2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

How Restructuring and Culture Change Impacted Our Performance

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Group photograph of Rural Resilience Activity team during its annual workplan development workshop. Credit: Mercy Corps/RRA

Summary:

The Feed the Future Nigeria Rural Resilience Activity is a five-year USAID-funded program that seeks to facilitate economic recovery and growth in vulnerable, conflict-affected areas. It does so by promoting systemic change using a market systems development approach and strengthening the resilience capacities of individuals, households, communities, and market systems. The Activity is part of the United States Government's global hunger and food security initiative aimed at giving families and communities in some of the world's poorest countries the freedom and opportunity to lift themselves out of food insecurity and malnutrition.

After two years of implementation, the Activity's Budget Vs Actual (BVA) analysis was at 6 percent, and the time elapsed at 40 percent with 20 percent of the Life of Activity (LoP) targets achieved. To understand the reasons behind implementation challenges, the Activity leadership created a feedback loop with team members: the discussions highlighted that the current organizational structure impacted the performance of the team. The structure promoted siloed work and distrust among the team and impeded high-performing team members from carrying out their functions effectively.

As a result of the feedback, the Activity pivoted and restructured its organogram (a representation of an organization's structure in graphical form) to promote a culture of openness, continuous learning, and internal collaboration. By end of April 2022, exactly eight months after, the BVA stood at 57 percent on expenditure, 50 percent on time elapsed, more than 75 percent on scope. Furthermore, 75 percent of Life of Activity targets were met with very minimal change in the team composition as 95 percent of the team remained the same.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

The Activity's original structure was designed for implementation across various sectors including Youth and Women Engagement, Financial Services, Technology for Development, Market System Development, Monitoring & Evaluation, Resilience, Enterprise Investment fund, Nutrition, etc. Team members developed work plans for their sector that were intended to bring lasting changes to northeast Nigeria.

After two years of implementation, few tangible achievements were available to showcase the team's efforts, while activities conducted did not seem to be leading to impactful results. The prevailing culture culminated in weak internal collaboration within the team, lack of trust for shared teamwork, weak and non-intentional culture of continuous, joint learning and cross-learning, and sector leads working independently in achieving stated milestones and targets. This created unhealthy competition and bureaucracy, while officers within sector teams were not given the opportunity to provide input into strategies, work plans, and interventions.

The Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Unit initially suffered from a lack of leadership and strategic vision to drive results monitoring and measurement. This was partly a spill-over effect from the identified challenges faced as a result of the siloed approach to the push-and-pull activities. The unit encountered difficulty in collecting, collating, and reporting data from activities to make informed decisions and also meet the targets and milestones set out in the Annual Workplan and across the Activity's indicators. Learning and adaptive management were also difficult and rarely in sight.

As stated above, the financial analysis indicated poor expenditure, and it was evident that drastic measures would be needed to produce results. There was an urgent need to change the status quo and introduce a more efficient and effective working model that would bring about the transformation needed.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Mercy Corps as an organization has invested in CLA as a blueprint for fostering a culture that promotes curiosity, purposeful experimentation, deep engagement, openness to admitting to shortfalls or failure, the ability to debate strategy among all levels of staff, and make decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context. This approach enables our teams to minimize risk and capitalize on opportunities to achieve impact in the face of complexity.

The Rural Resilience Activity uses learning to improve the flexibility and adaptability of its intervention designs to uncertainties that are typical of northeastern Nigeria. Leveraging the CLA approach, the Activity created a feedback loop with individuals, with teams, and through diligent documentation to understand how the organizational structure impacted their work. This culture of openness and trust ensured that the team members had a safe space to share opinions and ideas and helped in identifying the root causes of challenges faced in the field and proffer solutions. This has been the model of the Activity since significant efforts were made to restructure the team management and leadership process.

The Activity has established feedback channels that include team members, participants, and private sector partners. The feedback has helped to improve evidence-based decision making and enabled the Activity to use the information gathered through joint discussions to make better decisions and adjustments to implementation. The Activity has integrated CLA throughout its life cycle which has rejuvenated learning and improved adaptive management.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

Before the restructuring, the Activity organogram was divided into sectors. The various sectors reported to the Chief of Party and Deputy Chief of Party where applicable. There was very little interaction between field officers and the Activity leadership beyond formal meetings. Each sector developed its work plan and milestones in anticipation that during implementation, the team would work together to achieve the Activity objectives. The officers in the various sectors were assigned the responsibility of carrying out the activities as approved by the various sector leads. Due to the lack of a clearly defined framework that ladders up work plans to deliver the overall goal and theory of change, significant disconnects were apparent among activities. Team members were pinned down by approval processes and lengthy meetings that yielded little or no tangible results. This was further compounded by COVID-19 lockdowns and underscored during the Activity review meeting when the finance team presented an insignificant expenditure versus time spent implementing.

To put the Activity back on track, the Activity leadership comprising the Chief of Party (CoP) and newly engaged Deputy Chief of Party (DCoP) had an open conversation with team members to learn from their experiences and identify the major factors impeding the team from being effective and efficient in conducting activities. The leadership created an environment for team members that fostered openness and trust-building. That culture enabled team members to give honest feedback about the challenges faced during implementation and to communicate what was working and not working. This feedback loop ensured that the Activity leadership had first-hand information from team members. The information collected during these conversations showed a strong linkage between sub-optimal performance and the current leadership and management structure.

With country office support, the CoP and DCoP as part of the initial process for pivoting informed the donor of its plans to pivot the Activity. Following the communication with these key stakeholders, preparations for the Fiscal Year 2022 work plan began. The Activity's leadership drafted a new structure, presented it to the team for their input, and gave an opportunity for team members to also communicate via email. This was finalized and communicated to the donor for concurrence.

