



Photo: IRC

ADAPTING AID

LESSONS FROM SIX CASE STUDIES



JUNE 2016



“

Without donor flexibility and careful navigation of the context, none of this would have been possible.”

Program Director

FOREWORD

Long frustrated by the rigidity of traditional tools and processes for managing programs, practitioners are increasingly calling for new ways of working to be effective in complex and volatile environments. The hope is that a new generation of adaptive programs – more attuned to the realities on the ground, more dynamic and flexible – will be better able to deliver development and humanitarian results in complex, adaptive social systems.

ADAPT is one such initiative, and we find it remarkable on a number of counts. First of all, it is a collaboration between two organizations – the IRC and Mercy Corps – which requires trust, openness, humility, and a willingness to put one's own institutional priorities to the side in pursuit of a collective good: qualities often called for often but seldom seen.

Second, it is seeking to shine a light onto both the adaptive successes and challenges of humanitarian and development practice. This is not an easy thing to do and the collaborators are to be congratulated for their commitment to transparency.

Finally, all too often new change initiatives become policy abstractions, consider the frontline last, or are applied in relatively safe and stable settings. Not so here. ADAPT has focused its efforts on changing practices where it matters most – on the frontline – which is not only admirable, we think it is essential for the ideas of adaptive development to truly take root and realize their transformative potential.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance for the humanitarian and development sector of the findings of these six case studies. Their empirical findings run counter to current trends in much of the sector towards linear and control-oriented upwards accountability. They show the primacy of space for flexibility, adaptability, learning and change. The tensions and contradictions revealed between results-based and adaptive management are paradigmatic.

The case studies bring out the need for procedures and people to be flexible and adaptable and allow, value, and reward not only results but creativity, innovation to fit needs and contexts, and learning and adapting. The challenge is to evolve procedures and requirements that allow space for adaptation, and opportunism including budgetary flexibility.

This excellent report and the accompanying case studies deserve to be read, absorbed, explored, debated, and applied to bring about changes in the sector as a whole.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Aid and development organizations tackle a broad range of complex problems in demanding operating environments. However, the standard tools and processes we use are ill-suited to the task we face. The limitations of linear programming models and bureaucratic constraints are now widely recognized. Improving our impact requires a new generation of thinking and practice. Fortunately, there are new approaches in the works.

Adaptive management is a programming approach that combines appropriate analysis, structured flexibility, and iterative improvements in the face of contextual and causal complexity. It has implications for many facets of our work, from staffing to operations to planning to evaluation. Practitioners' experiences and academic research provide initial evidence that this model yields greater impact on aid and development challenges.

However, there are still practical and conceptual gaps. Adaptive management is evolving and multi-faceted: it includes a variety of specific techniques and approaches, whose usefulness depends on a given context, the problems being addressed, and the capabilities or constraints of the program in question. There is value in this diversity, but it complicates efforts to research and scale the approach.

The ADAPT partnership between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Mercy Corps exists to address these gaps. The goal of ADAPT – Analysis Driven Agile Programming Techniques – is to bring about a step change in the way implementing and donor agencies plan, resource, and implement programs. The partnership aims to provide a clear articulation of field-tested techniques to plan and operate in fluid, unpredictable, and complex contexts, along with the evidence to demonstrate how program adaptation makes a difference.

Our initial work focused on identifying and researching examples of adaptive management in our agencies' current work. Over the past year, we have conducted in-depth field research into six interventions in complex and volatile contexts. The output of this research was six case studies that shed light on three questions:

- ▶ What does adaptive management look like in practice?
- ▶ What impact can it have on programs?
- ▶ How can it best be nurtured?

None of these interventions was a perfect example of adaptive practice; the research highlighted both positive and negative aspects in each case. This evidence base was shared with a group of 50 like-minded practitioners and researchers – including those involved in related initiatives such as the Doing Development Differently community; DfID's Smart Rules framework; USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting work; and the Global Delivery Initiative. This group discussed and debated the cases at a workshop held in London on 20-21 April 2016.

This report is a reflection on the cases and the workshop. It is not meant as a full reporting on the workshop proceedings, nor is it the final word on adaptive management. Rather, this report marks a critical reflection point for the ADAPT partnership: by sharing what we are learning about how adaptive management can advance the effectiveness and impact of aid, we hope to engage others in this conversation.

This report describes the case studies in brief (with links to the IRC and Mercy Corps websites for the full cases) and draws out the key cross-cutting themes that generated the most discussion at the workshop. We have included a few of our internal commitments to move Mercy Corps and the IRC toward more adaptive management, as well as recommendations for the sector as a whole.

ADAPT's next phase involves field testing some of the most promising adaptive management techniques that surfaced in the initial research. Five pilots are already underway.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

ADAPT's research so far has been grounded in six cases of adaptive management in practice. Our research approach was built on three pillars: evidence of adaptation in projects and programs; purposive selection of a diverse set of cases; and a qualitative, inductive research approach.

ADAPTATION IN PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

Our unit of analysis in each case was either a specific project, or a set of projects implemented together as a program. Focusing on the project/program level gave us an entry point for capturing insights and practices that would be relevant to others in the sector. We were also able to touch on the broader levels (e.g. enabling or constraining aspects of organizational culture, donor strategies, or operational context) and the more granular levels (e.g. specific behaviors and competencies of practitioners, or instances of adaptation within a given project). Other research efforts could usefully focus on those levels more explicitly.

DIVERSITY IN CASES, INCLUDING BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS

Cases were selected to provide variety across several dimensions: intervention sector and implementation modality; spectrum from relief to recovery to development; and level of stability in the context (e.g. politically stable contexts, epidemic response, active conflicts, etc.). We also looked at projects/programs that were designed to explicitly and intentionally incorporate adaptive management from the start, as well as those that developed adaptive practices along the way.

As noted above, the cases were not selected as perfect examples of adaptive management. As these practices continue to evolve, each case exhibits certain adaptive capabilities and enablers, as well as constraints and inhibitors to adaptation. Our cross-case synthesis attempts to draw lessons from these variations.

QUALITATIVE AND INDUCTIVE RESEARCH

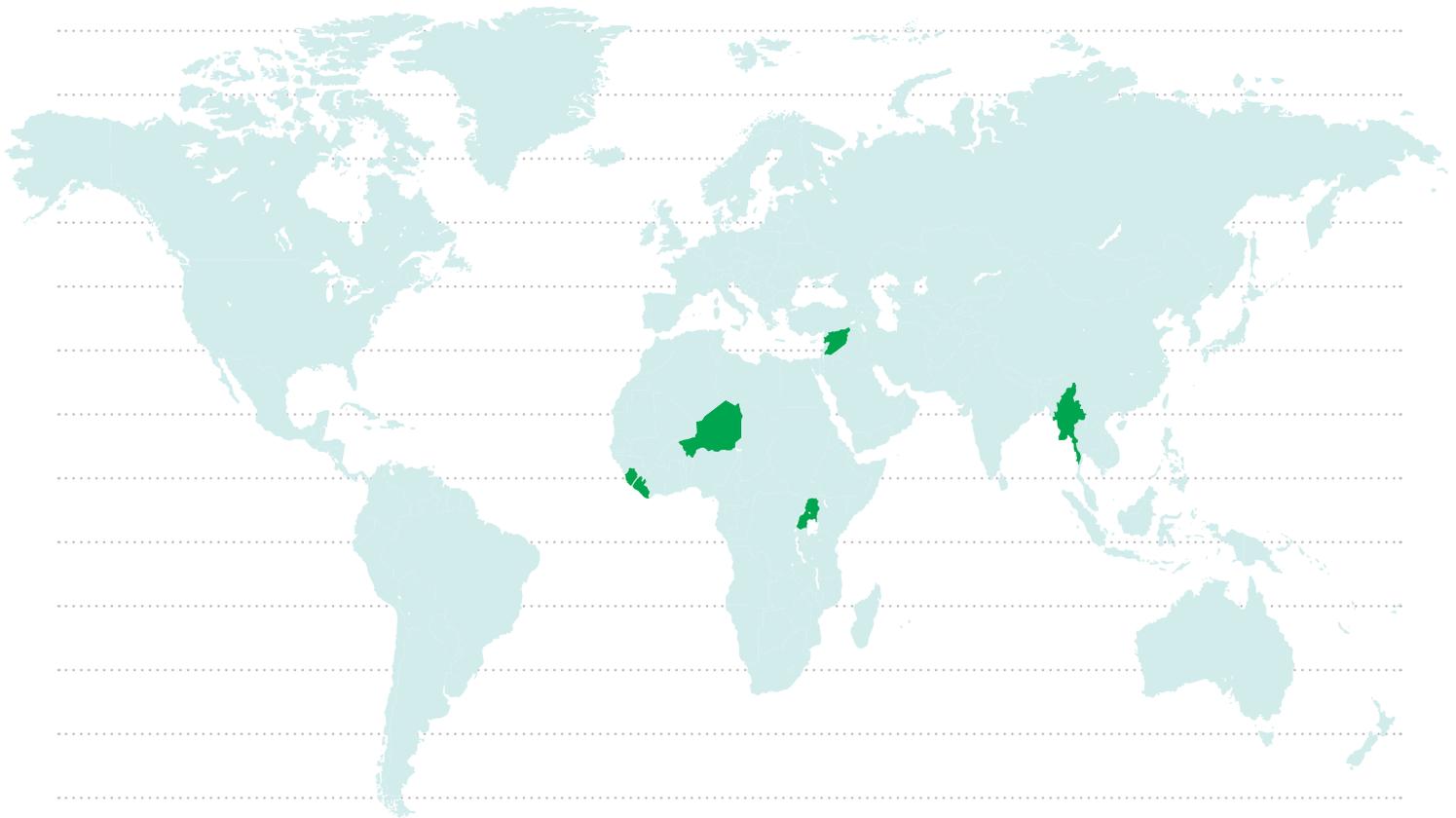
Data collection for each case study included: review of documents (such as project proposals, project tools, donor reports, and M&E reports); semi-structured key informant interviews with approximately 15 to 20 people in each country, both internal (covering different levels of seniority and different departments) and external (including local partners, other INGOs, UN agencies, and donors); and in-country reflection workshops. Some cases also made use of focus group discussions. Interviews, workshops, and focus groups were conducted by members of the ADAPT team from the IRC and/or Mercy Corps, during research visits to each project.

Rather than testing an overall hypothesis, the research took an inductive approach to understanding the context, practices, and outcomes of adaptive management as a whole. The in-country workshops combined an inductive/ deductive approach to test the case researcher's understanding of enablers and inhibitors of adaptive management in that context, while still providing space for new insights that might emerge from participants.



Miji P. and David O. from the Mercy Corps RAIN team.

3. SUMMARY OF CASE STUDIES



BUILDING AN ADAPTIVE TEAM FOR MARKET SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT IN ACHOLI, UGANDA

Since 2011, the Revitalizing Agriculture Incomes and New Markets (RAIN) program has facilitated market systems development in the Acholi region in northern Uganda. Led by Mercy Corps, the program's learning and adaptation hinge on the inquisitive team, culture of open communication, and reflective monitoring and evaluation practices. RAIN has faced challenges related to implementing in partnership across two international NGOs, finance and operational systems that are not well tuned for a market systems approach, and the loss of motivation that accompanies the end of funding. However, various project components continued under new funding sources have carried the adaptive elements forward.



TAILORING HEALTH PROGRAMMING TO CONTEXT VARIATIONS IN KAYAH STATE, MYANMAR

The Three Millennium Development Goal (3MDG) project in Kayah State, implemented by the IRC, used a six-month inception period to build relationships among partners and craft a context-tailored approach to serving basic health needs of the most vulnerable populations. The resulting program design included health plans for each of six ethnic health organizations, as well as township-level plans for the seven areas where those organizations work. Relationships built among the civil society and state partners, as well as opportunistic program funding, have been critical to adaptive management. Onerous reporting and centralized decision making have been key constraints, slowing implementation timelines and decisions.



ENSURING CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS AND FLEXIBLE PARTNERSHIP IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL SYRIA

The South and Central Syria program supports local NGOs and community-based organizations that respond to changing humanitarian needs in the midst of a war. Implemented by Mercy Corps with funding from three donors, the program leverages an in-house team of conflict analysts to inform response activities and forecast future needs. Critical to adaptive management have been the program's understanding of localized context, flexible compliance procedures to match partner capacity, and the autonomy to evolve team structure as needed. Donor approval processes remain a challenge. Early isolation from Mercy Corps' headquarters hampered access to internal support and learning from other programs, but this is being addressed as the program moves forward.



LEVERAGING AN INFORMANT NETWORK FOR RAPID RELIEF RESPONSE IN DIFFA, NIGER

The IRC has responded to humanitarian needs in the Diffa region of southeast Niger since 2013. Facing a shifting context and challenging operational environment, the team built a network of informants that feeds into a mechanism for rapid programmatic responses as populations move or new needs arise. An internal team culture of open communication facilitates the program's analysis and adaptation. The IRC also leverages this information to influence the wider humanitarian community's response. Despite procurement constraints and government restrictions, the program has dramatically increased its scale and the diversity of support it provides to people displaced by violence and insecurity.



PROMOTING PARTNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNING TO FIGHT EBOLA IN LIBERIA

As the Ebola crisis reached its peak in Liberia, the Mercy Corps team launched an ambitious experiment in adaptive management: to implement an emergency, social mobilization program with a technology-intensive learning platform. The Ebola Community Action Platform (ECAP) gave significant autonomy to 77 partner organizations to design their own outreach efforts. ECAP encouraged localized decision-making and supported a number of learning channels which enabled partners to make regular improvements during implementation. The ECAP team learned from many challenges, including the burden of their technology-intensive monitoring system, rapid team growth, internal communication challenges, and strained operational capacity. Despite these issues, the program reached 2.4 million people in nine months and helped drive improved learning systems in later programs.



PIVOTING APPROACHES IN THE FACE OF A CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE: COMPARATIVE CASE

Two education projects operating in Sierra Leone prior to Ebola responded to the crisis in dramatically different ways. Both implemented by the IRC, they demonstrate how adaptive management allows projects to achieve outcomes in the face of a changing context. One project had an iterative design from the beginning, with a flexible donor that trusted the implementing agency and empowered field staff. The project quickly shifted its approach and continued to support education in Kenema district in southeastern Sierra Leone throughout the crisis. The other project had a convoluted consortium and rigid donor requirements. It suspended activities for nearly nine months at the peak of the Ebola crisis, before finally re-launching with a new approach that quickly became irrelevant. Staff from both projects, and across the IRC, worked flexibly to support the overall Ebola response.



