Measuring the Contribution of CLA to Organizational & Development Outcomes: What have we learned?

REFLECTIONS FROM MERCY CORPS

What did we set out to do?

USAID funded five partner organizations to examine the question: does a systematic, intentional and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes? And if so, how and under what conditions? Each partner used their $100,000 grant to design and implement a study in response to these questions over 20 months ending in April 2018. Given the documented challenges associated with measuring the contribution of CLA to organizational or development outcomes, each grant was an investment in piloting and learning from measurement approaches, creating a safe space for trial, error, and ultimately improving current and future attempts at similar research.

This document describes the key findings from one learning network member, Mercy Corps, who used an assessment process called Adapt Scan to identify how factors that enable collaborative, learning, and adaptive approaches result in adaptive actions taken by program teams, and the resulting difference in development outcomes. Mercy Corps conducted their research through their work with Managing Risk for Economic Development (M-RED) II in both Nepal and Timor Leste. The programs work in an adaptive way at the intersection of disaster risk reduction and market systems development.

What did the research reveal?

The core findings from this research take the form of eight adaptive "action chains," each constructed around a specific action that the program took to adapt its approach. They result from conducting an assessment, called Adapt Scan, in two different countries implementing the same development program, Managing Risk through Economic Development (M-RED). The actions' outcomes varied from the sectoral (e.g., increased uptake of cattle insurance) to the systemic (e.g., increased women's participation in economic development activities).

Each chain stands on its own as a case study within a case study, concretely showing how development outcomes result from collaboration, learning, and adaptation. Taken together, they demonstrate both the value of adaptation and the utility of the Adapt Scan process.

The action chains also highlight the factors that enabled the M-RED teams to take these actions. These included:

- **Program partners and context knowledge.** Seven of the eight actions were enabled by external relationships with government actors, other NGOs, or local community partners. Context knowledge is tightly connected to this, as

relationships with communities enabled the M-RED II teams to better understand the communities' needs and engage the community in decision-making processes.

- **Vision.** Five of the eight actions were enabled by the program's overall vision for a facilitative approach and integrating multiple components. Importantly, several of the action chains explicitly mentioned the team's understanding of the facilitative approach and of the program's role as being critical to putting that vision into action.
- **Culture and relationships, learning approach, and decision-making.** Four of the eight actions were enabled by some form of staff knowledge exchange, cross-team learning, trust, and open communications linked with decision-making. These habits enabled the teams to bring together various information and ideas to identify and then take adaptive actions.

This analysis is constrained by the relatively small sample of adaptive actions. Generalizations should be made with caution. The same program model in other contexts may rely more heavily on other factors for its adaptations, as would programs in different sectors.

Beyond the findings about these action chains, this project also demonstrated how the Adapt Scan process had the additional benefit of helping the teams to improve their adaptive approaches. Both of the program locations that participated in Adapt Scan made changes to their management practices as a result of the process. However, arguably, these changes—such as restructuring team reporting and decision-making—were more substantial in the program location with more limited prior exposure to the principles of adaptive management.

What methods and tools were used?

The Adapt Scan process was designed in response to two conceptual challenges in prior work on adaptive approaches. First, it addressed the lack of connection between the factors that enable adaptation and the outcomes of adaptation by introducing the concept of adaptive actions (disaggregated into new information-decision-action) as distinct from the factors that enabled these actions. The Adapt Scan process can attribute outcomes to those actions with greater precision than they can link adaptive actions to enabling factors.

Second, the process addressed the difficulty of measuring enabling factors by working with the program teams through an overall assessment of adaptive factors based on an established framework, before then connecting those factors to the actions identified.

Despite the value of this approach, it suffers from a few limitations. The Adapt Scan process relies on the perceptions of a program's implementing staff and partners. While they are able to bring a great deal of nuance to their co-assessment, and leave with a great deal of ownership over their adaptive management plan, their perceptions are potentially biased. They may overstate the adaptive margin, especially by underestimating what would have happened in the absence of the adaptive action. For example, the action chains assume "no action" as the alternative to the action taken, rather than navigate the uncertainty of comparing actual outcomes to potential alternative actions that were not taken. They may also mis-identify the factors relevant to each action. Finally, the prioritization of action chains by impact may have left adaptations that had negative impacts unexamined.

The Adapt Scan process is most successful under certain conditions: when it is applied repeatedly with a team that has exposure to adaptive approaches; when it provides value to the team; and when it is accompanied by supportive facilitation and open team communication.

There are also some key changes that could be made to the process in future iterations, depending on the objectives. For research purposes, this process should be replicated with different types of programs, especially those with more strictly defined outcomes, in different sectoral areas, and/or without deliberately adaptive approaches.

- **Adaptive factors framework.** This was a refined version of the framework first developed through the Mercy Corps and International Rescue Committee's ADAPT partnership. This framework formed the basis of team discussions on which factors enabled or inhibited specific adaptive actions.

- **Team survey.** Prior to each co-assessment, a simple online survey provided the process facilitators with additional data on the program's adaptive factors. This data was shared with the team during the co-assessment workshops.
- **Interview guide.** A detailed set of questions on all factors, as well as adaptive actions and margins, was used to guide semi-structured interviews in advance of the co-assessment workshops. The process facilitators selected sections of the interview guide based on the interviewee.
- **Adaptive action timeline and action chains.** During the co-assessment workshop, facilitators used a timeline visualization to help the team identify and discuss adaptive actions that they had taken. Priority actions were then described in detailed action chains, outlining both the action taken, the reasons behind it, and its outcomes, as well as the outcomes that would have occurred in the absence of the action.
- **Adaptive management plan and change logs.** Teams left the co-assessment workshops with adaptive management plans that would help them improve their adaptation over time. This included keeping a change log of major actions taken, their reasons behind them, and the expected outcomes.

These tools were generally effective for research purposes. Using lessons from this project, Mercy Corps plans to package a self-facilitated version of these tools as an Adapt Scan process that teams can run themselves. This will be oriented more toward the practical outcomes of the process, rather than the research objectives.

We attempted to addressed confirmation bias by bringing together multiple perspectives within each program team, and then using program monitoring data to validate program outcomes discussed during the workshop.

What else did we learn about integrating CLA?

The main takeaway from this project is the value of a process like Adapt Scan in helping a team to trace the factors enabling CLA through to specific adaptive actions and better development outcomes. This can demonstrate the value of CLA for research purposes, but just as importantly, it helps to demonstrate the value of CLA to the team undergoing the process. The process of analyzing enabling factors also highlights ways for the team to improve its own adaptive practices and ultimately achieve better development outcomes.

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