

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.

## What's New? High-Frequency Mobile Communication Drives Resilience Learning in Somalia

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CARE's Somalia/Somaliland Towards Reaching Resilience (STORRE) project speaks with Saeed Ali in the Sanaag Region during the Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation, Reflection and Learning (PMERL) high frequency monitoring panel calls. *STORRE Project, CARE Somalia/Somaliland.*

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

CARE and World Vision are putting their best resilience programming forward in two unique projects in Somalia, and Tulane University is helping document and share what they learn. Resilience programming supports the ability of communities and families to adapt to recurrent shocks, but the approaches are also designed to respond to dynamic circumstances, evolving community experiences, and internal project/external partner learning. In complex contexts such as Somalia, characterized by protracted conflict, fragile government, a high-level of humanitarian needs, and recurrent climatic shocks and stresses, learning and adaptation are essential to programmatic success. However, this also necessitates a greater flow and exchange of information, beyond standard assessments and monitoring, so that learning is assessed, applied, and shared throughout the project cycle.

Working through a jointly funded Annual Program Statement (APS) award (USAID Mission in Somalia, the USAID Office of Food for Peace, and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance), CARE's Somalia Towards Reaching Resilience (STORRE) project and World Vision's Resilience and Economic Activity in Luuq (REAL) project have partnered with Tulane University to engage in an innovative research agenda to promote robust learning for communities, project stakeholders, and

the wider community of practice. A key component of this learning agenda centers on leveraging mobile technology to gather relevant, near-real-time information and community input, while sharing information with communities and partners for joint learning, reflection, and process improvement.

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

Moving away from handouts and service delivery to empowerment and sustainability as the basis to support the well-being of vulnerable populations has been the immediate programming objective and the longer-term goal of organizations like CARE and World Vision in protracted crisis contexts. When facing the immediate effects of climate change and enduring a protracted crisis, innovative resilience programming provides an opportunity for Somali communities to make progress in spite of recurring shocks and stresses. To move toward resilience, empowerment, and sustainability, communities and civil society partners must adapt programming to changing contextual dynamics and share capacity for finding innovative solutions to persistent and more frequent threats to livelihoods. Reducing vulnerability and building adaptive capacities in the face of climate-induced shocks and stresses is a long-term process that is affected by a multitude of factors and hence requires innovative approaches for systematically monitoring changes and evaluating impact. A core component of STORRE and REAL is to produce robust learning around resilience that is shared with communities, stakeholders, the donors, and others. Strengthening information feedbacks to changing circumstances and learning together to overcome new challenges will support resilience.

The traditional approaches of baseline, midterm, and final evaluations and monitoring program outputs are, as Michael Quinn Patton says, “unsuited to the turbulence” of programming in complex contexts and designing innovative resilience approaches. Frequent, timely information about the immediate outcomes of program interventions and how those interventions are sequenced and integrated with other interventions is at the core of collaborative and adaptive program management. With resilience-focused programming, it is also important to ensure that the information gathered is relevant, shared, applied, and critically assessed, alongside communities and stakeholders, to promote empowerment and sustainability.

Leveraging mobile communications and innovative technology, STORRE and REAL have designed integrated research projects to support adaptive program management, collaborative learning with communities and stakeholders, and reflective assessment practices for continual improvement.

The STORRE project uses CARE’s Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation, Reflection, and Learning (PMERL) process to help the communities it works with evaluate the risks they face (articulate their own needs), assess their adaptive capacities and assets, establish priorities in visions of change, monitor changes over time, and reflect on progress and process. The information and learning gathered through these tools are fed into community action plans, helping to prioritize community disaster risk management and climate change adaptation activities. PMERL committees then meet every six months reflect on progress toward their goals and assess changes in the context.

For REAL, the challenge giving rise to the adaptation was similar, regarding the need to ensure that information and learning were timely, relevant, and in collaboration with the communities in the project area. Working with communities experiencing frequent insecurity and operating in an area



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remote from the World Vision Somalia office, data collection and analysis around key topics have been an ongoing challenge for REAL. Many of REAL's programming decisions and strategies rely on data gathered with communities and, when working in areas such as livelihoods and nutrition, which both have close ties to environmental conditions, finding ways to improve the timeliness of information is paramount for adaptation.

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

CARE's STORRE project and World Vision's REAL project are piloting and sharing interactive mobile communication technology to inform program management decisions and give feedback to communities with smartphone applications.