You can access and download the full case studies from either:
www.rescue.org/AdaptCaseStudies
www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/adaptive-management-case-studies

4. WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

The six case studies form the basis for an initial set of lessons and insights into how we can make adaptive management a reality. These lessons fall broadly into five categories:

- ▶ Dynamic and collaborative teams
- ▶ Appropriate data and reflective analysis
- ▶ Responsive decision-making and action
- ▶ Agile and integrated operations
- ▶ Trusting and flexible partnerships

DYNAMIC AND COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Hire local and hire for an adaptive mindset. Though hiring local staff has long been important for aid work, cases of adaptive management add further evidence for the value of the local networks, contextual knowledge, and personal investment of staff hired from the communities being served. In addition, hiring practices should seek staff with “adaptive mindsets”: inquisitive by nature, able to ask the right questions, and bringing broad, flexible competencies and skillsets.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ Hiring Syrian staff means the South and Central Syria program has better access to information on the evolving conflict, and deeper understanding of the geographic challenges and operating norms facing in-country partners.
- ▶ In Uganda’s RAIN program, recruitment interviews included problem-solving scenarios or trips to the market to see how candidates analyzed context in real-time. The contextual knowledge and analytical skills of these team members were invaluable in several program pivots.

Foster open communications and a collaborative culture.

Successful adaptation is more likely when teammates build trust, communicate openly, and support one another in taking risks. The habits and norms of organizational culture are important. Program leaders can set the tone in how they interact with staff, including actively seeking input from field staff and demonstrating commitment to act on it. Relationships and common identity built across the team, including outside work hours, can facilitate collaboration. Quarterly reviews, weekly staff meetings, and even daily briefings provide further opportunities to reinforce this culture.

EXAMPLE FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ Open communication across three different teams (financial services, tillage, and M&E) helped the RAIN program in Uganda to develop new loan products with the potential to help farmers increase crop production through tillage.

Provide mentorship and coaching. The behaviors and competencies needed for adaptive management are quite different from those instilled by traditional management

approaches. Staff need supportive criticism and advice to help them adopt these behaviors and steer their work appropriately. This can occur through formalized mentorship and coaching, perhaps as part of supervisors’ roles, or through more informal channels.

EXAMPLE FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ In Uganda, leadership modelled coaching behavior and encouraged mentorship to such an extent that these became norms within the RAIN program. Because staff at multiple levels learned to regularly help each other improve their work, the team carried these habits forward even after the program’s central leader transitioned to a new role.

APPROPRIATE DATA AND REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Keep an eye on the context and surrounding systems, by leveraging multiple forms of data through multiple channels. Adaptive management requires mechanisms for building and maintaining an understanding of context. This enables a project to refine its approach, as more is learned about the context and the project’s impacts on it; and to shift the project approach as the context shifts, including as new needs or opportunities arise. Practically, traditional M&E systems (focused on tracking activities, outputs, and outcomes) often fail to provide sufficient contextual awareness or feedback to inform programming. Adaptive programs deliberately build large networks of external informants, including partner organizations and community leaders, which contribute data back to the program. “Soft” data sources, such as field staff observations, are also valued for the insights they bring, especially when combined with “hard” data and structured assessments.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ In Niger, community focal points alerted the response team to increasing numbers of people moving towards Lake Chad. The team launched a rapid assessment that revealed over 10,000 newly arrived people living on islands in the lake, with massive unmet needs for health care and clean water.

Dedicate analytical capacity, with time and space for reflection. In complex and fluid environments, finding time

to “see the bigger picture” is more difficult but also more important. Incoming data may not tell the whole story until it is combined with other sources and subjected to interrogation and interpretation by team members with multiple perspectives. The likelihood of useful synthesis can be increased through: dedicated staff to conduct context analysis; greater integration of M&E functions into programs; allowing deliberate time for incubating new approaches or systems (e.g. through extended inception periods); external networks of informants; and iterative use of tools like results chains, network analysis, and scenario forecasting. These are all ways to make sense of the context, detect shifts in that context, and gauge the results of a team’s work. It does not happen naturally when needs are great and resources are stretched, but building this analytical capacity can help teams to focus their work in the right ways.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ The South and Central Syria program’s “Humanitarian Access Team” (HAT) is composed of five analysts who leverage their networks, including through the program’s partners, to supply the program with conflict analysis and forecasting across the response region. Early separation between the analytical team and the program team allowed space to incubate the analytical capacity, though this initially reduced the usefulness of the analysis. The two functions now collaborate more closely, and the HAT has begun expanding into political economy analysis and other areas.
- ▶ In the Niger response, team members participated in a scenario planning workshop, which identified likely ways that the conflict with Boko Haram might evolve. The workshop led the team to raise funding for a “rapid response” mechanism.

RESPONSIVE DECISION-MAKING AND ACTION

Connect decision-making to the analysis and reflection processes. To be useful, appropriate data and reflective analysis cannot be isolated. They must feed into decision-making and action. Accomplishing this requires cross-team integration and structured processes, such as: integrating M&E or other analytical functions into program teams, as mentioned above; building response capacity (i.e. funding and/or staff) that will be ready to address opportunities and needs identified over the course of the program; and allowing for extended inception periods for research and design that shapes program budget, staffing, and strategies.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ Based on forecasting by the HAT, the South and Central Syria program has been able to pre-position food baskets and other items for areas that are likely to face sieges, whereby Syrian government and other forces cut civilian populations off from food and humanitarian assistance.

- ▶ A six-month inception period allowed the 3MDG project in Myanmar to build trust among the consortium members, conduct stakeholder analysis, identify the needs of multiple partners and communities, and develop a detailed budget and approach for the full project.

Place decision-making authority as close to front-line staff and partners as possible. Those who are closer to a problem usually understand it more thoroughly and are better positioned to quickly try new things, see whether they are working, and iterate accordingly. This is critically important in complex aid and development efforts, where difficulty understanding context reduces the value of initial plans and where shifts in that context can make current activities irrelevant. Centralized decisions often take too long and are made without nuanced understanding of on-the-ground realities. Adaptive programs allow significant field staff and partner autonomy. Where oversight is needed, short decision-making chains can support informed and rapid decisions.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ Partners in the ECAP project in Liberia faced very few restrictions in how they used their grant funding. They could define mobilization strategies that drew on their own strengths and shift strategies as needed. This allowed them to quickly tailor their messaging and approaches as they learned what resonated with their communities or saw new needs arise.
- ▶ The LWOL project in Sierra Leone responded to field staff’s observations with multiple pivots, such as providing stipends to community teachers after school closures reduced their funding from the host communities, and providing small learning groups with pencils, papers, and books when the economic shut-down made these unaffordable. These decisions were made by the field-based project manager, in consultation with the senior education manager and education coordinator.



AGILE AND INTEGRATED OPERATIONS

Bridge the gap between programs, operations, and finance teams. Programmatic adaptation has ripple effects across an organization. Operations and finance teams – which typically are designed for a stable context and pre-designed program – must find ways to adapt accordingly. These support teams are better placed to facilitate adaptation if they work closely with the program team, so that they better understand why they are being asked to take new approaches. Likewise, program teams that understand existing operational and financial procedures are more likely to understand the flexibility they have. Together, teams can tailor standardized procedures to the context and partners, finding creative solutions as needed.

EXAMPLE FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ The South and Central Syria program developed a matrix of alternative documentation for sub-granted partners, allowing them to provide compliance documentation that makes sense for their capacity and context. Developing and improving this matrix required close collaboration between programs, compliance, finance, and operations.

Create mechanisms for rapid procurement, grants, and contracts. The time needed to procure items or structure partnership agreements (whether grants or contracts) adds to delays for projects in emergency contexts, where delays can be ill-afforded. By bridging the gap between programs, operations, and finance, many projects have crafted mechanisms for speeding up these processes. These include “master purchase agreements” that pre-approve vendors, increased financial approval levels of field staff, and use of “fixed amount awards” that allow sub-grants without burdensome screening or financial reporting. The efficiency of such mechanisms frees up more time for reflection and reduces barriers to program pivots.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ The ECAP project in Liberia funded a majority of the partners through Fixed Obligation Grants (more recently renamed “Fixed Amount Awards”) which did not require burdensome screening or financial reporting. To spread the management burden, some higher-capacity partners received standard grants, which they then sub-granted onward through fixed obligation mechanisms.
- ▶ The South and Central Syria program has faced delays when adding new partners and providing sub-grants under funding from the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), whose approval process can take up to five weeks. In contrast, the UK Department for International Development (DfID) requires only notification (rather than approval) of new partnerships.



TRUSTING AND FLEXIBLE PARTNERSHIPS

Plan for adaptation in budgets and outcomes reporting.

Two of the biggest constraints on adaptation are rigid reporting (which lock projects into focusing only on pre-planned activities, outputs, and outcomes) and rigid budgets (including both spend/burn rates that require hasty program activity, without time for analysis or reflection, as well as immovable budget lines that prevent allocation of funding to experimentation and new adaptations). Adaptive programs find ways to loosen both of those constraints. Reporting can be made less rigid through the use of higher-level, fewer, and/or optional indicators, allowing teams to flexibly pursue shared

outcomes; narrative reporting can be used to explain decisions made. Similarly, budgets can be loosened by: allocating funding in broad categories, with the opportunity for flexibility within each category; holding a reserve of funding for learning and adaptation; or ensuring that budget changes receive rapid approvals from donors.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ In the Myanmar 3MDG project, a combination of core and opportunistic programming allowed the team to capitalize on emerging opportunities and mitigate risks. A flexible budget line funded important activities that were not originally planned, like a vaccination campaign run jointly by the state health department and ethnic health organizations.
- ▶ In the Niger program’s “rapid response” mechanism, multi-sector assessments can trigger distributions of food or non-food items, as well as water and sanitation interventions.

Keep organizational boundaries permeable. “Partnership” is a common mantra in aid and development, but it often means little more than finding organizations with complementary strengths. In adaptive management, partnership goes further than that: organizational boundaries become more permeable, with ideas and information flowing more freely among partners, including donors, implementers, civil society, private sector, and government. This leads to greater trust and mutual understanding. For example, more frequent communication with donors improves the ability to change budgets and outcomes, as described above, because donor counterparts are more likely to be “up to speed” on how the context and program are evolving. Permeable boundaries with implementing partners, such as private sector actors and sub-grantees, likewise improves a project’s contextual understanding and ability to adapt.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CASES:

- ▶ Close relationships with the funder enabled Sierra Leone’s LWOL project to change its approach, both before and after the outbreak of Ebola. The donor provided bridge funding when normal activities had to be suspended, allowed staff to be seconded to Ebola response activities, and allowed funds to be re-allocated as needed under a new design. This flexibility was made easier by a lack of intermediaries between the project team and the donor.
- ▶ The Niger response team shares data from its informant networks with donors and other humanitarian actors, helping to build common understanding and better collaboration in the response efforts.

5. ENABLING ADAPTATION ACROSS THE SECTOR

Mercy Corps and the IRC are committed to harnessing the potential of adaptive management, both for our own work and for the wider sector. The cases studied in this research form a small part of that work. We have a three-part strategy for further spreading these approaches.

INSTITUTIONALIZE: Our agencies will conduct adaptive management self-assessments in ten country programs over the next year, and make changes in response to identified adaptive capacities and constraints. At the agency level, our organizations are planning for, and putting into practice, new strategies and systems that will emphasize the importance of an adaptive mindset and adaptive approach in the people we recruit, train, mentor, and support – with the aim of infusing our field programs with an adaptive culture and delivering greater impact.

INNOVATE: Building on the adaptive management self-assessments, the ADAPT partnership team will work with the same ten country programs over the next two years to further pilot adaptive programming techniques. These will include new design processes, funding arrangements, implementation approaches, and specialized teams providing context analysis.

INFLUENCE: We will continue to conduct field research that builds evidence on the impact of adaptive management, to share the research findings with others, and to convene events to explore with other agencies and donors how we can make adaptive management the norm across the sector.

In addition, making adaptive management practices the norm across the broader aid and development sector will require concerted effort by donors, implementers, and researchers. Zooming out from the project level, our work so far points to several ways that organizations can put this agenda into practice and help move it forward.

All organizations in the sector, and especially implementers, can promote adaptive management in their work by building a clear commitment to its principles across the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ▶ Enable flexible competency prioritization in hiring key positions, placing value in soft skills, adaptive mindset, and change management experience.
- ▶ Build in time and budget space for adaptation in any program, project, or initiative, including through pilot/inception phases that enable a range of strategies to be tested in “small bets”.
- ▶ Pilot, iterate, document, and share practices that support adaptive programming in your organization.

Any organization in a position to fund others – whether a public-sector donor, private foundation, or re-granting NGO – has the ability to enable adaptation by those they fund.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ▶ Expect, acknowledge, and reward learning (as well as results), and recognize that iterative improvement takes time.
- ▶ Solicit concepts and proposals based on broad outcomes, giving implementers the flexibility to define their own approaches, work plans, reporting, and indicators, and adapting them toward shared goals.
- ▶ Provide funding for activities focused on context analysis and ongoing learning, allow flexibility across budget lines in both overhead and program costs, and provide multi-year funding mechanisms that enable flexibility and experimentation.

Finally, there is a significant research agenda around adaptive management, which academics and think tanks can support.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ▶ Document and share cases of adaptive management.
- ▶ Shape the conceptual and analytical frameworks for studying adaptive management.
- ▶ Craft measures to demonstrate the impact of adaptive management on programs and development outcomes.

The ADAPT collaboration would like to thank Sida for its generous contribution to this research, Dave Algozo for his writing and editorial support and Ric Allen and Ivan Nascimento for their graphic design work.

ANNEX ONE

ADAPT Case Study



BUILDING AN ADAPTIVE TEAM FOR MARKET SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT IN ACHOLI, UGANDA

CASE IN BRIEF

Since 2011, the Revitalizing Agriculture Incomes and New Markets (RAIN) program has promoted market systems development in the Acholi region in northern Uganda. The program's learning and adaptation hinge on the inquisitive team, culture of open communication, and reflective monitoring and evaluation practices. RAIN has faced challenges related to implementing in partnership across two international NGOs, finance and operational systems that are not well tuned for a market systems approach, and the loss of motivation that accompanies the end of funding. However, various project components continued under new funding sources have carried the adaptive elements forward.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Mercy Corps has been implementing the Revitalizing Agriculture Incomes and New Markets (RAIN) program in the Acholi region in northern Uganda since October 2011. In a context where recovery from two decades of conflict has been marked by rapid economic and social shifts, the program has pursued three core objectives: enhancing smallholder production and profitability; improving agribusiness and trade performance in input and output markets; and expanding access to agriculture financial services.

Though RAIN's original approach focused on direct training of farmers, it was redesigned in the first year to incorporate a market systems approach. Rather than directly delivering goods and services to households, the program would instead support local actors to create long-run economic opportunities for poor farmers and others.

