2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Convening key actors to improve water market service in Eastern DRC

Name:

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Organization:

Mercy Corps/D.R. of Congo

Summary:

USAID's Sustainable Water and Sanitation Systems Activity (USAID's Activity), implemented by a consortium comprising Mercy Corps, Tetra Tech and Sanergy, is a 5-year activity launched in 2020. USAID's Activity has been helping local actors to develop the market sector to improve sustainable and equitable access to potable water supply and safe sanitation services in four focus sites in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

USAID's Activity's holistic approach includes research to enhance understanding of the impact and scalability of the water and sanitation sectors, improving the enabling environment for water and sanitation service delivery, and demonstrating the market potential of economically sustainable water and sanitation service delivery. USAID's Activity is facilitating local-led development to overcome several obstacles to durable and equitable access to clean water and safe sanitation. Some of these obstacles include:

Evidence base and knowledge gaps for effective water security and safe sanitation in Eastern DRC that hinder the ability of the sector to expand, sustain services and improve resource management.

Paining Governance interventions to implement the new Law on Water and supporting its National Policy on Water Public Services while also working to amend the vagueness of the Law about sanitation.

Communities' low knowledge level on Water Law and their duties and responsibilities in regard to water and sanitation sectors.

Lack of reinforced, sustainable and equitable performance-based business models in the target region that can prove the potential of the market.

Through the Collaboration, Learning and Adaptation (CLA) framework, our approach has focused on allocating the time and resources required to build relationships and facilitate local actors in defining their agenda. We worked to reduce the knowledge gap and inform potential investors, operators and authorities at all levels on best practices in the sector. Throughout the design and implementation, we continued to build in time and budget space for external collaboration and adjusted our interventions through all programming phases which generated a range of plans that we tested in small bets. This led to reaching major outcomes even though we started implementing our CLA agenda a year after launching.

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

The Eastern DRC is slowly emerging from years of conflict and civil unrest that have resulted in massive displacement of rural populations to safer cities and urban centers. The corresponding unplanned population increase has resulted in high demand for water services, among other basic needs. Additionally, the resultant rapid urbanization has not only overwhelmed aging municipal infrastructure but has also created the need for new infrastructure to accommodate growing service areas beyond historic urban boundaries. Humanitarian assistance and emergency responses by international organizations over the years have led people to believe that water and sanitation services are free, while DRC law clearly states that public water service is not free.

There were no legally or economically viable water delivery services in peri-urban and rural areas. Existing delivery models were managed on a community voluntary basis, taking care of cash collection, operations and maintenance. These structures usually intervened on a fix-on-failure basis with no support from local governments, technical operators, and with no access to commercial finance.

Local governments were not aware of their role as water contracting authorities. They had no coordination with provincial governments, let alone the national side. They had limited collaboration with key players, notably community structures, consumers, and existing service providers.

There was little information on the impact and scalability of the water sector outside of the urban areas. No public or private service providers as such existed until recently after the Water Law was passed in 2015. Available data was overlooked by analyses of only urban water supply. Regulations to address rural and peri-urban water service arrangements, informal providers, and voluntary community-based management were largely neglected.