STORRE is using live-call mobile phone surveys with a panel of users on a high-frequency (monthly) basis to gather household and community-level information about the changing context, needs, and experience on the ground, related to the indicators communities identified as important during the PMERL process. STORRE's work with PMERL produced 19 village-level plans to monitor community-identified outcomes (for example, all households in the community have access to clean water) and information related to context factors (such as drought or floods), while also analyzing the interests and roles of project stakeholders.

Each round of the mobile panels (there will be 12 rounds in all) contains a mix of new questions and a few core indicators reflecting the project's theory of change. During the call, the enumerator first reports on the results from the last round and asks questions to follow up on changes and trends. All members are then asked a core module of questions, selected by STORRE project staff based on the PMERL indicators. A set of questions based on seasonality (dry or rainy season) is also asked of all participants, as relevant to the timing of the call. Relevant panel members are asked additional questions to monitor specific project activities. STORRE also provides information to panel members on topics such as health interests, markets and trends, climate forecasts, policy developments, and upcoming activities.

The REAL project is gathering a wide range of immediate information inputs to program decisions from rapid surveys on a variety of subjects, including markets, youth labor, and "seed surveys." This is possible only with rapid prototyping and testing using Open Data Kit (ODK), a set of open-source tools for mobile data collection, to conduct rapid surveys on seed and agro-ecological system security. The rapid seed-system security assessment explores the information that households and communities need or want to adapt in the face of potential system shocks (particularly climate events), the sources of knowledge communities access to inform their decisions, and past as well as anticipatory strategies households adopt to protect themselves in times of stress.

The rapid surveys are programmed into an Android mobile platform, accessed through the ODK Collect application, and linked to ODK's server and data repository, ODK Aggregate. Survey results are automatically processed through ODK Aggregate upon submission of each survey for real-time data reporting. Where connectivity is a challenge, ODK Collect can securely store completed forms until the enumerator is able to submit them. Automatic data entry via ODK significantly reduces time and resource constraints, allowing an immediate focus on analysis and application.



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Although the use of ODK is linked to real and immediate project needs, the learning is also intended to examine whether higher-frequency and on-demand information lead to more adaptive and relevant timing, prioritization, sequencing, and refinement of activities that better fit the changing context. The basic idea is that on-demand information should promote more adaptive programming and improve communities' agency to take anticipatory action. This is an aspect of social capital and how the exchange of relevant, timely information can be used for adaptive capacity.

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

Somalia's rapidly changing dynamics and context present challenges to program staff around limited physical access to support community and project adaptation. However, the country's rapidly expanding mobile connectivity provides an opportunity for innovation around a high-frequency exchange of information. For projects and programs working to support the resilience of populations affected by climate change, conflict, or other shocks and stressors, this increased frequency of information exchange can provide critical information to support adaptive project management for more responsive activities and interventions, and offers the ability to provide participants with information to enhance community-based adaptation and crisis response.

The high-frequency mobile phone panels are a recurring activity, involving collaboration between STORRE, Tulane, and community members. Although this new action is still being tested, the panels are a novel innovation to the PMERL protocol, which CARE has used elsewhere, and will allow more opportunities for adaptation and learning. The REAL project has piloted two-way video interactions over 3G networks; STORRE may also take up this learning to take high-frequency monitoring and feedback to a whole new level.

Perhaps the biggest factor enabling these approaches to be brought into practice has been the commitment of all involved to join with Tulane researchers and their somewhat novel approaches to action research. Were it not for the close collaborative relationships that the projects had formed with communities and that among Tulane, REAL, and STORRE, the process behind developing these approaches would not have been possible. In the end, collaboration and learning is about relationships.

The approaches are designed to be continuously revisited and revised, so open and honest discussion around challenges, successes, alterations, and failures has been essential to ensure the tools and approaches are responsive and relevant. Information gathered and the process are analyzed to determine how to improve design and methodologies for better relevance and use. Frequent revisions to tools and plans has led to near-constant adaptation.

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



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The overall objectives for the application of collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approaches in Somalia are to improve the flow of timely relevant information among the APS partners (STORRE and REAL), the communities, and the research partner (Tulane); provide greater opportunities for learning and reflection; and support community adaptive capacity and adaptive project management for improved resilience.

