision making and flexibility within budget lines.

This stands in contrast to the partner's relationships with other international NGOs, which often request that quotations for every activity be sent first to their office and then to headquarters for approval. Minor procurements, such as purchasing a water pump, can take a week. Given the difficulty in predicting in advance exactly what support will be required in a specific location, Mercy Corps' flexibility allows the team inside Syria to react rapidly.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Mercy Corps' experience through its SCS program provides a basis for an initial set of lessons and insights into how adaptive management practices can be mainstreamed. Our findings demonstrate a need for dynamic and collaborative teams, appropriate data and reflective analysis, responsive decision making and action, agile and integrated operations, and trusting and flexible partnerships.

The SCS program's three adaptive capabilities — the internal analytical capacity provided by the Humanitarian Access Team, creative compliance methods to match partner capacity, and program autonomy to grow the team organically — all combine to support one another in various ways. The context analysis guides specific partner engagements, partners provide information for that analysis, the organic team growth has allowed both the evolution of the operations team to support partner



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capacity and the development of the program's analytical capacity, and the analysis helps to make the case for the program's autonomy.

This mix of capacities has not been enough to eliminate the constraints on adaptive management, but it has mitigated them. The result is a program approach that enables the flexible and adaptive work of its partners. The shift to pre-positioning and livelihoods programming in conflict zones also marks an important shift from reactive to anticipatory and nuanced humanitarian work. This would not have been possible without the program's investments in contextual understanding.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Building on its commitment to collaboration, learning, and adaptation, Mercy Corps joined with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2015 to launch Analysis Driven Agile Programming Techniques (ADAPT) to research, innovate, and field-test adaptive management techniques for the sector. To drive improvements in impact, we need to better analyze the dynamics of a given situation, anticipate how they might evolve, and be sufficiently agile to adapt to changes in context and need.

The content in this case study was drawn from research conducted for the ADAPT partnership. The full report and additional case studies can be found at <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/adaptive-management-case-studies>.

Mercy Corps and the IRC are committed to harnessing the potential of adaptive management by conducting adaptive management self-assessments in 10 country programs over the next year, making changes in response to identified adaptive capacities and constraints, and further piloting adaptive programming techniques, such as new design processes, funding arrangements, implementation approaches, and specialized teams providing context analysis.

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.

