2017 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

YES! Structuring a Youth Employment Program for Learning and Adaptation

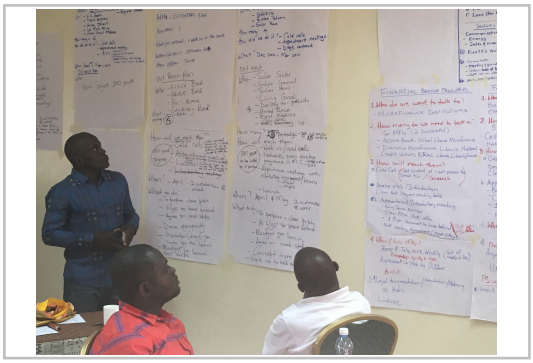

Photo Caption & Credit: YES! Team Retreat, Naivasha, Kenya (2017)

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Summary:

High rates of unemployment, working poverty, and other forms of vulnerable employment persist among young people in many African counties. Not only is youth unemployment an urgent issue, it is also complex and demands that employment programs be structured to respond nimbly to varied contexts. They must be deliberately geared toward experimentation and learning in order to offer robust models to enhance youth livelihoods.

YES! is an initiative of the Coca-Cola Africa Foundation implemented in five African countries in partnership with Mercy Corps, currently in its first phase. Once it became apparent that our initial approach was not the perfect solution for each country, we realized that our linear management approach and cumbersome M&E systems would not allow us to truly experiment and develop an effective, scalable model to improve youth livelihoods. We pivoted in two ways; the primary change meant pausing to refocus our overall strategy on structuring for evolution around multiple work streams, rather than one solution. The second involved shifting to a leaner M&E system to facilitate more responsive program management and inform internal collaboration.

These strategic and programmatic changes have enabled us to "place small bets" and more intentionally learn from these innovations, thus preparing the program to evolve overall as we near Phase II.

1. Which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Framework are reflected *most* in your case (select up to 5 subcomponents)?

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

2. What is the general context in which the case takes place?

The population of youth in Africa is expected to double to 830 million by 2050. Already, 40 million Africans aged 15-24 are out of work. Though there have been predictions that this demographic dividend will drive economic growth in the coming decades, many African countries continue to be marked by high unemployment, working poverty and other forms of vulnerable employment among young people. With only a third of the 10 million African youth entering the labor market annually finding employment, unemployment is a significant development challenge. However, not only is youth unemployment an urgent issue, it is also complex, as recent evidence from the World Bank (2016) indicates that only 30% of employment programs are engendering demonstrable impact.

Youth Empowered for Success (YES!) is an initiative of the Coca-Cola Africa Foundation implemented in partnership with Mercy Corps. YES! seeks to develop a tested, scalable model along with government, business and civil society partnerships to improve the employment and entrepreneurship of 500,000 vulnerable youth by 2022. In Phase 1 (2015-2018), YES! aims to impact 25,000 youth in Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Uganda. As a multi-country program, we must respond to the markedly varied contexts in which we operate, even while remaining grounded in an overarching program strategy. Through an iterative process, YES! has defined three work streams through which it aims to strengthen the livelihoods of vulnerable youth:

(1) Developing and testing a Core YES! model, which seeks to facilitate low-cost linkages to economic opportunities for youth. It does this through a localized approach based on
the most viable opportunities in each market
(2) The identification, incubation and scaling of innovative business and digital
solutions to youth employment
(3) Research and Thought Leadership

3. Why did you use a collaborating, learning, and adapting approach?

One of the three primary objectives of the first phase of the program was to develop an effective and evidence-based model to empower youth at scale. Given the diverse set of countries YES! operates in, we would be uniquely placed to design and test a model to facilitate youth linkages to productive employment -- with significant potential impact at scale.

However, despite a stated commitment to experimentation during this pilot phase, we faced significant pressure to quickly create a clear plan, and rapidly begin hitting determined targets. With such pressures, and limited precedents for intentional testing in delivering youth employment programs, it was easy to slip into a business as usual management structure around implementation and doing without pausing to reflect and pivot as needed. It became apparent that such a linear management structure did not enable or encourage the responsiveness and flexibility needed for experimentation to take place: our learning systems were insufficient, relying on rigid performance metrics; deliberate internal collaboration was limited; and our communication with the donor suggested there were clear-cut success pathways while we had not even worked out systematic ways to test and learn from our interventions.

We soon recognized that we needed to be able to learn from the range of our interventions much more reliably, iterate incrementally and become much more nimble as a program in responding to the complexity of our operating contexts as well as the difficulties posed when working on a wicked problem like youth unemployment.

4. Describe how you used collaborating, learning, and adapting in this case.

We made two major shifts. The primary change meant pausing to refocus our overall strategy on structuring for evolution around multiple work streams, rather than one solution. The second change involved overhauling the M&E system to intentionally inform learning that would enable us to experiment more effectively as was part of our renewed commitment to intentionally testing out multiple approaches.