Emerging results include the following:

- **Increased community input and feedback.** Program beneficiaries frequently share their experiences and ideas directly with STORRE and REAL program staff. Participants in the PMERL mobile phone panels share concerns relevant to STORRE programming, in areas such as livestock and water, allowing staff and communities to explore activity options and targeting. Program staff are acting on information, responding with feedback, and sharing this directly with learning partners.
- **Shift from emergency to resilience mentality.** The impact of the resilience approach is clearest in the shift in mentality of program staff, community members, and partners. This cannot be understated. Shocked at first there was “nothing” in terms of material goods being given as part of the projects, participants were skeptical. In initial qualitative monitoring and reflection, staff noted a noticeable shift as responsibility for diverse interventions (such as water, sanitation, and hygiene or savings groups) was driven by participants, contextualized in a deeply place-based structure and leadership. Moving project locations, focus, and even resource allocation have been documented in the monitoring of village committee actions and anecdotes from program staff.
- **Cross-sharing and replication.** Again acknowledging an evaluative heuristic from Michael Quinn Patton, CARE, World Vision, and Tulane support broader CLA objectives with reality-tested, results-focused, learning-oriented cases to inform resilience learning and resilience programming. We have already seen replication, with World Vision applying the ODK approach to beneficiary baselines and the transfer of VSee two-way communications coming soon to CARE projects.

**If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?**

STORRE and REAL both began activities in September 2014, although though the CLA activities in this case study were established more recently. Project monitoring and evaluation developed around the learning objectives helps track results and impacts. For example, STORRE includes such sub-purposes as “information analysed and reflected upon,” while REAL’s framework contains intermediate objectives such as “project implementation modified based on lessons learned.” Indicators and tools related to regular assessments and monitoring build reflection on CLA results into the projects’ logical frameworks. However, results are not only tracked and assessed through the projects’ monitoring and evaluation systems. Along with regular, planned reflection events at the community level and periodic, systematic reviews conducted between the APS partners and Tulane, we are constantly reflecting on the process and results of the activities for improvement and



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research purposes. A significant part of the learning agenda developed for the Annual Program Statement includes collaborative research into the CLA activities and their impacts.

Additionally, we will hold a widely attended partner-led learning event September 26–29, 2016, in Nairobi to share our resilience learning thus far and explore opportunities for additional learning that could be pursued in the future.

### **What were the most important lessons learned?**

The resilience learning approach and structure promoted and supported by Tulane provides tools and frameworks intended for double- and triple-loop learning among all involved. Single-loop learning documents and shares what have projects have learned in terms of problem detection and correction. This comes from high-frequency monitoring of immediate outcomes. Double-loop learning analyses and feeds back what APS projects learn about patterns of change from their interventions. This process documents and shares emergent, unexpected, or new learning about the resilience interventions. Triple-loop learning cannot be led by Tulane alone, because it focuses on what project staff and partners have learned about the way they monitor, reflect, value, and learn from their projects. The learning event in September 2016 is an example of the culmination of this third loop. Tulane’s resilience learning approach encourages group reflection for collective impact that builds consensus on effective principles that can inform practice and establish minimum specifications that can be adapted to context. Perhaps the most important aspect of high-frequency information exchange is the regular opportunity to review and reaffirm APS project values and commitment to making a difference in the resilience agenda.

Lessons learned:

- Either allow for continuous evaluation and improvement of the tools or really invest the time up front to test them.
- Learn some of the new technologies and be prepared for the learning curve. Access the great community of practice that exists around tools.
- Identify a strategy from the beginning, build consensus around the steps that need to happen, and then be flexible.
- When introducing new(er) technologies to unfamiliar project staff, spend time to make people comfortable using the tools. The innovative approach should be the challenge, not the technology that makes it possible.

### **Any other critical information you’d like to share?**

There are numerous substantive issues in adaptive and innovative resilience programming that need to be addressed through learning. APS resilience projects are very broad, combining risk management with integrated development in resource-poor conflict settings. Over time and through collaboration, we hope to better understand the following:



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- What are the key interventions that build absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities?
- Which capacities and capabilities are most important for achieving and sustaining well-being outcomes in the face of shocks and stresses experienced in these communities?
- Can we identify core interventions that catalyze resilience capacity building in most areas of the region, or is it preferable to outline effective principles and minimum standards that consistently promote resilience?
- Can we identify approaches that can be scaled to meet the needs of a country like Somalia, or is replication of smaller projects more preferable in conflict settings?
- Are there strategic interventions that launch the process of resilience building, and what are the tipping points in that process?
- Has community engagement, feedback, research, or learning identified any emergent pathways to resilience?

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