RAIN's new focus required team members to design their workflows to monitor and respond dynamically as markets developed. They adopted a set of tools and systems centered on testing, learning from, and improving interventions throughout the program's lifecycle. The program also made a series of strategic and tactical alterations throughout implementation. For example, the team repeatedly tested and altered their approach to input vouchers, dropped and developed partnerships in financial services, integrated gender into marketing and messaging, and diversified the program's focus crops.

Initially funded for three years by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the program was extended for an additional two years. Mercy Corps also attracted additional funding for the same program portfolio, but continued to manage all donors' activities under a single management

structure. TechnoServe was initially a sub-granted partner focused on agribusiness, though Mercy Corps moved forward with the USDA extension without them.

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS

RECRUITMENT, COACHING, AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The Mercy Corps country and program leadership focused on recruiting and building the kind of dynamic team that would be able to carry out an adaptive market development program. They focused on hiring team members from the Acholi region, in order to ensure strong localized knowledge and increase retention. They also made a dedicated effort to attract women, who could communicate with and understand the program's female target group (see text box).

Finding candidates who were inquisitive by nature was prioritized and supported by creative recruiting techniques. Interviews included problem-solving scenarios; occasionally, they would also involve trips to the market to assess how well a candidate could observe and analyze context. Once on board, this inquisitiveness carried over into the team's culture. The opportunity to learn and challenge themselves has been a key motivator for staff, even as the team has weathered turnover.

Building team members' skills was prioritized beyond what is seen in most programs. Team members attended external and internal training courses in market systems programming, and successfully advocated for TechnoServe's team to invest in and join training. The team received support from Engineers without Borders, Mercy Corps' technical unit in headquarters, and a learning-focused monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

IMPORTANCE OF GENDER ON THE RAIN TEAM

Building a team that retains women and gives them voice was critical to gender-focused shifts in program strategy. In 2013, as part of a country-wide Mercy Corps initiative, the RAIN team conducted an internal gender analysis, started tracking gender-disaggregated recruitment metrics against targets, and began to proactively recruit and promote women. When a few of the newly recruited women on the team struggled to have their voices heard, the Mercy Corps Uganda gender advisor, HR department, and the RAIN Program Director held a meeting to identify ways to resolve the problem. The Program Director focused attention on attracting women to join the team, and called on male gender champions within the team to support the women's integration. By the start of 2016, the program staff was 48% women, up from 22% at the start of the program.

Without deliberate efforts to support women's voice and retention, critical gender-focused shifts in program strategy would likely not have occurred. Mirroring internal increases, the RAIN team helped the Gulu Agricultural Development Company (GADC) increase their recruitment of female extension agents from zero in 2012-2013 to 20 in 2014-2015. These efforts helped GADC increase the number of organic female farmers registered and trained with GADC from 26% to 48% over the same time period. This shift required dedicated resources: in addition to support from the country office's gender advisor, the team leveraged gender-focused grant funding in pushing forward the changes.

consultant. The external attention further motivated the team and created a connection to the broader Mercy Corps world.

Finally, leadership modelled coaching behavior and encouraged team members to mentor one another to such an extent that coaching and mentorship became norms within RAIN. Team members gave one another supportive criticism and advice, helping to improve one another's critical questioning skills and the overall program's ability to learn and adapt. In the most important test, the team carried forward these habits even after the program's central leader transitioned to a new role. The attentive focus on soft aspects of program culture and team management in the context of on-boarding and handover proved critical to maintaining one of RAIN's strongest assets for adaptive management.

CULTURE OF OPEN COMMUNICATION AND EXCHANGE

The norms around coaching and inquisitiveness were reinforced by a culture of open communication and exchange. This culture built trust, helped team members feel valued, improved information sharing, and supported program shifts. Open communication and willingness to accept criticism were particularly important given how field-level learning is often founded on local storytelling and verbal communication: much of the most important knowledge was tacit, held in team members' heads.

Operating norms and management techniques built on these existing communication streams and styles in order to draw important information to the forefront and support joint problem solving. Weekly Monday morning meetings served as regular touch points for open communication; team members raised issues in these meetings that they would then go and solve in smaller groups after the main meeting had ended. Quarterly and semi-annual reviews motivated team members to think more deeply about challenges in their sectors and the results they had achieved.

Quarterly and semi-annual meetings were the most useful for learning and idea generation when they included local government and private sector partners. Both the RAIN team and its external partners would make presentations about their strategies and challenges, which helped identify information sharing gaps, strengthened trust and support (especially with local government), and allowed RAIN team members to learn about implementation challenges directly from local actors. For example, information sharing between the field agents of one private sector partner, Gulu Agriculture Development Company (GADC), and Mercy Corps staff helped to address key challenges around uptake of tillage services (see text box).

On a more daily basis, RAIN's Program Director modeled good relationships and communications with his team members, fostering a safe environment where staff felt open to raise ideas, experiment, and fail. He also maintained an "open door" policy and took time to build personal connections with team members, in order to fight the traditional hierarchical structures that often serve as barriers to critical information and idea sharing. This culture of openness propagated throughout the team.



Even with your crazy idea that you (bring), they allow you to try, and they don't blame you for failing, and you come and sit down and talk about how you could do it differently... Also the way the team relates, there is that free flow of conversation, when you come up with something, it's not taken as a personal thing, it's taken as a team responsibility."

RAIN team member



Miji P. and David O. from the Mercy Corps RAIN team.



We were blending so much with the team leaders and the bosses: you could reach a point when everyone is valuable...

When you met everyone under the tree you wouldn't know who is who."

RAIN team members



ENSURING M&E SUPPORTS LEARNING AND PROGRAMMATIC DECISION MAKING

RAIN's M&E staff focused on helping the broader team learn, improve interventions, and evolve the theory of change. This departure from M&E's typical focus on measurement for reporting was enabled by the relatively limited number of required reporting indicators and semi-annual (rather than

quarterly) donor reports. This gave the inquisitive M&E team the capacity to focus on learning and programmatic decisions.

A substantial portion of the M&E team's time went to supporting frequent mini-assessments (covering topics such as cross-border trade, gender, and financial services) and internal evaluation activities (focused on understanding the impact of seed subsidies and contract farming). The ideas for these investigative exercises frequently arose from program reviews or weekly meetings, carried forward by the team's culture of open communication and joint problem solving. The assessments would then be led by the M&E team, but conducted jointly with implementation teams.

Though the most important information for programmatic decisions often came from one-off assessments carried out on a weekly or monthly basis, the team also participated in the design and review of a large mid-term evaluation which helped the program make broader, strategic shifts, such as diversifying the focus crops to support household resilience.

As the program evolved, so too did the M&E team's tools and systems. Quarterly and semi-annual reviews started as long, unstructured story-telling sessions; they shifted under the guidance of the M&E manager to focus on results achieved and challenges faced. Similarly, the team started out using after-action reviews, but usage dropped after reflections were integrated into event reporting. Various other monitoring tools were set aside as the program progressed and they were found to be time consuming or limited in value.

The team depicted its theory of change in a results chain – a visual format that is often more detailed and less linear than others, with the intent of being a more useful tool for ongoing, activity-level program management. Many team members found that the results chains helpfully clarified how their work connected to the program goal. After the first growing season, the M&E team restructured the results chain in order to better

CROSS-TEAM COMMUNICATION: DEVELOPING CASHLESS LOANS FOR TILLAGE

Increasing farmers' use of tillage services (which have the potential to increase crop production) represented a significant challenge in the RAIN program. Farmers lacked the on-hand cash needed to pay for the service, and loans for these services were seen as too risky because households tend to spend any available cash on other needs.

Team members used weekly meetings and team brainstorming sessions to discuss the barriers they saw. They organized monitoring and assessments to understand the issue better. Pulling together the ideas and expertise of three different teams (financial services, tillage, and M&E) as well as that of partners, they developed a solution: a cashless loan product that would allow farmers to receive vouchers for tillage and then gradually make payments to the bank for the services. The success of this product relied heavily on repeated informal and formal cross-team meetings and close collaboration to identify issues and develop solutions based on the team's experience.

Meetings with partners like GADC also helped to uncover other opportunities to improve tillage service use, such as emphasizing the importance of tree stump removal.



Mercy Corps team member, Molly, talks with Pauline. Pauline owns a farm supply store and has completed trainings in business management and best practices in farming, which helped her expand her business and become an agent for GADC.

align with the broader team's understanding of its strategy and organizational structure. However, evolving the results chains alongside the program created significant work for the M&E team to document changes, update indicators, and revise measurement plans. There was also a hesitance to make updates to the program strategy through the results chain, out of the fear of getting it wrong. As one team member said, "It's like a scary thing, and I just don't want to mess it up." In the end, RAIN only made two significant results chain revisions in the three years after its redesign as a market systems program (with a few smaller shifts along the way as well).



With our tools, you always get to build things – they're not rigid."

M&E team member

As Mercy Corps' work in the Acholi region has expanded and brought on additional donors, each with their own funding requirements, the country program invested in a monitoring database to reduce data aggregation efforts and protect the M&E team's time for learning and reflection. As a result of the database, the team estimates that reporting that previously took a full week of M&E staff time each month now takes less than two days – a significant reduction. Unfortunately, the increased administrative and reporting requirements across the broader team resulting from funding increases have inevitably come at the expense of time for learning and reflection.

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



LOSS OF MOTIVATION AS PROGRAM ENDED

The team has been able to leverage new funding sources to enhance its broader approach, building upon key components of RAIN's core strategy: women's economic empowerment, resilience, youth economic empowerment, and value chain linkages.

However, uncertainty over employment began to affect the team's focus as the end of RAIN drew near. Staff were understandably concerned about their job security. Even though new funding was received near the end of the program and management informed the team about new opportunities, there was not enough security given to keep team members motivated on a daily basis. The team became comfortable with the status quo of their work as RAIN neared its end. There was a drop in energy in program reviews, and an increase in missed opportunities. Some of these opportunities will be seized under new funding sources, but only after an additional time gap before new activities can begin.



INFLEXIBILITY OF FINANCE AND OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

Despite a culture of open communication within the program team, challenges of mutual understanding and collaboration among finance, operations, and programs are an issue in the broader Mercy Corps Uganda country program. Leadership has attempted to address these challenges by having operations and finance teams present in program review meetings.

In the RAIN program, the team faced the added challenge of building a shared understanding of the market systems approach and the non-traditional partnerships needed to expand market opportunities for the poor. Market systems programs often require cost-sharing agreements and loan guarantees with private sector partners in order to stimulate pro-poor investment. Despite Mercy Corps' agency-level promotion of market systems programming and lessons learned from financing these interventions in other locations, the team struggled to identify and properly structure agreements. Few external examples were available.

The RAIN program was forced to choose between two partnership tools – service contracts and sub-grant agreements – that were both inflexible and too burdensome for a program which needed to work with non-NGO partners and regularly adapt its strategies. They chose to use service contracts, but these agreements can easily misrepresent

DRIVING LOCAL SAVINGS THROUGH IMPROVED ASSESSMENTS

The RAIN program's mid-term evaluation in 2014 revealed that increasing formal savings might limit household spending on alcohol—a social issue which contributes to gender-based violence and limits household investments in farming. At the same time, local savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) were struggling to recruit and retain members and to mobilize savings.

As the program's financial services team conducted an assessment of SACCOs to understand the problem better, the M&E manager realized that the team was not capturing the most critical information. He started working with the

financial services team to ensure they understood the SACCOs' business constraints, improving their assessment questions and data analysis. The resulting information was shared back with the SACCOs.

Based on the assessment, the RAIN team supported the local SACCO to pilot a mobile-based savings drive in one branch. The SACCO then independently repeated the drive in all of their other branches, increasing their membership from 10,000 to 16,000 members overall and attracting savings of over \$750,000 and distributed loans over \$40,000 in the first three months.

the intent of a cooperative and adaptive partnership. Structuring and negotiating financial agreements through inappropriate, rigid mechanisms slowed the team's work with its partners and constrained its ability to revise partnerships as strategies changed.

CONFLICTING SYSTEMS WITH CORE PARTNER

Implementing RAIN across two different organizations, Mercy Corps and TechnoServe, created several obstacles. Beyond typical differences in organizational culture, the partners' HR policies and operational systems were not in sync. They had different salary scales and per diems. Even traveling together was difficult, as the two organizations had different vehicles, different field accommodation policies, and kept separate movement plans. More than mere operational differences, these issues undermined team motivation, detracted attention from program implementation, and limited the open communication that was so central to RAIN's ability to adapt.

Leadership from both teams invested significant effort to overcome these issues. They co-located their teams and sat together in the same office; they took time to discuss problems jointly and seek each other's feedback for staff performance reviews; they negotiated shared use of resources; and they made some small shifts in salary scales to reduce compensation gaps. Over time, the two organizations made gradual progress toward a healthy working relationship and a collaborative, cohesive team. Nonetheless, when Mercy Corps applied for a program extension, they chose to do so alone,

in part due to the extra effort and resources required to work adaptively across organizations.



We made deliberate efforts to build one team culture, very deliberately acknowledging that there are different HR systems, but creating a leveled ground and breaking interpersonal barriers..."

Technoserve DCOP

KEY REFLECTIONS

Leadership sits at the center of many of RAIN's successes. Investments in building a collaborative, inquisitive team and promoting a culture of open communication made it possible to learn and adapt. Orienting M&E functions toward programmatic and strategic questions, rather than reporting, increased the analytical capacity of the team. There were challenges in each of these, but the practical effect of leadership in this program was to build a team that had the entrepreneurial spirit to test new strategies and tactics, and the discipline and tools to reflect on them and overcome challenges as they arose. This approach was especially useful for a market development program that aimed to make change at the level of systems as well as individual farmers.



Photo: Mercy Corps

A woman in East Acholi province cleans sesame seeds after harvest. She sells her produce to a local output buyer, GADC.

ANNEX TWO

ADAPT Case Study



TAILORING HEALTH PROGRAMMING TO CONTEXT VARIATIONS IN KAYAH STATE, MYANMAR

CASE IN BRIEF

The Three Millennium Development Goal (3MDG) project in Kayah State used a six-month inception period to build relationships among partners and craft a context-tailored approach to serving basic health needs of the most vulnerable populations. The resulting program design included health plans for each of six ethnic health organizations, as well as township-level plans for the seven areas where those organizations work. Relationships built among the civil society and state partners, as well as opportunistic program funding, have been critical to adaptive management. Onerous reporting and centralized decision making have been key constraints, slowing implementation timelines.

BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

Conflict, inaccessibility, and resource limitations stand in the way of health services in Kayah State in eastern Myanmar. These challenges stem from decades of civil war that continue to impact the state's population of 230,000 people. Though the government has established ceasefire agreements with almost all ethnic armed opposition groups, some townships in Kayah are still under complete control of ethnic armed groups, and others have active conflict. Even in places without violence, ethnic minority groups have underlying grievances related to a lack of influence over political decisions, an absence of economic and social development, and the repression of cultural rights and religious freedoms.