Informed by adaptive management principles, we developed a program strategy which would give us space to place many bets by testing out different approaches so that we could intentionally implement a strategy that actually works in enhancing youth livelihoods. We structured the program around multiple work streams, but kept the organization cohesive enough to be able to comparatively learn and speak about the program coherently. We are working to move beyond static, prescriptive and comprehensive planning, to more flexible diversified planning. For instance, as part of our Core Model work stream, we identified three key processes that we would distinguish the model, but remained open to these being localized by country teams, and even worked to encourage that customization.

In order to support the change in program strategy, we needed to completely overhaul the previous M&E systems, which was cumbersome and unreliable, primarily because it demanded too much of staff effort, yet only a fraction of the data we required had actually ever been collected or entered, much less engaged with at the country level. The new system provided less data (probably about 20% of what we had initially required), but we were more confident of its accuracy, and it was more consistently collected and updated. With simple, integrated dashboards, in-country program managers engaged with the data more than before, and were much more likely to incorporate evidence into their decision making, even with minimal Excel expertise. The shift to lean data was also paired with the hiring of a full-time Results, Learning and Research Coordinator to offer support across all the country teams, and a commitment of budget to conduct action research projects when issues arose which required more detailed analysis.

Even so, while the different teams were testing and learning locally as planned, we had not been deliberate about setting up systems and facilitating conversations across country teams. This meant that while the teams often developed solutions to shared challenges, or generated insights relevant to the entire program, they rarely communicated directly with other country teams to ask for ideas or share their own. We learned that frequent and productive internal collaboration would not always emerge organically. We are now deliberately promoting channels for teams to engage, including joint workshops and webinars. As a more solid culture of learning and sharing takes root, we are working to invest time and resources in ensuring consistent collaboration, so that not only are we more effectively fulfilling program goals through our new strategy, but we are also producing research and insights for influence, which are truly grounded in implementation at the local level.

5a. Organizational Impact: What impact, if any, has collaborating, learning, and adapting had on your team, mission or organization?

The YES! program developed the balance it sought to achieve at the outset, and that Mercy Corps' system necessitates: diversity at the country-level with interventions from formal job-matching to entrepreneurship, and agricultural linkages to social enterprise investments in tech-based education; and a cohesive structure to enable comparative learning and the ability to talk about the program as one. Internally, this has translated as a greater inclination for testing at the country-level as they feel more ownership over the strategy and implementation. Furthermore, with private sector engagement that has proven particularly challenging for the program overall, we have found that teams have a greater willingness to both share and learn from each other.

The clearer numbers from the leaner M&E systems and production of research products also mean that our donor has much more confidence in our capacity, and has a more secure base from which to engage with the messy reality of our programming. Critically for us, we are now equipped to maximize on our unique opportunity to learn from programming across five countries. While still in the early stages, we are keen to generate learning products and have set up a platform (www.youthempoweredforsuccess.blog) to communicate our findings on what works, and doesn't, in youth employment programming.

5b. Development Results: What impact, if any, has CLA had on your development outcomes?

So far, YES! has trained nearly 6,000 young people, and has facilitated new economic opportunities for close to 900. But importantly, because of the revamped strategy and tighter learning systems, we have earned the space to experiment. One partnership under the Innovation & Digital work stream, for example, which would not have been possible under the original structure of the program, will enable the delivery of video-based work-readiness content to up to an initial 300,000 young people per month under a sustainable business model. While we don't know that this will work, we now have the systems to learn. If it does work, it would be a foundational part of Phase II.

6. What factors affected the success or otherwise of your collaborating, learning and adapting approach? What were the main enablers or barriers?

The biggest challenge we faced was around negotiating compliance with existing financial and procurement processes, particularly as a multi-country program. The revised strategy seeks to promote experimentation across five countries, each of which has their own structures to ensure compliance. In one country, we found a fantastically adaptive partner that wanted to test out multiple approaches, but our finance and compliance teams would not give them the flexibility to change plans without a stream of in-writing internal approvals, which would have slowed down the way that partner worked. In two countries, we have sought to develop partnerships with private sector entities by feeling them out and working with them to develop shared value solutions to youth unemployment, but this challenges Mercy Corps' procurement guidelines which traditionally require a competitive process like a tender. In all of the above, we have had to negotiate solutions with financial and procurement departments to push things through. In most cases, this has required intervention from senior organizational or program leadership, as country-level teams were not in a place to challenge systems proposed by Operations or Finance departments. What worked in our favor, however, was that our countries had small but committed teams who were willing to pivot and contribute to the new strategy, which required a fairly healthy appetite for risk and uncertainty.

7. Based on your experience and lessons learned, what advice would you share with colleagues about using a collaborating, learning, and adapting approach?

1. Strive for structured flexibility in program strategy
Provide an overarching structure, and define where adaptation and change is expected

2. Keep monitoring and learning systems lean
Narrow down to a key set of performance metrics. Keep systems simple, and enable auto-analysis through things like dashboards so as to encourage engagement with program data, and usage in decision making.

3. Deliberately facilitate internal collaboration
Even with high capacity teams, collaboration will not always happen organically. Invest time in ensuring channels for collaboration are used consistently, and prioritize productive collaboration.

4. Work with organizational departments responsible for compliance to develop processes for greater agility
This needs to be proactive, rather than reactive to challenges when they arise.