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.

# From Implementing to Coaching: Building Local Civil Society in Niger

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*Credit: CARE.*

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

In 40 years of work in Niger, CARE's role has evolved from primarily implementation of emergency relief to focusing on supporting local civil society to build the structures and skills necessary to meet its own needs and advocate for change.

Equitable Natural Resources Management and Reinforcing Civil Society in Niger[1] (PROGRES II, 2013-2017) promotes a strong, diversified, and committed civil society that represents and defends the rights and interests of pastoralists. It does this by working with three key civil society partners: The Association for Revitalizing Pastoralism in Niger (AREN), specializing in pastoralist rights; Development for a Better Life (DEMI-E), with expertise in pastoralism and water; and the West African Herders' Network (*Réseau Billital Maroobé*, or RBM), which addresses issues of pastoralist cross-border mobility and security. The program supports these partners' organizational development and works to meet development and advocacy goals together, rather than treating them merely as sub-grantees.

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[1] In French, the name is *Programme de Gestion équitble des Ressources Naturelles et de renforcement de la Société civile au Niger phase II.*

CARE has committed to putting local partners in the lead on advocacy issues and supporting their agendas and priorities, as well as building their legitimacy at the community level by building a strong constituent base and their ability to advocate for the poorest people in Niger. In particular, CARE advocates at the community, district, regional, and national levels.

The Government of Niger is a key stakeholder. The initiative is supported by the Danish Cooperation for International Development (DANIDA).

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

The CLA approach of stepping back and primarily coaching and supporting partners was designed to resolve three key challenges: creating more sustainability by building the local capacity to take the lead on development outcomes, especially in the advocacy space; changing the behavior of the Government of Niger and local power-holders to take a more evidence-based approach and respond to citizens' needs; and helping local organizations build legitimacy among the communities they represent.

1) **Sustainability**: Development actors often face a tradeoff between achieving tangible results very quickly and investing in the slower, but ultimately more sustainable, process of building local capacities to solve problems themselves. While we often use the term "partnership" to denote any stakeholder from a sub-grantee to a donor, the reality is that those relationships come with very different power dynamics. Generally, with donor funding our role as prime contractor focuses on accountability, oversight, and ensuring delivery on priorities and actions we define in collaboration with the donor. While this is often a faster and easier way to get to "quick win" development outcomes, it generally means that sub-grantees build their ability to execute external strategies, not their ability to be self-sustaining, self-driven local actors. This generally means that quick wins do not endure in the long term when donor-funded projects close, because the partners are not able to continue their activities independently. Building local capacity and allowing for local ownership creates more sustainability in the long term. CARE still backstops accountability to financial management and donors, but its role is supportive, not punitive.

2) **Evidence-based policy**: The pastoralist communities in Niger are often under-represented in decision-making, and have faced increasing challenges of urban growth, the arrival of extractive industries, land grabbing for agriculture, and climate change—all of which restrict the rangelands on which they depend. By the very nature of pastoralism, these communities are not present in urban decision-making spaces, and their nomadic lifestyle makes it difficult for them to receive an education or connect to policy processes. Nevertheless, there is a rich set of experiences and evidence that demonstrates those communities' needs and the case for protecting pastoralist rights. By building local capacity to connect pastoralists to government processes, PROGRES is focusing on long-term strengthening of government decision-making.

3) **Building legitimacy**: Local partners often work project-to-project, with a tenuous funding base and little ability to invest in long-term relationships with communities. But successful

advocacy needs to build from strong ties to pastoralist communities to ensure that civil society partners are adequately representing the needs on the ground. Strengthening pastoralist groups and local networks, and building the organizational self-assessments and governance structures give local partners the base from which to influence their governments (at local and national levels), donors, and other stakeholders.

**Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.**
The CLA approach focuses especially on Block 2 of [USAID's CLA Maturity Matrix](#), looking at the enabling conditions with and around partners so they can focus on building their own capacity to not just implement projects, but also to focus on CLA to strengthen their sustainability, evidence-based decision-making, and legitimacy.

As a way to accomplish this, we work with partners on practicing specific skills through existing projects (Block 1 in the Maturity Matrix), and very practical applications of the skills and resources to make the capacity building relevant and concrete, taking it out of the purely theoretical space. Practices that have made up this CLA approach include:

- **Putting partners in charge**: CARE lets partners set their own strategic priorities and supports them in accomplishing those goals. Instead of coming in with pre-set goals and project activities, CARE lets partners choose their strategic priorities, and works with them to survey the landscape, focus on the evidence, and decide what makes the most sense to them.

- **Opening doors**: CARE helps link partners, governments, research institutions, and donors. With more than 40 years of reputation in Niger and activities in 90 countries, CARE has strong ties to many of the international stakeholders who are both donors and power-holders in Niger. We work with partners to make these connections available to them directly, and help them present their cases to outside actors. With our support, local partners were able to access money from the Swiss and French governments for their priorities.