PROJECT

Launched in July 2014, the Three Millennium Development Goal (3MDG) project aims to address the basic health needs of the most vulnerable people in Kayah State, with a focus on supporting maternal, newborn, and child health service provision across all seven townships. This project is one of many across Myanmar that have been supported through the 3MDG Myanmar Fund, managed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) with contributions from seven donor countries.¹

In Kayah, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) leads a core consortium that includes the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Civilian Health and Development Network (CHDN)—a local organization consisting of representatives from six ethnic health organizations that are

active in the state. The IRC works principally with CHDN and the ethnic health organizations, while the IOM works with the State Health Department (SHD).

The 3MDG project in Kayah involves state and non-state health services, as well as mobile health teams supporting remote populations. The program approaches are tailored in township, state, and organization-specific plans.

Improved access to quality health care has provided a shared objective for the parties in this conflict. The IRC and partners have sought to capitalize on this opportunity by encouraging increasing levels of collaboration. Key accomplishments over the project period to date include:

- ▶ CHDN has the respected and active participation of all ethnic health organizations;
- ▶ Joint training and regular coordination meetings between SHD and CHDN;
- ▶ Joint immunisation campaign and coordinated response to cyclone Komen by SHD and ethnic health organizations.



A woman is examined by a nurse from the state health department.

¹ Australia, Denmark, the European Union, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America



Without donor flexibility and careful navigation of the context, none of this would have been possible.”

Program Director

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS

PROJECT APPROACH TAILORED BY EACH LOCAL PARTNER

3MDG’s contextually tailored approach was built on an understanding of local dynamics. This foundation was laid during a six-month inception phase, funded by an initial grant of \$530,000 from the 3MDG Fund. The IRC used the period to build trust within the consortium through a small number of activities, while also working together to conduct a stakeholder analysis and develop a detailed budget and approach for the full project.

The inception phase was critical to crafting a project that responded to the heterogeneity and needs of the six ethnic health organizations. For the IRC and IOM, this was a period for building understanding of the different goals, capacities, and cultures of their partners. This allowed the consortium to present a nuanced approach to the 3MDG Fund, which had previously emphasized a standardized process whereby each township developed a single health plan that contributed to the achievement of a state-level health plan.

Instead, the consortium worked toward *organization*-specific plans that supported township and state plans. This approach was tailored to partners’ capacities and the specific context, which increased participation and ownership. At the end of the

inception period, the project grant was increased to \$8 million and extended to December 2016.



We didn’t initially ask for a detailed project proposal or budget. Instead we asked for an estimate of operational costs. We said we want you to implement a package of services, how much will it cost? They started with little funds – for interventions to react to needs, to get things started. They worked with all the partners – did (their) analysis, then provided us with a detailed plan.... Then came the contract and detailed activities.”

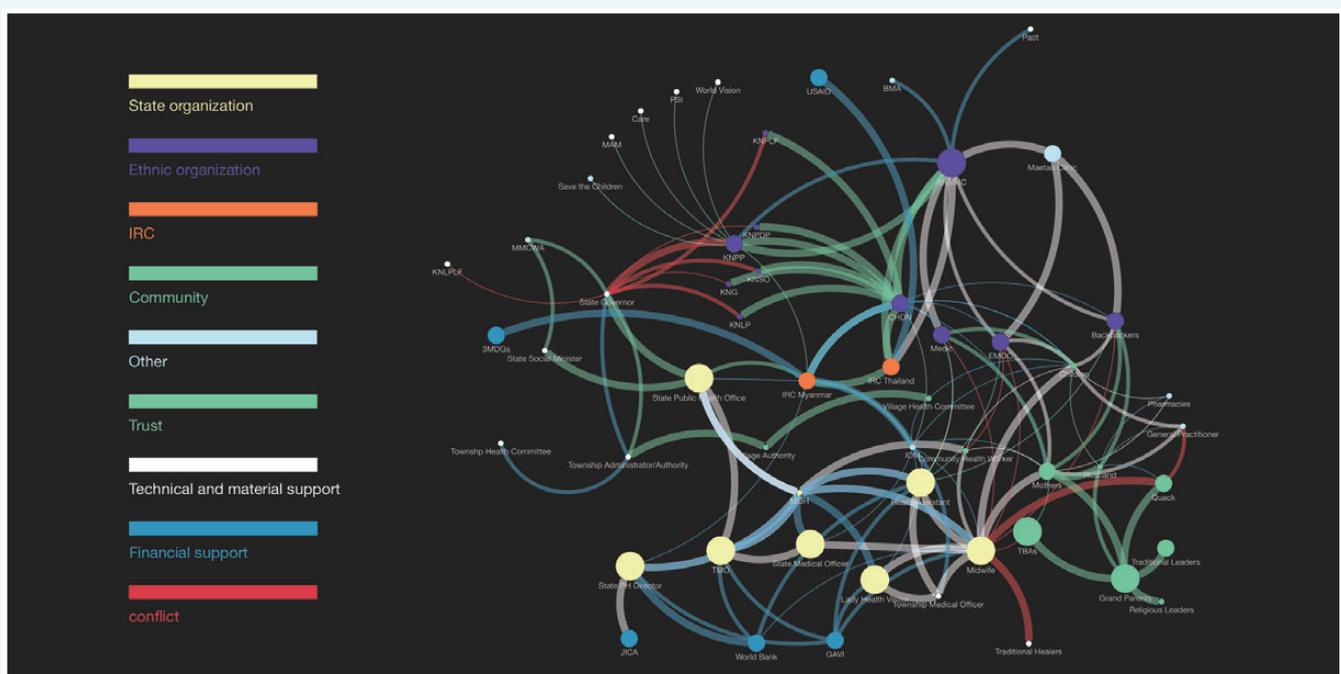
Donor representative



RELATIONSHIPS BUILT AMONG PARTNERS

To achieve the project’s goals, stakeholders from different sides of the conflict need to collaborate. To increase collaboration, the project team has focused the various parties on the overarching and shared ambition of meeting basic health needs, while managing the concerns and motivations of different actors and facilitating productive engagements. For example, activities like joint trainings have helped to build trust and personal connections.

In February 2016 the team conducted a social network analysis of actors involved in health care provision in order to inform its strategies and approaches. The analysis mapped state actors, ethnic organizations, community organizations,



Social network analysis of health actors in Kayah State: The IRC (orange dot) managed to build trust (green lines) within the network of ethnic health organizations (purple dots) and capitalize on opportunities for joint engagement between them and the state (yellow dots).

international organizations, donors, and mothers and children accessing care. Among those actors, the team identified connections of trust, technical/material support, financial support, and conflict. This data was visualized for analysis by the team (see diagram on page 2). The result proved invaluable for establishing a common understanding of the relationship dynamics in Loikaw, Kayah and for capitalizing on opportunities and addressing tensions.

The program team used the information from the social network analysis to strengthen relationships between partners over the course of the project. The CHDN is now recognized by all ethnic health organizations and is a respected partner of the SHD. These partners – CHDN and the ethnic health organizations on the civil society side, and SHD on the government side – hold regular coordination meetings, collaborate to organize joint trainings, and are able to engage in sensitive issues like immunization protocols in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups.



(The) IRC’s role is about creating an enabling environment for change, rather than being the driver of it.”

Project staff



The project is led by compromises within CHDN, and between CHDN and the government.”

Project staff member



COMBINATION OF CORE AND OPPORTUNISTIC PROGRAMMING

The project partners and donors have a shared understanding that progress in a context like Kayah’s is not fully predictable and does not follow work plans. However, as is often the case, the logical framework (logframe) that is used as the primary management reporting tool between the implementers and UNOPS does not reflect this complexity.

Appreciating the complexity of the context, UNOPS introduced a flexible funding line, which enabled project partners to

initiate a systematic and collaborative approach to identifying, analyzing, and responding to opportunities and needs. The project complemented core programming, in line with the logframe, with opportunistic programming that capitalized on emerging opportunities and/or mitigated risks.

Opportunistic programming facilitated some of the most significant relationship-building achievements such as the referral of complex cases from ethnic armed group-controlled areas to the SHD, and even a joint campaign between the SHD and ethnic health organizations to vaccinate 2,400 children in 80 villages against Rubella.



A child is examined by the health team.



In a situation such as Kayah progress doesn’t happen at a constant rate or necessarily in line with program implementation work plans. It rather is a start-stop process with slow periods, sudden spurts forward as well as some steps back.”

However, the project logframe is: “outdated and too rigid... our major stumbling block to being flexible.”

Donor representative

ADAPTING TO URGENT NEEDS FOLLOWING CYCLONE KOMEN

In October 2015, heavy rain from Cyclone Komen triggered a series of landslides in Hpa-saung Township of Kayah State. At least 28 people were killed, 60 homes destroyed, and 800 residents forced to temporarily relocate to camps opened on the grounds of schools and hospitals.

The 3MDG project partners shared information on the needs of affected villages, and then collectively determined how to respond. The SHD expedited the temporary evacuation of

those at risk of landslides in Kone village, while the CHDN, ethnic health organizations, and local partners rapidly distributed relief items to people in Lo Kha Lo camp.

The speed of the response was possible only because the SHD and ethnic health organizations had built sufficient trust from previous engagements to be willing to work together and permit access to one another, and the IRC was confident in the 3MDG Fund’s resource flexibility.

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



REPORTING BURDENS AND AUTHORIZATION DELAYS

Grant compliance and financial management burdens resulted in implementation delays for 3MDG. Though the relationship between the project team and donor was characterized by regular communication, mutual respect, and joint problem solving, various aspects of the bureaucratic requirements were inflexible and time consuming.

For example, the grant amendment that allowed for organization-specific (rather than township) health plans took five months and ten budget iterations to complete, cutting significantly into implementation time. As one staff member put it: “There is flexibility with funding, but it takes forever to negotiate.”

In a similar gap between intended flexibility and reality, the UNOPS team initially planned a relatively simple financial reporting system but instead reverted to more detailed and time consuming reporting system due to the discomfort of some staff on their side. The result was what a DfID representative called “overly onerous” planning and budgeting frameworks, which were perceived to be “quite inflexible and very time consuming.”



CENTRALIZED DECISION MAKING

The 3MDG project’s effectiveness has relied heavily on the decision making of a few champions within the project team and donor. These key people invested heavily in a thorough understanding of the context, and decided that this detailed knowledge was less critical for junior staff who were responsible for implementing more standard aspects of the intervention.

The dependence on a few individuals’ decision making has slowed down implementation, especially as communication can be difficult between Loikaw (the capital of Kayah State) and Yangon. More recently, efforts have been made to empower mid-level managers and to encourage deeper contextual understanding, in order to allow for more rapid and nuanced approaches to changing conditions or new information.

KEY REFLECTIONS

In some ways, the results for 3MDG have been slow in coming. However, as one donor representative put it: “Some political analysts think it’s amazing that (the) IRC are even there” and the project has created the conditions for future success in a challenging context. The progress made in coordination and collaboration among previously conflicting parties is arguably more impressive than the gains made in health outcomes, and the relationships built will contribute to further health outcomes going forward.

As the Program Director observed: “There has been a change in mindset over the past year. Whereas previously they (the SHD and ethnic health organizations) wouldn’t speak, now they seek to understand the other. They try to find common ground and are willing to compromise. This change has been brought about by building trust, which has been facilitated by making the most of opportunities for engagement when they arise. Without donor flexibility and careful navigation of the context, none of this would have been possible.”

ANNEX THREE

ADAPT Case Study



ENSURING CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS AND FLEXIBLE PARTNERSHIP IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL SYRIA

CASE IN BRIEF

The South and Central Syria program supports local NGOs and community-based organizations that respond to changing humanitarian needs in the midst of a war. Implemented by Mercy Corps with funding from three donors, the program leverages an in-house team of conflict analysts to inform response activities and forecast future needs. Critical to adaptive management have been the program's flexible compliance procedures to match partner capacity, and the autonomy to evolve team structure as needed. Donor approval processes remain a challenge. Early isolation from Mercy Corps' headquarters hampered access to internal support and learning from other programs, but is being addressed as the program moves forward.

BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

The humanitarian consequences of the Syrian war have been far-reaching. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates there are 13.5 million people in need of assistance, including 4.8 million refugees and 6.6 million displaced within Syria. Now in its sixth year, the war has had a dramatic effect on service provision, with health facilities, schools, and other essential services across the country closed or operating at reduced capacity. Spiraling food and fuel prices, a deep economic recession, sanctions, fluctuating national currency, and disrupted markets have worsened vulnerability. The use of sieges – cutting civilian populations off from food and humanitarian assistance – by the Syrian government and other forces have exacerbated malnutrition and the lack of access to essential services.

In response to the war, nascent civil society and community-based organizations have had to rapidly develop the capacity to partner with international NGOs to deliver aid. However, their staff face a constant threat of being detained, tortured, or killed by the government or other parties to the conflict who seek to control delivery of aid and services. Receiving funds from international partners is further complicated by the financial infrastructure, embargoes on Syria, counterterrorism regulations, and the regulations of the surrounding countries where many international NGOs base their relief operations.

PROGRAM

Mercy Corps maintained a presence in Damascus until 2014, when it moved its operational base outside Syria. Since then, the South and Central Syria (SCS) program has worked with

partners inside Syria to provide food assistance; non-food items (NFIs); water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); livelihoods support; and limited activities in child protection and education.

The SCS program has always taken a partner-led approach, whereby partners propose projects based on their local knowledge of needs and what is possible. However, certain aspects of this approach have evolved over time. Mercy Corps has moved from working largely through umbrella groups and international NGOs that were still able to work within Syria to working more directly through smaller community-based organizations. Current program partners range from relatively well established local NGOs to more informal networks of activists and volunteers. In addition, the SCS team has come to recognize that many partners do not consider methods beyond in-kind distributions. Mercy Corps has started to offer more strategic guidance to help partners think through alternative approaches, such as livelihoods activities and pre-positioning.



You can't cut short this process as it's all based on relationships and trust. We couldn't do it without the partners. They have access and understand the communities. Partnership is not just a thing. It's the thing."

Humanitarian Director

In 2015, the SCS program reached 847,179 people in some of Syria's hardest to reach areas. It is funded by grants from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US

Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), and Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development (DFATD—now called Global Affairs Canada).¹

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS



INTERNAL CAPACITY TO PROVIDE CONTEXT ANALYSIS AND FORECASTING

The SCS program has deliberately built its internal capacity to understand the context, analyze conflict dynamics, and forecast future events in order to support a more agile and strategic response. The core of this capacity is a five-person “Humanitarian Access Team”, which draws on informant networks within Syria, social media reports, the knowledge of Syrian staff on the team, observations of implementing partners, and experience gained over the last two years of analyzing the Syrian conflict. The team invests heavily in report writing, mapping skills, and a website for information sharing, though the use of their information hinges more on personal connections and a team that work closely together.