2. **What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?**

External Collaboration

Technical Evidence Base

3. **HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?**

Technical evidence base. USAID's Activity first thought of tracking and updating the evidence in the water and sanitation sector in North Kivu and South Kivu. At the initial phase of USAID's Activity, we conducted a literature review of more than 500 documents starting 2020. The literature review gave a clear overview of the gap in the sector in terms of impact and ability to scale in both North Kivu and South provinces. Then we conducted a desk review to select 10 candidate intervention sites, based on criteria such as available water infrastructure, political and security stability, and consumer and influential stakeholders prioritization. This was followed by an in-depth site assessment which gave the 4 final intervention sites. The last assessment factored political commitment, people-centered socio-economic feasibility, current water service levels, communities willingness to pay, and Technical feasibility.
In the following phase, USAID's Activity conducted at least 7 studies in each of the 4 intervention sites. These studies ranged from governance aspects (Community structure viability studies, Conflict analysis and Socio-economic and political analyses), to Market System Delivery aspects (Market Studies and Market Operational Assessments), and Infrastructure aspects (Water Supply System inventory and Environmental and social impact studies). These various studies provided new evidence to USAID's Activity and key stakeholders on the appropriateness of management models based on the Law and the different socio-economic and political contexts, on key constraints and challenges to implement water and sanitation regulations, along with data on associated costs, lessons learned, best practices, challenges and incentive structures that are critical for service providers to effectively thrive.
This information was shared with all stakeholders. As a member of the Sector-specific Knowledge Management and Learning Platform (GCAS) put together by the National Ministry of Planning, We continuously used that national stage to disseminate findings and evidence collected throughout the implementation and get valuable feedback from all actors. The national GCAS platform is composed of different ministries with a role in the water and sanitation sectors, national and international development organizations, private and public sector service providers, commercial investors, universities, etc.
External Collaboration. We conducted a social network analysis and identified all key stakeholders with whom the program would collaborate throughout the implementation. These included local water Community-Based Management groups such as Potable Water Management Committee (COGEPs), Potable Water Users' Association (ASUREPs) and one privately owned service provider, YME Jibu in North Kivu. Overall, studies held at the third phase of the Activity served to set the ground for detailed planning necessary to undertake work at the all 4 sites, including initial infrastructure design, development of governance plans and service delivery plans to facilitate the implementation of activities.
In each intervention site, USAID's Activity met with different stakeholders to discuss the form strategic collaborations would take to advance locally led water agendas and to assess capacities of each actor, especially Government, service providers and infrastructure suppliers, to take up their roles and meet the demand. In this approach, stakeholders were involved at every level, from design to implementation of activities. After participating in their own capacity assessments, key stakeholders worked on their plans to strengthen their ability to take ownership and meet the demand. USAID's Activity worked to facilitate these plans. Over the time we organized 3 community consultations and 5 quarterly meetings with Governance Stakeholders and 5 technical workshops with services providers to review progress.

4. RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.

We know you may have answers in mind for both questions; However please choose one to highlight as part of this case story

A. DEVELOPM ENT RESULTS

The CLA approach has had a significant impact on our development outcomes. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders, promoting continuous learning, and enabling adaptive management we were able to leverage diverse perspectives and expertise, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions. The flexibility provided by CLA allowed us to adapt our strategies in response to changing contexts and emerging challenges, resulting in positive development outcomes.

CLA being a new concept for USAID's Activity consortium, the first year we did things differently, in an ad hoc way. As we matured in implementing our CLA agenda, outcomes also improved. With the new evidence generated, 85% of stakeholders reported an improved understanding of the water sector in North Kivu and South Kivu compared to the first year. Also, 75% of recipients of research products said they have used them to inform discussions or decisions in their work while 75% of key local stakeholders reported an increased knowledge of water law after training.

Compared to the first year, 5 new government institutions were strengthened to manage water resources while 2 private sector organizations were empowered to manage water resources or improve water supply. Over the same period the average score on the ease of doing business in the DRC index indicator related to water in the North Kivu and South Kivu moved from 2.36 to 3,3. Furthermore, the sector revenue generated through implementation of economically sustainable models reached $500,000 from no revenue in year 1.

5. **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?**

Several factors influenced the success of our CLA approach. One critical factor was stakeholder engagement. When stakeholders were actively involved and had a sense of ownership, it facilitated the collaborative process and enhanced the success of our approach. Additionally, a supportive organizational culture that valued learning, innovation, and collaboration created an enabling environment. Clear communication channels and structures for knowledge sharing and decision-making were also crucial enablers.

However, the major obstacle was that we started implementing CLA practices more intentionally and systematically at the beginning of the second year. Prior to that, staff had not incorporated CLA into their scope and work plans in an intentional and systematic way. We did not have a dedicated CLA personnel who could coordinate efforts with our other internal components or external partners. We didn't have a CLA agenda nor plan for a CLA budget to support its mechanisms throughout the first year. We did not hold any adequate Pause and Reflection session to adjust programming accordingly. This led to a lack of staff training to help them gain CLA-related knowledge and skills which resulted in an overall poor performance after our first year.