- **Coaching**: CARE focuses on building capacity in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), human resources, strategy, accountability, and financial management. Most of the CARE staff time is directed toward these activities to make sure that our partners are growing and strengthening their ability to manage projects. Five CARE staff members work with the local partners on strengthening. To give partners more space, CARE finances the staff, but partners recruit and manage human resources.

- **Sharing and managing knowledge**: CARE works with partners to produce reports and evidence, and share them with appropriate stakeholders, as well as to make decisions and recommendations based on the evidence they generate.

- **Providing Funding**: In some cases, CARE provides direct funding to support activities, such as the Milky Way campaign that is strengthening dairy value chains across Niger and the CEDEAO (i.e., Economic Community of West African States) West African region. Focusing on concrete projects helps partners build skills in a relevant and tangible way. Providing funding also gives local civil society organizations, which often have little to no unrestricted funding, the opportunity to act on strategic priorities that they would struggle to resource in the local context.

- **Being a fellow activist**: CARE supports campaigns and advocacy activities, lending our weight and voice to priority issues such as land grabbing, food security, and water access management in pastoral areas—issues with which we have decades of experience.

- **Serving as a watchdog**: We focus a lot on M&E systems, including teaching the partners how to do outcome mapping, and helping them build new data systems, and on making information transparent to members and stakeholders. This holds CARE and our partners accountable to communities, governments, and donors. We also provide support on financial management issues.

- **Improving their own governance**: Using tools and resources that CARE provided, the partners are now conducting self-evaluations and reporting more transparently. They have even spread this to offices and board members that were not included in the original terms, because their members are so pleased to have more transparency.

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

One reason CLA was so successful was DANIDA's flexibility to take this approach and have longer-term capacity building as the key project component. That is not a common practice for many donors, who often focus on much more specific development implementation outcomes. It was instrumental to the project's success.

Another key factor was the long-term relationship CARE has had with the strategic partners, which builds up trust on both sides to adopt this kind of transparent coaching process. These are primarily partners CARE has worked with before, and we have experience with strengths and weaknesses on both sides. The strong working relationships allow us to have frank conversations, jointly work toward solutions, and find actions that will work for all stakeholders.

Finally, the willingness of leadership in CARE, AREN, DEMI-E, and RBM to engage in this kind of coaching/mentoring relationship was critical to success. It required everyone to step out of traditional relationships and think about how to advance both organizations and development goals.

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

- **Built better networks**: With support from CARE, the partners have expanded their membership sixfold, and included thousands more people in their processes. AREN created a coalition of 11 civil society organizations to defend pastoralist rights, and RBM built nine new offices to influence local governments and has extended its reach to other countries in West Africa.

- **Created opportunities for women**: The partners have added women to their leadership boards and membership. Forty-seven percent of new members are female.

- **Created social movements**: From a base of zero, partners have created 10 advocacy campaigns, and quadrupled the number of groups that are active in advocacy movements.

- **Built evidence for advocacy**: With support from CARE, the partners have conducted more than 10 studies on pastoralist and water rights to sway government decision-making.

- **Made information available**: In addition to the studies, AREN has created a new system that tracks pastoralist situations and reaches more than 40,000 pastoralists, all of whom access data on mobile phones.

- **Influenced government decisions**: The government has passed new water rights laws, and the president included natural resource management concerns in his speech before the UN, partly as a result of pressure from these groups. National and local governments are now routinely reaching out to our partners, looking for evidence that will help them make better decisions.

- **Created spaces for negotiation between governments and citizens**: As one pastoralist said, "With AREN, we have access to light … and now we have access to justice." The partners are building conflict resolution forums and links between people and the actors who can help solve their problems.

- **Responded to emergencies**: During the 2014 hungry season, partners accessed finance and inputs to get 960 tons of food to 3,500 families who would otherwise have been unable to eat.

## What were the most important lessons learned?

The most important lesson has been that the CLA approach is possible and can have very successful results. As the development community moves toward more local ownership and a larger focus on sustainability planning, PROGRES helps us prove that putting local partners at the forefront is not only viable option, it is a very successful one when handled well. We are working to replicate this model in many other countries as we build new approaches to achieve development outcomes.

Another important lesson has been to focus heavily on evaluation and documentation. CARE and each strategic partner conduct regular self-evaluations to ensure that we are making progress toward goals. An important caveat here is to streamline and simplify the process as much as possible. Local civil society organizations do not often have the resources for a large and complex M&E staff; introducing processes that are too cumbersome and difficult may work in the short term with heavy CARE intervention, but will not survive in the long term. Many local groups never get capacity building in CLA or documentation techniques, which weakens the whole organization, so we need to support those goals.

Finally, it has been very important to align our approach with each partner across the initiatives that CARE is doing with them. At any given time, we often have several projects other than PROGRES

operating with a strategic partner. While we obviously have to remain accountable to donor demands for each project—and not all donors are as supportive of CLA as DANIDA—it causes great frustration for the partner if they have very different rules of play between CARE projects and CARE staff.