Within two months of the Humanitarian Access Team, I learned more about Syria than I knew in the whole year before.”

Program Director

This team's analysis has supported a shift away from the reactive model typical of humanitarian aid, toward a more anticipatory approach that prepares for likely scenarios. This has been particularly important as the number and severity of sieges has increased, with humanitarian aid often arriving too late. Forecasting has allowed the SCS program to pre-position food baskets while access is still possible, ensuring aid is ready for release when certain triggers occur.

Having a detailed understanding of the Syrian context also makes the SCS program a better partner. It increases the feasibility of the requests Mercy Corps makes of partners and improves communication. The team has also been able to offer more strategic advice to partners, exploring alternatives to in-kind assistance (food baskets or NFIs) such as providing vouchers or supporting localized livelihoods strategies alongside emergency activities.

In a striking example, the Humanitarian Access Team's knowledge of a local court system in northern Homs helped the SCS program advise a local partner who was encountering problems with armed groups stopping shipments of aid. The partner had sought extra funding to hire armed security for their distributions – a request which Mercy Corps felt could further fuel a cycle of violence. Knowing that the local court system was fairly well-functioning and respected by

communities, Mercy Corps suggested that the partner raise the issue with the court and ask for mediation support. Within a week, the court came down in favor of the partner and aid reached the besieged area.



Partners don't have the ability to analyze and forecast these things, even if they have the information. We're shifting a bit more to giving them a framework for what they should be doing. It will always be owned by them, but shifting in a good way where we're actually giving a bit of advice.”

Program Director

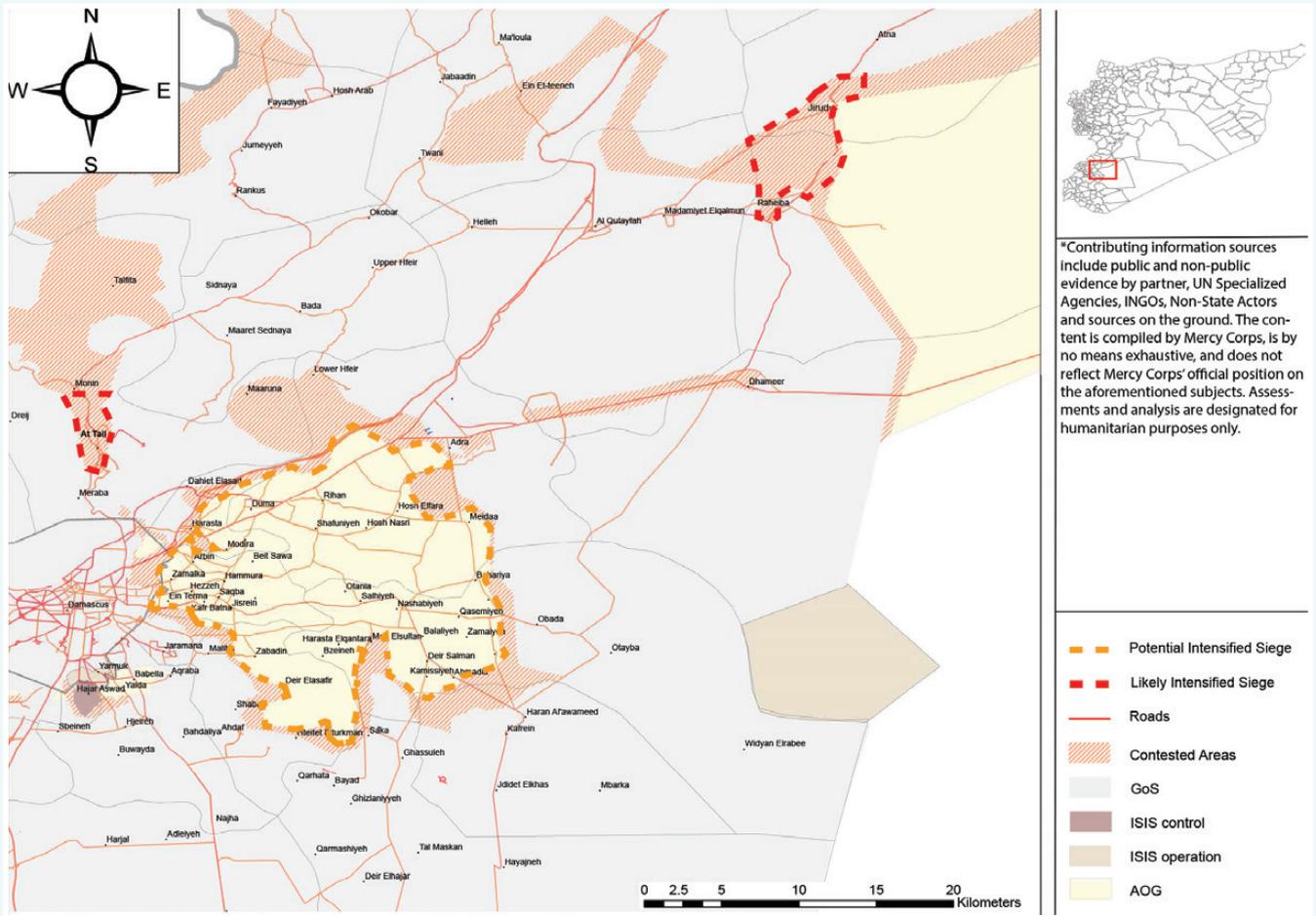
The capacity for this contextual awareness took a long time to develop. The Humanitarian Access Team was initially formed as a security team. It was given space to learn during its first six months, developing an in-depth understanding of the dynamics in Syria and producing conflict analyses. However, it was not expected to provide any value for programmatic decision making during this period. Separated from program activities, the team struggled to understand programs and present information whose form or content could be easily used by the program team.

Mercy Corps also struggled with large amounts of potentially unreliable data. Vast amounts of secondary information on humanitarian needs in Syria proved a huge burden for information management and analysis. Investments made in analyzing this information have proven to have limited returns: the data is often too late, inaccurate, or simply irrelevant for programmatic decisions. Having information available but not transformed into actionable analysis is a missed opportunity.

Since late 2015, the products of the Humanitarian Access Team have become much more usable, driven by a new leader of the SCS program who emphasized greater cross-team collaboration. The team has been working with the Information Management Team to overlay humanitarian data with conflict analysis. Reports increasingly incorporate scenario forecasting and recommendations. Even simple presentation changes, such as the use of bullet points, have helped programs teams to make better use of the analysis.

Finally, the very presence of a team focused on context analysis and “big picture” understanding of the conflict has been influencing strategic debates and decisions. Prompted by the Humanitarian Access Team, the SCS team is now planning to investigate how private actors are supported or undercut by local power structures in the conflict. This political economy analysis could potentially inform the team's future efforts to work with non-traditional partners, such as business communities, which may have the strongest capacity to address localized needs.

¹ An \$11m grant from DFID (July 2014 - June 2016) for food assistance, WASH, NFIs and livelihoods; a \$3.5m grant from OFDA (October 2015 - September 2016) for WASH and NFIs; and a \$1.4m grant from DFATD (March 2014 - February 2016) covering child protection and education.



*Contributing information sources include public and non-public evidence by partner, UN Specialized Agencies, INGOs, Non-State Actors and sources on the ground. The content is compiled by Mercy Corps, is by no means exhaustive, and does not reflect Mercy Corps' official position on the aforementioned subjects. Assessments and analysis are designated for humanitarian purposes only.

Likely Intensified Siege Areas: Qalamoun/Eastern Ghouta (14 January 2016): Example of map produced by Humanitarian Access Team helps program teams foresee siege areas.

“
There is a logic to conflict. If you can figure that out, you can change how you work.”
 Humanitarian Access Team Leader

CREATIVE COMPLIANCE TO MATCH PARTNER CAPACITY

The SCS team’s work has required a nuanced understanding of each partner’s capacities, the ability to respond to differences in capacity and the operating environment, and strong relationships of reciprocal trust.

The ability to respond to the contextual nuance started with an early recognition that Mercy Corps’ standard compliance procedures were often unworkable in the Syrian context. For example, requirements like collecting three quotations for procurements over a certain value are impossible to satisfy where there are limited suppliers and where partners could be put at risk holding or transferring such documentation. Early partners might say they could provide certain documentation, only to reveal later that it was impossible to obtain.

This led the SCS program to adapt financial and compliance processes, and develop robust alternatives such as a matrix

of supporting documentation. Finance and compliance staff use this tool in working with partners to identify what is feasible. Basing requirements on what is feasible has helped create a more honest relationship between Mercy Corps and its partners.

The willingness to be flexible with financial documentation requirements is accompanied by an expectation of improvement. Capacity development, always a core focus of SCS, has shifted from one-off trainings to regular coaching, facilitation support and peer meetings. This has proved to be more effective and appreciated by partners.

The SCS team has encouraged awareness of its partnership approach and alternative compliance procedures within Mercy Corps’ headquarters and among donors, helping to build trust in the approach. This creates space for the team to work in ways appropriate to the context, quickly responding to partner needs with clear answers, while understanding when and how to escalate issues for headquarters or donor approval. The team’s clear understanding of its decision making authority in turn helps the partners understand their own latitude for rapidly responding to context shifts and emerging needs.

ENABLING RAPID PARTNER RESPONSES

One of the SCS program's longest standing partners saw the strength of the flexible approval process when an emergency started in northern Homs. Observing the widespread displacement that was underway, the partner requested permission to move activities into a new area. Mercy Corps rapidly gave permission, first communicating it informally so that activities could start, and then following up with a formal approval process.

This nimble reaction was only possible due to the relationship of mutual trust that had been built between the partner and Mercy Corps. Over the prior one and a half years, the SCS team had invested considerable time in supporting the partner's organizational development, with a staff member visiting the partner's offices twice a week during a particularly intensive period of support. This extensive engagement gave Mercy Corps confidence in allowing the partner greater freedom in decision making and flexibility within budget lines.

This stands in contrast to the partner's relationships with other international NGOs, which often request that quotations for every activity are sent first to their office and then onwards to the headquarters for approval. Minor procurements such as purchasing a water pump can take a week. Given the difficulty in predicting in advance exactly what support will be required in a specific location, Mercy Corps' flexibility allows the team inside Syria to react rapidly.



Promptness and speed is vital, as access to besieged areas can close quickly.”

Partner representative



This takes more time at the beginning but it saves a lot of time later.... It used to take six months to close financial reports but now it can be done in one month.... Compared to other INGOs we do a lot of follow up, which builds trust. In this line of work, you really need to be able to trust our partners.... Through regular contact you learn more about what they really do.

Partnership Finance Coordinator



A lot of the enabling solutions and drive comes from the partners themselves. We're really responding to partners' creativity and innovation.”

Compliance Advisor



PROGRAM AUTONOMY TO GROW THE TEAM ORGANICALLY

The SCS program's adaptations were possible as a result of a dynamic team with an evolving structure, driven and protected by strong leadership at the program and regional level. Significant autonomy from external interference during the first year and a half gave the program time to experiment, make mistakes, and improve.

Departments have grown organically and roles have evolved in response to emerging needs. For example, the finance and compliance team grew from two staff to seven (out of a total

team of 22 staff). This large size reflects the unusual level of effort devoted to building partners' finance capacity. Such growth is unlikely to occur in programs that design rigid org-charts at inception.

The team also recruited an Operations Manager – a potentially unnecessary position given that Mercy Corps is not directly implementing program activities. In this case, the role was filled by someone who brought an inquisitive mindset and years of experience with Mercy Corps systems. He took on mentorship with the team and strategic problem solving for the program. For example, he developed a way to allow Mercy Corps to hire Syrians, despite a regulatory environment that sought to prevent this. Careful recruitment, including a conscious drive to hire more Syrians, has led to a team composed of people with diverse and complementary skills who are willing to try doing things differently.

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



DONOR APPROVAL DELAYS

The SCS program's donors have largely supported its partnership approach, but certain OFDA requirements have reduced Mercy Corps' and its partners' abilities to respond to the volatility that characterizes the Syrian conflict. Notably, OFDA must approve all new partners and sub-grants, with a process that can take up to five weeks. The burdens and delays imposed by the process prevent the SCS program's partners from initiating new activities in a timely manner.

Separately, an exhaustive waiver process is required for the procurement of any vehicles made outside the United States, with partners putting themselves at risk to collect some of the required information; adding to the frustration,

waivers only last for 180 days. Finally, OFDA only supports a limited number of sectors: it is unable to fund food aid due to departmental barriers within USAID, so the program's OFDA grant only covers WASH and NFI distributions. This has inhibited the program's ability to initiate new food-focused sub-grants, even in cases when access to food has been identified as the primary humanitarian need.

In contrast to OFDA's regulations, DFID allows for notification, rather than approval, of new partners and sub-grants. The result is nimbler responses to developments within Syria.

Challenges to rapid responses are ongoing. In February 2016, the Humanitarian Access Team shed light on a worsening situation in Dar'a as Russian airstrikes intensified and armed opposition groups initiated a new campaign to repel government forces. While the SCS program was aware of the escalating emergency, it was unable to respond in a timely way: not enough funding remained under their DFID grant, and OFDA's partner pre-approval would not have moved quickly enough.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND CONNECTION TO HQ

The inception of the SCS program was somewhat clandestine. Given general fears that sharing information might put partners and activities inside Syria at risk, and specific issues related to the legal status of cross-border activities, very little was communicated about the SCS program both within Mercy Corps and externally. This secrecy, combined with the fact that many of the early SCS team members were new to Mercy Corps, contributed to the separation of the program from headquarters, which helped it craft a different way of working.

Unfortunately, these factors also isolated the program from headquarters' resources and prevented cross-learning with Mercy Corps programs elsewhere. Mercy Corps is an organization that relies heavily on informal networks and internal relationships to access the support and quick approvals that can enable adaptive management. This isolation has constrained the program's ability to make requests to headquarters, resulting in missed opportunities to deal with issues related to technical areas, compliance, and donor relations. More recently, key staff visits to Mercy Corps headquarters and the addition of a Humanitarian Director with significant Mercy Corps experience have fostered better internal relationships and connections.

KEY REFLECTIONS

The SCS program's three adaptive capabilities – the internal analytical capacity provided by the Humanitarian Access Team, creative compliance methods to match partner capacity, and program autonomy to grow the team organically – all combine to support one another in various ways. The context analysis guides specific partner engagements, partners provide information for that analysis, the organic team growth has allowed both the evolution of the operations team to support partner capacity and also the development of the program's analytical capacity, and the analysis helps to make the case for the program's autonomy.