To remove the silos, the entire Activity was structured into just three teams. The MEL unit, now changed to the Monitoring and Results Measurement (MRM) unit, CLA, and Communications team was coordinated under the knowledge management unit reporting to the CoP. The Intervention Facilitation Team, comprising all officers, was created, reporting to an Intervention Team Leader who reports to the DCoP. A Technical Advisory team with requisite specialists now reported to the DCoP. The new structure ensured that CLA works efficiently within a Unit, as opposed to being previously embedded in MEL, and now collaborates across other key units which include MRM, Communications, and the Intervention Facilitation Team. A Program Management Unit (PMU) was composed and meets monthly, to ensure quality implementation, coordination, and rapid problem-solving. The PMU meets monthly to review progress with the MRM team and ensure closer coordination across activities and geographic areas.

Officers under the Intervention Facilitation Team were each assigned interventions to manage. They developed concept notes and intervention budgets, which were approved early in the year. Officers are managing their intervention, as well as the private sector and civil society partners across the portfolio to understand the unique dynamics and business models adopted in each sub-market. The Activity allowed the team to try innovative delivery models and to learn and adapt. This CLA approach to restructuring has built the confidence of team members and motivated them to rapid delivery. This reinforces the evidence from the CLA literature review, 2020 conducted by Dexis Consulting Group that "high trusting teams generally tend to be high-performing."

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Before the application of the CLA approach, the Activity's organizational structure limited the capability of employees to showcase their technical skills and make meaningful contributions to the achievement of stated objectives. This was due to decision-making being the sole responsibility of the Sector Lead with little or no input from field officers. Communication and internal collaboration among the various sectors were lacking as team members focused only on their sector deliverables without recourse to the larger goal of the Activity. This structure also impacted the year's work plan where various activities were developed and implemented in silos resulting in overlaps and few results.

With the current organizational structure in place, the system has created a platform for employees to showcase their skills and enhance trust. Each employee is now empowered and trusted with the responsibility to manage intervention, budget, and report on successes and shortfalls. In addition, the pivoting of the MEL Unit from traditional M&E to MRM has impacted the efficiency and effectiveness of adaptively managing the program, based on quantitative and qualitative data generated from the lynch-pin intervention management checklist. The checklist tracks systemic changes in market behaviors and quantitative indicator performance and documents milestones and deliverables achieved. This has been a key driver for generating evidence for adaptive management.

During the recently concluded Pause and Reflect Workshop in April 2022, there was evidence that internal collaboration and cross-learning within the team had improved significantly when compared to the previous structure, and intervention areas are now linked to each other, thereby limiting the bureaucracy and hierarchy observed in the former structure. Due to this, the Monitoring & Results Measurement unit engages more with the team, and joint monitoring visits to collect data for an informed decision are now strengthened. This culture of openness, strong relationships and networks, continuous learning and improvement have impacted the Activity's performance, as staff now have greater opportunities to contribute to the success of the Activity.

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The CLA approach has helped in strengthening internal collaboration and openness within the team; decision making and adjustments in response to new information and learning (from the team) by Activity leadership have impacted the team's performance. The greatest impact of this CLA approach is progressing the Activity's BVA from 6 percent and time elapsed at 40 percent, to 57 percent and over 75 percent respectively, and target achievements up from 20 percent to 75 percent within nine months. These results can be attributed to the restructuring of the organogram, where previously, only the sector leads were empowered to lead the development and implementation of interventions to achieve the targets set by the Activity resulting in skeletal activities conducted and limited funds spent.

The former structure, which had the sector officers working under their supervisors to address broad, yet not well-focused interventions or activities, limited the creativity of the team who had little opportunity for input. This was due to a process whereby one supervisor managed so many activities under one sector as opposed to each member of the team being a team player for achieving overall "success" within the sector. This had a spill-over effect on the MRM Unit as they struggled to show results and progress towards targets against specific indicators.
In the current structure, sectors were scrapped and the team is structured around intervention areas to maximize impact. Team members now collectively develop and implement interventions, manage budgets, and document successes and failures, while MRM officers are assigned to each intervention to provide the needed technical support in data collection, collation, and reporting. We also have observed a significant improvement in how team members enhance internal collaboration and integration of the CLA approach and practices into their interventions. This buttresses the evidence from the CLA literature review, 2020 that "continuous learning is linked with job satisfaction, empowerment, employee engagement and, ultimately, improved performance and outcomes."

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

The main enabling factor that helped us respond quickly to the challenge was the support from the organization, Mercy Corps, and the donor, USAID. The buy-in from them into the Activity's request in pivoting as a result of the feedback from the team members was key. Mercy Corps provided the needed financial and human resources support in ensuring that the process of transition was smooth and successful, and the donor also accepted and approved the restructuring based on the justification provided by the Activity. The flexibility of the Activity to adapt to changes in context was key.

Openness and development of trusting relationships among the team members during information exchange was also an enabling factor. The team was open to giving honest feedback on what was working and not working, and their feedback helped in the identification of the root causes of failure and proffering solutions. The dedicated leadership of the Activity and the commitment to continuous learning and improvement played a major role that impacted the success of the Activity.

One obstacle that almost impeded the pivoting was the pushback and reluctance from some of the sector leads to buy in to the new approach, perceiving that their decision-making powers would be limited to make contributions and inputs to the Activity with the officers. The leadership of the Activity was able to convince them to see the bigger picture in the restructuring and they were, thereafter, open to change. Today, the result of this CLA approach is benefiting the team and Activity as a whole.