This mix of capabilities has not been enough to eliminate the constraints on adaptive management, but it has mitigated them. The result is a program approach that enables the flexible and adaptive work of its partners. The move to pre-positioning and livelihoods programming in conflict zones also marks an important shift from reactive to anticipatory and nuanced humanitarian work. This would not have been possible without the program's investments in contextual understanding.

ANNEX FOUR

ADAPT Case Study



LEVERAGING AN INFORMANT NETWORK FOR RAPID RELIEF RESPONSE IN DIFFA, NIGER

CASE IN BRIEF

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has responded to humanitarian needs in the Diffa region of southeast Niger since 2013. Facing a shifting context and challenging operational environment, the team built a network of informants that feeds into a mechanism for rapid programmatic responses as populations move or new needs arise. An internal team culture of open communication facilitates the program's analysis and adaptation. The IRC also leverages this information to influence the wider humanitarian community's response. Despite procurement constraints and government restrictions, the program has dramatically increased its scale and the diversity of support it provides to people displaced by violence and insecurity.

BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

There are currently an estimated 213,000 refugees, returnees, and internally displaced people in the Diffa region in southeast Niger. Escalating insecurity and violence in nearby northern Nigeria has been the main driver of this crisis: over 165,000 people fled across that porous border between late 2013 and late 2015. In Niger itself, Boko Haram attacks since early 2015 and forced relocations instigated by the government have resulted in internal displacement.

The influx of Nigerian refugees and Nigerien returnees has stretched already scarce resources in a region that has long faced chronic food insecurity, poor access to basic services, and recurrent droughts and floods. Displaced people are spread across remote host communities, with a very small proportion (approximately 2%) residing in camps. Humanitarian actors struggle to reach communities in need due to limited infrastructure, a volatile security situation, and fluid population movements across a large geographic area.

PROGRAMS

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been working in Diffa since June 2013, with a portfolio of work that has evolved with the shifting context. The initial focus on population monitoring and protection allowed the IRC to develop a robust network for collecting information from across the region. As the crisis escalated, the response launched activities related to food, non-food items (NFIs), nutrition, health, livelihoods, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Donor funding has increased to support this work.

Starting with a single grant of \$330,000 in October 2013, the IRC's portfolio had grown to 13 grants and a total value of \$8.1 million by December 2015. The funding has come from a range of donors, including: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida); UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Swiss Agency for International Development (SDC); European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO); Stichting Vluchteling; US Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM); and US Agency for International Development's Offices of Food for Peace (FFP) and Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

The diversity of activities and rapid increase in funding have both depended on the response team's ability to track changes in the context and react quickly, working with the rest of the humanitarian community, despite challenges from procurement procedures and government restrictions.



IDP/refugee settlement in Diffa.

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS

INFORMANT NETWORKS AND RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISMS

The IRC’s informant network has ensured that the team can track population movements and rapidly respond to emerging needs. Both of these components – the informant network and the response mechanisms – evolved over time as the IRC expanded its work in Diffa.

The informant network started small and grew quickly. In October 2013, the launch of the initial project included a partnership with a local NGO, the Niger Association for the Defense of Human Rights (known by its French acronym: ANDDH), to recruit seven monitors to cover 81 sites. Within a few months, the number of sites hosting displaced people had grown to nearly 200. To accommodate the growth, the response team switched to a system of “focal points”: in each site where displaced people were present or likely to arrive, individual citizens were provided with a phone that allows them to call the IRC and ANDDH for free. As the program continued to expand and launch new activities, it also set up village protection committees to help with identification and protection support.

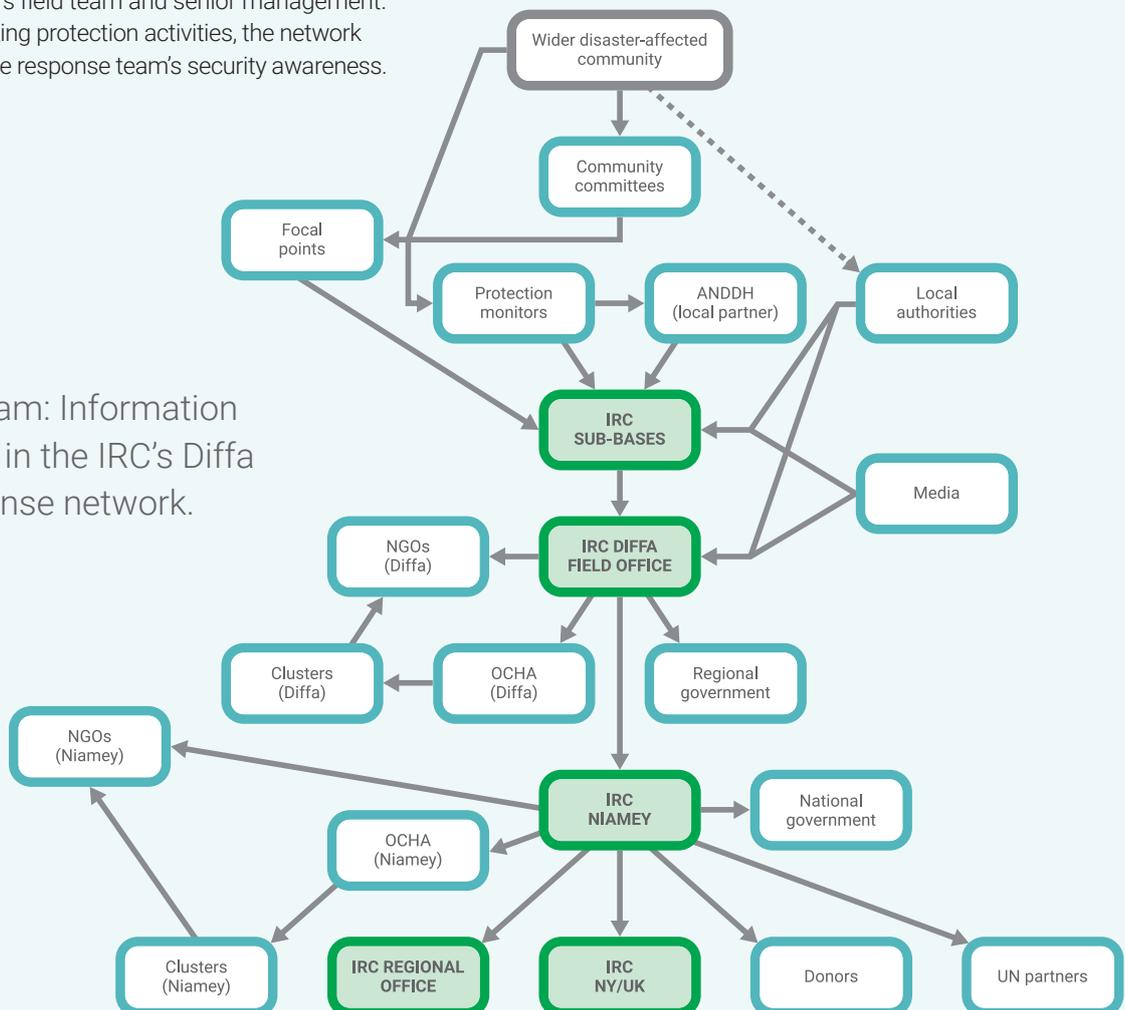
This network of focal points and protection committees rapidly transfers information on population movements and needs to the IRC’s field team and senior management. While mostly supporting protection activities, the network has also increased the response team’s security awareness.

The team has been better able to ascertain when it is unsafe to visit certain areas, and to maximize periods of relative security. The network has even served as a proxy for the IRC when security restricts access; in particular, the committees are able to carry out some program activities and provide information about services in their areas.

The IRC’s contextual awareness was crucial to a scenario planning exercise held in January 2015. The day-long session pulled together team members from across multiple offices in the region to examine different ways the situation in northeastern Nigeria and Diffa might develop. Factors like the joint Nigerien, Chadian, and Nigerian military operations, Boko Haram’s response, and potential subsequent population displacement all fed into the development of four scenarios; three of which actually occurred in subsequent months.

The week after the planning exercise, the team sent proposals to emergency funders to support a rapid response mechanism. With dedicated funding and staff on this mechanism, information received from the focal points and committees network can now trigger multi-sector assessments using household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. A scoring system flags critical issues and prioritizes hard-to-reach and highly vulnerable areas. These assessments have led to rapid food, NFI, and WASH activities, as needed.

Diagram: Information flows in the IRC’s Diffa response network.



INFORMATION, RESPONSE, AND INFLUENCE: LAKE CHAD ISLANDS

In March 2014, the community focal points alerted IRC about increasing movement towards Lake Chad and that nearly half of the people who had arrived in Diffa were staying on islands on the lake. Recognizing the information gap, the response team launched an assessment with the support of local authorities. It revealed over 10,000 newly arrived people on the islands and massive unmet health and water needs. At that point, no international NGOs were working on the islands.

Over the course of a weekend, the IRC team developed a concept note for a response, submitted it to UNHCR, and received approval with a budget of \$100,000. The response launched the following week. It provided people on 117 islands with access to clean water and better health services, through a mobile boat clinic and provision of medical supplies to health clinics. The assessment and intervention also had a multiplier effect, as it attracted the attention of other agencies to the previously underserved islands and to the possibilities of mobile clinics.

This experience marked a turning point in the IRC's Diffa response in three ways: it expanded the number of sectors in which the IRC worked; it was the first rapid emergency response launched; and it demonstrated the potential of information sharing as an advocacy tool to increase the responsiveness of the wider humanitarian community.



Photo: IRC
Aid delivery in Lake Chad.

INFLUENCE ON WIDER HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

The informant network has proved valuable beyond the IRC's own projects. As demonstrated by the Lake Chad response in March 2014 (see box), other humanitarian actors have made effective use of the information gathered and analysis conducted by the IRC team. Given the operational and security challenges in Diffa, few agencies have as much on-the-ground presence and often lack updated information on population movements and needs.

The response team shares information through weekly reports, and switched to daily reports during the peak of the crisis. Multi-sector assessments are also shared and distributed by OCHA to the clusters and other humanitarian agencies. Together, these reports and assessments have helped to set the agenda with key actors such as UN agencies and donors, highlighting the volatility of the situation and advocating for appropriate and flexible responses to emerging needs.

Furthermore, the IRC leadership team has maintained regular formal and informal channels of communication with UN agencies, donors, and local authorities. Regular updates keep donors informed of the evolving situation, which in turn makes it easier for the IRC to renegotiate projects and contracts as well as secure funding for new projects to meet emerging needs.

In a few instances, the information provided by the IRC has prompted a response by another international NGO. However, there have been challenges with follow-through on commitments to launch activities that are made following the distribution of an IRC multi-sector assessment by OCHA. A functioning official coordination system was missing for some time, which made it difficult to hold actors accountable, though that situation is improving.



At the beginning our projects were based on logframes. We're now doing the job based more on context than on logframes. To do this, we need to have regular communication with donors... but what we really need is a contingency plan that identifies alternative pathways so that if the situation changes we have automatic approval to change the way we work."

Deputy Director for Programs



OPEN COMMUNICATION AND TEAM CULTURE

Team engagement is critical to working adaptively and navigating the uncertainty of an insecure environment. The IRC response team has managed to promote this engagement in a variety of ways.

First, the leadership has promoted open communication by actively seeking and valuing information obtained by field staff, and demonstrating commitment to act rapidly on it. This has also meant modelling adaptability in the way the leadership team works. Management staff have sought to find or create flexibility in rules and policies to ensure field staff are able to do their work; this has included, for example, almost doubling the financial authorization level of field coordinators, as well as developing a system of electronic approval and payment from the capital to allow for quicker action.

Second, leadership has sought to show its commitment to supporting staff. When an attack on Diffa town seemed

imminent in February 2015, the IRC evacuated local staff and their families to safety in Zinder (see box). Combined with hazard pay for staff working in Diffa, this sort of action has helped the IRC retain staff when many other organizations have lost significant numbers. In more mundane examples, staff have observed that rapid promotions are possible as recognition of good performance and team work. Field staff efforts are also recognized by the Country Director through regular encouraging messages and the communication of positive feedback received from the IRC headquarters and donors.

Finally, open communication among team members has helped to foster flexibility. For example, in the Diffa field office, daily briefings dispelled rumors and helped build team spirit. These measures have supported an environment where staff at all levels remained committed and willing to work in flexible ways, despite the highly insecure and volatile context.



Any change in context inevitably requires changes in the implementation of activities and our approach with the beneficiaries. This is the surest way to achieve the objectives we assigned ourselves.”

Member of field staff from Diffa office

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



STANDARD PROCUREMENT PROCEDURES

The IRC's standard procurement procedures have been a burden on the Diffa team's ability to respond rapidly. NFI distributions, construction of WASH facilities, and other activities have required significant and speedy procurement. The IRC has an emergency procurement policy that can

be activated with approval from headquarters, but the Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit determined that the number of people affected in Niger was too few to qualify the emergency response for relaxed procedures.

That lack of approval means the Niger team has been required to hold open tenders, taking at least three weeks, for procurements over \$20,000. For some large procurements, the team has sought individual exemptions to hold quicker bid processes, rather than the lengthy open tenders. More recently, the IRC in Niger has created Master Purchase Agreements which pre-approve vendors who can deliver goods at pre-determined prices within three days. These agreements (used for NFIs, transportation, and latrine and borehole construction) have since helped to increase the IRC's responsiveness.



GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS ON DATA SHARING

Data sharing has proved to be a sensitive issue with the Nigerien government, despite a generally positive relationship throughout the response effort. Government data is typically released more than two months after it is collected; given the fluidity of population movements, efforts to map service coverage cannot be effectively aligned with population data. At the start of the Diffa crisis, the IRC began monitoring and reporting on population movements, sharing estimates on the numbers of new arrivals with the wider humanitarian community in order to fill the information gap.

However, the government has since prohibited the IRC (and any other non-state actor) from reporting unofficial population data. This has reduced contextual awareness among humanitarian actors in Diffa, hindering the overall humanitarian response.

PROGRAMMATIC AND OPERATIONAL SHIFTS FOLLOWING BOKO HARAM ATTACKS IN FEBRUARY 2015

Boko Haram attacks in February 2015 turned Diffa into a warzone. Through security and media monitoring, the IRC observed increased military (Nigerien and foreign forces) and Boko Haram movements in early February. On February 3rd, the team closed the Bosso sub-base and relocated staff; two days later, Boko Haram attacked Bosso. As violence began to threaten Diffa town, the IRC evacuated all but three essential staff from Diffa to Zinder. Core staff began working from a newly opened office in Zinder, remotely supporting activities in Diffa thanks to the partnership with ANDDH and the network of focal points and village protection committees.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the IRC made both programmatic and operational shifts. Donors such as ECHO, SDC, and UNHCR allowed the projects they funded to shift focus away from longer-term livelihoods activities to essential

lifesaving aid. In the case of SDC, it took approximately a week to secure approval for the programmatic change, including a major budget realignment, reduction of the implementation timeframe by four months, and launch of entirely new activities. Meanwhile, funding from Sida, unrestricted funds from the IRC, and the flexibility of other donors allowed the launch of the rapid response mechanism.

Operationally, significant investments were made in the purchase of new vehicles and communications equipment. Arrangements were made to allow for faster procurement. The IRC's adaptation following the volatile situation and quick restart of work convinced donors of its capacity and led to subsequent funding streams to further develop the emergency response activities.

SUMMARY

In an uncertain and volatile context, the IRC has built systems to collect information and put it to actionable use. The informant networks of focal points and protection committees have contributed to the IRC's own responsiveness, especially through the dedicated funding and staff of its rapid response mechanism. It has also been able to influence other humanitarian actors: as of December 2015, the IRC was one of only four international NGOs on the Humanitarian Country Team, with its weekly reports and multi-sector assessments promoted by OCHA. This information sharing has helped create an enabling donor environment, further facilitating adaptation.

Despite these adaptive capabilities and enablers, the IRC efforts in Diffa have struggled with many of the same procurement procedures and government restrictions that plague other response efforts. Few program contexts are perfectly suited for adaptive management. What stands out in this case is the interconnections between various adaptive capacities to create a more enabling environment, and to compensate for the inhibitors that exist.



Villagers in Diffa line up to collect water from one of three wells constructed by the IRC in the remote villages of Gagamari and Chetimari.

ANNEX FIVE

ADAPT Case Study



PROMOTING PARTNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNING TO FIGHT EBOLA IN LIBERIA

CASE IN BRIEF

As the Ebola crisis reached its peak in Liberia, the Mercy Corps team launched an ambitious experiment in adaptive management: to implement an emergency, social mobilization program with a technology-intensive learning platform. The Ebola Community Action Platform (ECAP) gave significant autonomy to 77 partner organizations to design their own outreach efforts. ECAP encouraged localized decision-making and supported a number of learning channels which enabled partners to make regular improvements during implementation. The ECAP team learned from many challenges, including the burden of their technology-intensive monitoring system, rapid team growth, internal communication challenges, and strained operational capacity. Despite these issues, the program reached 2.4 million people in nine months and helped drive improved learning systems in later programs.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Liberia confirmed its first case of Ebola on March 30, 2014. The number of new cases in the country would erupt in July, reaching a peak in September. In the two years following the first case, approximately 10,700 Liberians would contract the disease, resulting in over 4,800 deaths nationwide.

Mercy Corps' Ebola Community Action Platform (ECAP) launched just after the peak, in October 2014. This social mobilization program sought to address a nation-wide gap in localized awareness raising and information sharing on Ebola. It had the ambitious goal of reaching two million people in six months, later extended to nine months, with the support of \$12 million from the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the technical guidance of partner Population Services International (PSI).

ECAP was designed around a two-pronged approach. First, ECAP sub-granted 77 geographically spread, locally trusted grassroots organizations. Of these, 71 were community-based organizations such as women's groups, youth groups, and religious organizations. Some had previous experience with health issues, and some had none. Most had never accessed international funds before. Each partner could define (and, importantly, change) their own mobilization strategy, so long as they articulated a plan for influencing community knowledge and behaviors related to Ebola. Partners were then trained in the "Listen, Learn, Act" methodology, a flexible framework provided by PSI to guide their message focus in communities.

Second, ECAP established a nation-wide, technology-centered monitoring and learning platform to help partners improve

their mobilization activities. Mercy Corps sent 1,000 mobile phones to the partners' community mobilizers, who would use them to report on their mobilization activities and on community knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Data from the technology platform fed into an online dashboard, self-reflection workshops held by the partners, and broader lessons learned workshops hosted by Mercy Corps. In response, many partners shifted their mobilization approaches and messaging emphasis over the course of the program.



Community educators for Centre for Liberian Assistance, an ECAP partner, mobilize for community outreach on the dangers of Ebola.



We used the bottom to top approach. We listened to the communities, and then were able to listen to communicators, and the mobilizers were able to work as a team, and then there was support from management."

Local ECAP Partner



What was good was that the NGOs got to make their own decisions – we didn't have the capacity to manage these NGOs, we didn't know the communities or how to go to them."

ECAP Program Director

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS



PARTNER AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENT DECISION MAKING

Community organizations were best placed to quickly and effectively spread messages about Ebola prevention and care as Mercy Corps and other international partners like Population Services International (PSI) lacked the localized knowledge or networks to reach communities nationwide or respond to changes in context at a community level.

The ECAP team created very few rules for its partners in their grant applications. This allowed them to define mobilization activities that drew on their local strengths. Partners' ability to shift strategies over the course of the program was eased by a funding mechanism (Fixed Obligation Grants – FOGs – recently renamed Fixed Amount Awards) which did not require the burdensome screening or financial reporting of standard sub-grants.

Reporting through the mobile data-collection platform also helped to protect the autonomy of partners. The presence of a publicly available dashboard reassured the OFDA and the Ministry of Health that the program would stay on track. This confidence gave ECAP and its partners the space to test and improve their work. In fact, OFDA and Mercy Corps intentionally limited the number of required reporting indicators to give partners the contractual flexibility to change their detailed approaches over time.

Nonetheless, the sub-granting plan had its challenges. Setting up sub-grants and FOGs required significant time; partners were not approved until two months after the initial program approval. FOGs could also be constraining. Even

as they helped ECAP to include grassroots organizations, the reliance on fixed budget values and pre-determined deliverables meant that partners could not easily amend their budgets to add, for example, communication materials for their field work.

To spread the management burden, Mercy Corps used standard sub-granting with some higher-capacity partners, who then sub-granted to grassroots organizations through FOGs. In all, Mercy Corps managed 26 partners directly, and another 51 through consortium lead partners. The program's results would not have been possible without the cascading partnership structure. Still, the complicated nature of the partner application, approval, and contracting process call into question whether another system could have been faster and more responsive.



ECAP mobilizer collecting community data using a mobile phone.



MULTIPLE CHANNELS FOR PARTNER LEARNING

ECAP had many learning channels to support partner learning and adaptation. Direct observations, monitoring data, and spaces for reflection were all necessary, in different doses and combinations, for partners that made shifts in their approaches.

Savvy partners made quick, local changes based on field observations, daily meetings, texts, social media, and phone calls to understand what was not working. These were light-touch, informal monitoring mechanisms that relied on

PIVOTS IN PARTNERS' APPROACHES

One ECAP partner recognized the Ebola-related risks posed by female genital mutilation, a widespread practice in some locations. Though addressing or challenging these cultural practices was not the goal of ECAP, the partner was able to hold conversations with female leaders to discuss locally relevant messages about hygiene and safety around bodily fluids. These conversations were also structured to improve the partner's understand of the local context, a key piece of PSI's "Listen, Learn, Act" methodology.

In another case, this same organization struggled to get entry in another area due to informal, political dynamics. Through an ECAP Lessons Learned workshop, the partner's leaders had met another ECAP partner with strong ties to the area; they called on this other partner to facilitate an introduction to the restricted areas.

localized information flows (including using the “Listen, Learn, Act” methodology), independent from Mercy Corps’ data collection efforts.

Meanwhile, the technology platform gathered data nationwide and made the full monitoring data available to all partners through an online dashboard. Those who accessed it or interacted with the analysis at workshops found it useful. For example, some partners redirected their mobilizers’ activities in response to activity-level data on geographic coverage and mobilization methods.

For other partners, learning was crystallized in “lessons learned” workshops. The Mercy Corps monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team presented aggregate data showing activity outreach, types of mobilization activities implemented, and the kinds of messages emphasized. Data helped to show how communities’ attitudes were changing, including how message types were correlated with improvements in attitudes toward survivors over time, which helped partners understand the importance of certain messages.

The workshops also provided space for partners to share their own experiences. Many kept in touch after the workshops (via Whatsapp and by phone) to source ideas and advice from one another. Unfortunately, the demands of an emergency program led one planned workshop to be cut, while another focused primarily on data quality and capacity building to get the monitoring system running. In the end, only two lessons learned workshops were held during the course of the program.

These various channels for learning helped some partner organizations make multiple changes to their mobilization approaches over time. They moved mobilizers around to cover geographic gaps in coverage or border hot spots; changed mobilization schedules to reach farming households when families would be home; switched from repetitive door-to-door visits to more creative community engagement, like drama and puppetry; and shifted focus of messages to address relevant issues (such as stigma) when Ebola cases waned and communities demonstrated knowledge about transmission.



OUTCOME ORIENTATION

The clear goal of “getting (Ebola cases) to zero” through social mobilization was shared by the ECAP program’s wide partner base. While many programs rely on leadership to clarify objectives and motivate the team, the unique nature of the Ebola crisis provided a goal that was felt personally, even viscerally, by every person involved.

This motivation translated into a desire to improve. Partners were intrinsically motivated to adapt their mobilization activities to be more effective, and Mercy Corps team members worked quickly to solve partners’ issues. As one manager put it: “The enthusiasm and desire of the Liberian people is what made this work.”

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



BURDENSOME DATA SYSTEMS

While it was a bold undertaking, setting up a real-time data system with functional feedback loops at a national scale required more time and effort than was perhaps expedient in a short-term emergency program.

The technology platform required mobilizers to submit monthly data on: mobilization activities, including location, methods, and topics covered; challenges faced in the field; and the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) in communities. Partners would then have access to an online dashboard that showed the monthly report results.

The two team members responsible for the system faced a daunting task: training 1,000 mobilizers on mobile data collection, designing a dashboard with a programmer who was based remotely, addressing connectivity issues, and ensuring that partners sent in reports. The database was online after only six weeks, but fixing data quality issues on activity reports took another two to three months. Testing and iteration were also needed to craft the right questions in KAP surveys to improve data quality. In the end, the time

SEEING THINGS FIRST-HAND

Three months into implementation, the Program Director realized that a lack of field-level observation was limiting the Monrovia-based Mercy Corps team’s ability to support partners. Partner support officers had been doing most of their work via phone and email, which limited their tangible understanding of activities in the field. They were struggling to collaborate effectively with partners.

To address these issues, the partner support team joined the PSI staff for mobilizer trainings and field visits. These trips included time to observe mobilization activities in communities, and to reflect with partners and PSI on what was working and what could be improved.

This new approach led to Mercy Corps and PSI supporting several adaptations by partners, including shifting schedules to accommodate the farming season, clarifying mobilization methodology with partners to improve message quality, and pushing partners to focus on the right types of messages for their areas. The exercise also strengthened relationships and communication among Mercy Corps, PSI, and partners, improving their ability to jointly solve problems for the remainder of the program.

LEARNING FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

The team members who were responsible for ECAP's technology-intensive M&E system moved on to design systems for ECAP 2 and a youth economic empowerment program. They took lessons from the ECAP experience to design improved, leaner monitoring systems with sharper focuses on the types of information and best channels for reflection.

On the technical side, the ECAP system has moved from an ona.io platform to CommCare. In addition to computer-based access, teams are able to view activity reports from the field on their tablets. Individual community data, which was difficult to track under ECAP's first phase, can now be viewed longitudinally for each community and by the staff member responsible for a given area.

On the human side, Mercy Corps has focused on improving data quality by making a single M&E staff person in each ECAP partner organization responsible for data collection, and ensuring that person visits every community to collect baseline KAP information. With greater granularity and the ability to track individual organizations and communities over time, Mercy Corps and its partners are better able to monitor staff performance, motivate team members, and highlight good work. Individual organizations can see and comment on data submitted on the dashboard, helping them to better understand the activities they are implementing.

needed for capacity building and development of the system itself cut into other learning activities.

Even as data submission challenges were resolved, data use remained a problem. Partners lacked enough understanding of the M&E system to make robust use of it for ongoing learning. In an end-of-program survey, only 18 partners (of 24 respondents) reported having accessed the database at least once per month which fell short of the standards the ECAP team had set for themselves.

Similar challenges stood in the way of using the data for centralized, strategic decision making. Senior leadership was too busy to regularly guide the team on how and why the system's data could be used to improve the program. Meanwhile, the program's steering committee (a group created to make high-level shifts) was cut because of the volume of other work. By the time the Mercy Corps team was able to learn and improve, the program was coming to a close.



TEAMBUILDING AND COMMUNICATION

Forming a coherent team with clear roles and good internal communication was a major challenge with such a fast growing team. The demands of the crisis and the program's tight implementation timeline meant the team grew quickly. Mercy Corps' team in Liberia grew more than four-fold. Staff moved positions (Mercy Corps team members whose program activities had been suspended due to Ebola were moved to ECAP) and new staff joined, despite recruitment challenges – everyone in Liberia seemed to be recruiting, yet the pool for externally recruited staff was small for Ebola-affected countries.

Some team members, new and old, excelled in their new ECAP roles. Others lacked the hard or soft skills to do their jobs, often because their previous projects had been focused

on very different sectors, such as economic development. Brief on-boarding and limited on-the-job mentorship led to confusion over roles. M&E responsibilities were not clearly defined across the ECAP team which hindered the effectiveness of the monitoring systems. Moreover, mid-program transitions in management at senior and mid-levels made it difficult to establish a cohesive, collaborative team which could effectively support partner activities, learning, and improvement.

Some tension arose within the team, and sub-teams within ECAP began to function as silos. In the middle of the emergency, senior management did not have the space to build collaboration and transparent communication in the team. At times the communication breakdown would create frustration and confusion for partners, who received inconsistent and late communication about program activities. One team member roughly estimated that when communication was poor, up to 20% of some partners' time was wasted due to confusing messages received from Mercy Corps.

The challenges the team faced are common in emergency contexts. It is clear that improved on-boarding and mentorship in capacity-strained emergencies could enhance a team's ability to implement and adapt, even in the face of rapid shifts in funding streams and staffing needs.



OPERATIONS OVERSIGHT

The growth of the team in Liberia put significant pressure on the operations and finance functions. After support from Mercy Corps' emergency response unit and a short-term operations manager ended, the operations and finance functions were often too overwhelmed to quickly support program needs and adaptation.

Harvard’s Ronald Heifetz refers to strategic reflection as “getting off the dance floor, and on the balcony.” As one ECAP team member put it, the Program Director, “couldn’t get on the balcony because he was shouting at ops.”

This had three results. First, steps that would have reduced the amount of work needed in the future (such as getting preferred supplier agreements for basic supplies like paper) were delayed by many months. This increased the work load on both operations and programs teams, which created delays in procurements and reduced the amount of time available to spend on partner support.

Second, delays from operations limited the team’s time for reflection and energy to address strategic issues. Finally, delays in reconciling procurements made it challenging for management to monitor spending and have the information needed to adjust planned activities.

KEY REFLECTIONS

Decentralized decision making, the ability to network and learn from other partners, and opportunities to reflect on data gathered were important to partners’ ability to change their mobilization methods and focal messages. The ECAP team struggled to operationalize their technology-intensive learning platform in time to improve results, but their ambitious investments remain a promising source of learning for future efforts.



Photo: Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps

ECAP mobilizers lead community outreach in December 2014 in Robertsport.

ANNEX SIX

ADAPT Case Study



PIVOTING APPROACHES IN THE FACE OF A CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE: COMPARATIVE CASE

CASE IN BRIEF

Two education projects operating in Sierra Leone prior to Ebola responded to the crisis in dramatically different ways. Both implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), they demonstrate how adaptive management allows projects to achieve outcomes in the face of a changing context. One project had an iterative design from the beginning, with a flexible donor that trusted the implementing agency and empowered field staff. The project quickly shifted its approach and continued to support education in Kenema district in southeastern Sierra Leone throughout the crisis. The other project had a convoluted consortium and rigid donor requirements. It suspended activities for nearly nine months at the peak of the Ebola crisis, before finally re-launching with a new approach that quickly became irrelevant. Staff from both projects, and across the IRC, worked flexibly to support the overall Ebola response.

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) was managing several education projects in Sierra Leone when the Ebola outbreak began in May 2014. Despite progress made since the end of the country's civil war in 2002, education was characterized by poor retention, gender disparity, poor learning outcomes, and an education workforce where fewer than half of teachers were trained, qualified, and on salary.

One of the IRC projects that addresses these challenges is called “Lɛ Wi ɔl Lan”—also known as the “LWOL” project. It began as a relatively small-scale project in 2011, supported with an annual budget of \$600,000 from a private US-based foundation that focuses on education. LWOL's goal is to improve in-school learning opportunities and outcomes for girls and boys in Kenema district, in southeastern Sierra Leone. The project was designed to be iterative, with built-in annual reviews, budget revisions, and opportunities for adaptation.

Another project is the the “Supporting marginalized girls in Sierra Leone to complete basic education with improved learning outcomes” or “Girls' Education Challenge” (GEC) project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), administered by a Fund Manager, and implemented by a Consortium of international agencies. The GEC project launched in January 2013 with a three-year timeline (now extended) and a total budget of approximately \$9 million (of which the IRC's component was approximately \$2.9 million). The IRC was responsible for a range of activities (including distributing textbooks and uniforms, organizing study groups, and training teachers) in the three districts of Kenema, Kailahun, and Kono.

The Ebola outbreak rendered both the LWOL and GEC projects impossible to implement in their original forms, as schools were closed nationwide from July 2014 to April 2015 (though when initially closed, there was no re-opening date in sight). With schools closed, hundreds of thousands of children were left without access to education.

While the two projects faced the same unforeseeable change in their context, their responses to the shift took them on completely different trajectories. The GEC project suspended all field-level programming in July. The following March it eventually adapted its model to focus on improving access to radio lessons.



Students take part in small learning groups in January 2015.

Meanwhile, soon after schools closed, LWOL conducted an informal risk assessment of the outbreak's impact on learning. This led the program to develop an alternative model focused on small group learning, facilitated by unsalaried community teachers and supported by community members. Putting this model into practice required sensitization and preparation from July through September. Education activities began in October, only one month after the start of the normal school year.

Adding to the delays from school closures and new planning, IRC staff from both projects were seconded to health-related activities during the outbreak. Another stark difference between the projects became apparent here. When approximately half the LWOL team were seconded to work on health surveillance activities in Bo district, staff were still covered by the project's budget, and the donor allowed general support costs to be redirected to the health response. On the other hand, while the Fund Manager committed to cover the salaries of GEC staff during the project's suspension, it was on the condition that staff were *not* involved in any non-GEC activities. Seconded GEC staff had to be funded from other sources.

The crux of this comparative case lies in the way one project leveraged existing adaptive capabilities and enablers in the face of crisis, while the other was unable to overcome its constraints and inhibitors in a meaningful way.

LWOL: ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS



DONOR FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST IN THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTER

The IRC and the donor that funded LWOL had a collaborative and supportive relationship, sustained by regular informal communication between the project manager, education coordinator, and donor. The donor was supportive in connecting the project team with leading thinkers in education and development, and also recognized that project staff were the experts in what works on the ground. The donor encouraged an iterative project design that piloted innovative approaches, scaling up the successful ones and dropping the others.

For example, the initial design of LWOL included adult literacy classes, based on the assumption that improving adult literacy would enable parents to better support children's reading and writing. However, it was found that adult literacy classes were not having the expected impact on children's reading outcomes. The LWOL team decided to scale down adult literacy classes and instead invested in piloting other approaches, such as Teacher Learning Circles. The donor supported such shifts, though they demanded rigor in justifying decisions to change directions.

The relationship established prior to Ebola supported increased adaptability once the outbreak began. The donor quickly contacted the IRC to check on the safety of staff and offer support in approving any project alterations needed. The donor also provided bridge funding during the suspension of normal activities from July to September 2014, allowing

the IRC to scope out new activities, engage in community sensitization around education needs, and second LWOL staff to the Ebola response. This enabled the team to start appropriate education activities in October.

As schools prepared to re-open, communities expressed concern over the furniture broken and buildings damaged by the military use of schools during the outbreak. The LWOL donor allowed funds to be redirected for school maintenance and refurbishment, despite not normally supporting infrastructure. Throughout the project's adaptations, the lack of intermediaries between the IRC country program and the donor allowed budget re-alignment and grant re-approvals to move quickly.



DEVOLVED DECISION MAKING AND EMPOWERED FIELD STAFF

Change within LWOL often came from field staff suggesting different ways of working. The iterative project approach and management's efforts to empower and mentor staff have created an environment where field staff have great ownership of the project. Field teams critically appraise the project's progress toward goals, identify problems, and craft solutions in consultation with community stakeholders. This often occurs through a series of weekly and monthly reflection meetings, established by the field-based project manager as a way to encourage staff to discuss successes, challenges, and ways to mitigate problems.

This reflection and empowerment is complemented by a short and direct decision-making chain: the project manager, in consultation with the senior education manager and education coordinator, has the authority to make decisions about project changes and can discuss issues directly with the donor.

Field staff's observations laid the groundwork for the LWOL project's new approach in response to Ebola. The team noticed that unsalaried community teachers (who constitute the majority of teachers in rural areas) were moving away, as the school closures meant they no longer received financial support from the community. At the suggestion of LWOL field staff, the IRC continued to work with the teachers and paid them stipends to support small group learning activities. This approach provided education activities during the school closures, while the stipend ensured that teachers would still be present in rural communities when schools re-opened.

Similarly, based on observations from field staff that families could no longer afford learning materials as the economy shut down, the project started providing pencils, paper, and books to small learning groups.



Everything starts from us, from the field. If we see something challenging, we know we have to find a different way of working. So we as field staff give suggestions to the manager."

Teacher Training Officer



TEAM CULTURE AND FLEXIBILITY

Across the IRC in Sierra Leone, the team's willingness to change roles and responsibilities was a key adaptive capability in the agency's Ebola response. Though all staff were given the option to take extended leave in the face of the outbreak, none took this up. Instead, the vast majority offered to change roles to support the response, including 13 national education staff (about half from the LWOL project) who moved to Bo district to support surveillance activities. At the leadership level, the expatriate education coordinator became the Ebola response coordinator.

Staff motivation was supported by the senior management team who consistently highlighted the importance of the IRC staying for the emergency, and put in place trainings and transmission prevention measures that helped staff feel safe.

LWOL staff seemed to emerge as natural leaders within this context. As they were seconded to surveillance activities, they drew on their previous experiences with exchange visits (where they had spent time shadowing counterparts in different chiefdoms to encourage learning among staff) and cross-project collaboration (where they had supported the design and inception of other projects). LWOL staff were retained in surveillance roles the longest, at the request of the District Ebola Response Centre and the District Health Management Team.



An IRC contact tracing supervisor, Hawa (seconded from her role as an Education Officer), gets ready to visit communities in Bo district.

GEC: INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



CONSORTIUM CHALLENGES

Frustrations with the GEC consortium pre-dated the Ebola crisis, largely due to the number of links in the complicated decision-making chain, the lack of timely and transparent communication, and barriers to collective decision making.

The consortium had a Lead agency, with four main implementing partners responsible for interdependent activities across the districts. The implementing partners (including the IRC) had a limited relationship with the fund managers and no relationship at all with DFID. Information

had to travel from the IRC to the Consortium lead in Sierra Leone to the Consortium lead in the UK to fund manager and then to DFID, and then back down the chain. The process caused significant confusion and delays.

When the Ebola outbreak began, those barriers to timely adaptation were compounded by risk aversion on the part of other consortium partners. Rather than developing Ebola-related initiatives to propose to the Fund Manager for funding, the consortium coordination unit instead put the GEC project on standby. The eventual decision to modify the project for Ebola response took many months, delayed by the extended decision-making chain and poor communication in the approval of adaptations.



DONOR RIGIDITY, DISCONNECT, AND DELAYS

Even without the consortium challenges, the GEC project design and donor arrangements were inherently non-adaptive. The IRC was required to create a rigid annual work plan, with little flexibility on a monthly or quarterly basis. The project was initially structured as Payment by Results, and then changed to Payment by Activity Milestones, whereby the IRC received funds based on hitting the predetermined targets. The team was left with limited space to explore whether the design assumptions were correct. Even if evidence emerged that activities were not having their intended impact, the length of time needed to secure approval for changes to milestones created a strong disincentive to attempting to adapt.



Payment by activity milestones created an incentive to keep doing activities even if they were not working well. We've had to rush activities due to fear that IRC would not be paid. Our focus ends up being on reaching milestones, not on quality education."

Education Manager

As the consortium attempted to modify the GEC project in response to Ebola, engaging with GEC's fund manager became a problem. The Fund Manager showed no understanding of the rapid changes or limited predictability inherent to emergency work. Instead, they approached the process of adapting the GEC project from the perspective of auditors, requiring a full proposal, logical framework (log-frame), milestones, and budget to be developed in a process taking two months to complete. This was followed by extended back-and-forth, rather than the support for rapid decisions needed in an emergency context. During those exchanges, implementing partners were expected to respond to requests for information immediately, yet had to wait months for communication in return.

Following the suspension of the GEC project in July 2014, the consortium managed to submit a full proposal for

the “Education in Ebola” project in November 2014. It was approved four months later, in March 2015. The radios needed for the new project design arrived the following July, by which time their relevance was greatly reduced as schools were open again. On the contracting side, the IRC operated on email approval of the project changes until the signing of a revised agreement in December 2015.



The Fund Manager take so long to approve things that proposed activities become obsolete before they are approved.”

Senior Education Manager



Everything came to a standstill. The project became its name itself – a challenge.”

Education Officer



Photo: Erika Perez-Leon/IRC

Students take part in small learning groups in January 2015.

KEY REFLECTIONS

Staff flexibility and leadership decisions enabled adaptations across the IRC’s programs in the face of Ebola. However, the structure of relationships surrounding each project shaped the extent to which it adapted during the crisis. The GEC project struggled against a complicated consortium and rigid donor requirements. The inability to adapt the project caused damage beyond the missed opportunities: GEC-targeted communities felt they had been abandoned, and the resulting anger has created problems as the team tries to implement the extension to the GEC project.

Meanwhile, the LWOL project’s adaptations were enabled by a flexible donor and trusting relationships, which supported internal capabilities like devolved decision making and empowered field staff. The donor made it safe to fail so that the team could try different approaches, reflect, and quickly get to the core of what works in that particular context. Though LWOL itself was a relatively small project, it directly inspired the approximately \$23 million DFID-funded “Improving School in Sierra Leone” program that supports 450 schools across eight districts. This demonstrates the value of small but adaptive projects that can inform future delivery at scale.

The contrast between these two cases reveals the extent to which adaptive capabilities and enablers developed during periods of stability can have major impacts during periods of crisis.



To improve the adaptability of development and humanitarian work, the nature of communication with donors needs to change. We need to be able to communicate the situation in communities and for donors to accept this. Even with a good assessment you cannot know everything, so you find things out during implementation and need to adapt to issues that arise.”

LWOL Project Manager

ANNEX: RELATED WORK

A number of related research efforts have informed the ADAPT partnership's approach. For a non-exhaustive sample of recent relevant work, please see the following:

- ▶ Allana, Amir. "Navigating Complexity: Adaptive Management at the Northern Karamoja Growth, Health, and Governance Program." October 2014. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/navigating-complexity-adaptive-management-northern-karamoja-growth-health>
- ▶ Andrews, Matt; Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock. "Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)." June 2012. <http://www.cgdev.org/publication/escaping-capability-traps-through-problem-driven-iterative-adaptation-pdia-working-paper>
- ▶ BEAM Exchange. "Snapshots: market systems approaches in action." <https://beamexchange.org/practice/snapshots/>
- ▶ Gonzalez Asis, Maria; Michael Woolcock "Operationalizing the Science of Delivery Agenda to Enhance Development Results." 2015. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/23226>
- ▶ Kleiman, Shanit. "Lessons for Effective Resilience Programs." August 2013. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/lessons-effective-resilience-programs>
- ▶ Kleinfeld, Rachel. "Improving Development Aid Design and Evaluation." 2015. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/devt_design_implementation.pdf
- ▶ Mercy Corps. "Managing Complexity: Adaptive Management at Mercy Corps." 2015. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/managing-complexity-adaptive-management-mercy-corps>
- ▶ Ørtnemark, Charlotte. "'Learning Journeys' for adaptive management—Where does it take us?" February 2016. http://gpsaknowledge.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NOTE_march.pdf
- ▶ Ramalingam, Ben. "Learning to Adapt: Building adaptive management as a core competency in development practice." 2016. <https://www.globalinnovationexchange.org/learning-adapt>
- ▶ Root, Hilton; Harry Jones and Leni Wild. "Managing complexity and uncertainty in development policy and practice." March 2015. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/5191.pdf>
- ▶ Valters, Craig; Clare Cummings and Hamish Nixon. "Putting Learning at the Centre: Adaptive development programming in practice." March 2016. <https://www.odi.org/publications/10367-putting-learning-centre-adaptive-development-programming-practice>
- ▶ Wild, Leni; David Booth, Clare Cummings, Marta Foresti, and Joseph Wales. "Adapting development: improving services to the poor." February 2015. <https://www.odi.org/publications/8125-adapting-development-service-delivery-sdgs>

ADAPT

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