2018 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Building Resiliency in Northern Ghana through Collaborative Project Adjustments

Women from the Chahiyili VSLA prepare for a cooking demonstration and community outreach on improved nutrition and women's contribution to rural development during a USAID RING Project event. Credit: Clarissa Heger, Global Communities.

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Summary:

The Resiliency in Northern Ghana (RING) program is a five-year, $60 million, Feed the Future program that seeks to reduce household poverty and malnutrition in 17 districts in Northern Ghana. The program delivers a variety of activities through local District Assemblies in the following technical areas: agriculture, livelihoods, nutrition, governance, and water sanitation and hygiene (WASH). This case study examines the adjustments that RING made in its first few years of implementation to strategically sequence and layer complementary interventions to achieve better poverty and nutrition outcomes. RING utilized many principles of CLA including extensive collaboration with partners, testing and refining a theory of change, using M&E for learning, building on an existing technical evidence base, and adapting programmatic interventions accordingly.

Initially, RING worked closely with government partners to define and offer a tailored and integrated suite of activities to each district. As results were analyzed after the first year of implementation, it became apparent that the Village Savings and Loan Activity (VSLA) had an immediate and greater impact than some of the other program activities. Data showed the districts who had implemented VSLA activities not only achieved desired outcomes for the activity itself, but also had better results in other non-VSLA activities as well. RING shared this program monitoring data with partners and they were convinced of the need to adopt VSLA across the board. Over the next years of implementation, RING successfully scaled up the implementation of VSLAs in all 1,500 target communities to enhance development results.

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

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

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

RING's integrated, multi-stakeholder, and multi-sectoral approach isn't new to development; however, the government to government (G2G) mechanism used at the sub-national level to build capacity, ensure ownership, and maximize sustainability was new, adding a level of complexity to standard programming. Global Communities is accountable for project results to the donor, who has a direct relationship with the district and regional project partners. Civil servants from these offices lead implementation and decision-making, while Global Communities along with USAID|Ghana, guide government counterparts through the process of incorporating evidence into strategic planning and implementation, all with the aim of building more resilient communities and households.

RING's Theory of Change (TOC) is based on the concept that an integrated approach will reduce poverty, relying on households receiving complementary interventions from each of the five technical areas of the project. Each districts' needs were different though, and government partners, as the key decision-makers, could choose from a variety of activities from each of RING's five technical areas. The result was an endless combination of activities.

By Year 2, despite program stakeholders' best efforts, Global Communities realized that integrated interventions were not as effective as we had expected. Small ruminant herds weren't growing as expected, largely because households were selling the animals, animals were dying, or households were selling the animals and reporting them dead. This prompted the technical team, in coordination with USAID|Ghana and the government, to examine a number of possibilities as to why the intervention was not resulting in better outcomes. After adjusting other program interventions with no noticeable change in results, Global Communities realized that the root cause was at the household level; not in how families took care of the animals, but in how frequently they relied on them to be a source of cash in times of financial need.

3. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Although an explicit CLA approach was not built into the design of RING, CLA principles did guide the vision for how Global Communities would engage with district and regional partners. As such, the RING team has been practicing many of the sub-components of the CLA framework throughout the life of project. We routinely collaborated with our government partners and USAID technical team in substantive ways, solicited feedback on best practices, addressed shortcomings in implementation, and incorporated their vision for how the activities might unfold throughout the region over time. We were quite flexible in our implementation strategies, as well, by employing adaptive management techniques when challenges arose or opportunities to further scale up successes emerged. We also relied heavily on the relationships and networks we had formed throughout the region to ensure the overall success of our programming. In short, CLA was a useful tool to help conceptualize and manage a non-traditional project like RING.

4. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

M&E for Learning: Anecdotal accounts and monitoring observations showed that many families were selling off their ruminants much faster than anticipated – the herds didn't have the time needed to grow in number to create the intended asset cushion against unexpected economic shocks. The first step in the process was to identify why people were not adhering to small ruminant best practices. In most cases, women reported selling their animals because they needed to pay off a debt, they needed medicine for sick children, or money was needed for a family member in an emergency. It was apparent that women needed another option to cover shocks faced outside of the routine household expenses.

Technical Evidence Base and Theories of Change: When reviewing RING interventions, the technical team recalled that many women in VSLAs were taking out loans for similar needs. However, VSLA loans offered advantages to women in that they had a low interest rate, loans could be taken out in smaller amounts, and women had greater flexibility on when to pay the loans back. On the implementation side, VSLAs were incredibly low-cost and easily managed by the district technical officers. Using the Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) model as a basis, RING theorized that providing VSLA as a standard first intervention would lead to better management of subsequent assets received under the program, such as small ruminants and other harvested crops such as soybeans.

External Collaboration and Adaptive Management: At midpoint in Year 2, VSLA was proving to be one of the most valuable interventions under RING, not only in value for money, but in overall impact on group members. 12,700 women had collectively saved over US$224,000 and loaned over US$34,000, supporting one another to start small businesses, expand agriculture efforts, pay school fees, and address healthcare and food needs for their family. VSLA also created an ideal platform to layer other interventions. Social cohesion was key as women formed close knit relationships that hadn't existed before joining; group farming efforts, such as dry season vegetable gardening, was much more successful when built onto an existing VSLA. All parties (Global Communities, the Government of Ghana, and USAID) agreed that VSLA needed to reach 100% of RING households.

All districts had implemented VSLA at this point, but some districts had covered more ground than others. Once the gap was identified, a combined team consisting of Global Communities, district government officials and USAID strategized how to fill it as quickly as possible with the rationale that the sooner families had access to VSLA, the more effective some of the other interventions, such as small ruminants, might be. To achieve this, however, there was a bottleneck that needed to be addressed – limited government staff. How would just a handful of people in each district roll out VSLA in several hundred communities in the next 18 months?

To address this challenge, Global Communities and USAID|Ghana took an innovative approach of hiring several performance-based short-term consultants to carry out the heavy lifting during training and the initial six months of monitoring. Districts would manage existing groups, while starting their own VSLAs under their work plans, and eventually absorb monitoring duties for all groups. The additional hands proved to be what the project needed and now, nearly two years later, 98% of RING households belong to VSLAs.

5. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The RING program would have made programmatic shifts related to the sequencing of interventions and the inclusion of VSLA in all community activities regardless of whether a specified CLA approach was adopted but, by better understanding CLA, the team was able to retroactively apply a useful framework in which to understand the process around these changes. CLA validated the program's process around making substantial programmatic changes and gave confidence to pursue similar types of activities going forward if needed.

We also saw areas where we could improve as we moved forward with programming, given the complexity and speed of our project. Pausing and reflecting in a more deliberate manner, for instance, is a step that we employ before taking strategic decisions. Our project is also working more intently at knowledge management by documenting our trials and errors, successes, and recommendations as we enter the final year of implementation. Being aware of the sub-components of the CLA framework has improved our approach to delivering technical support more systematic, while building on the successful practices that we already employed.

6. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Internal monitoring data shows positive results from the scale up of the VSLA activity with over US$3.39M saved and US$1.23M loaned to nearly 77,000 women in over 2,800 groups. Herd growth has increased from 8% in 2016 to 13% in 2018 as well. Enthusiasm for VSLA continues to build with word-of-mouth making it one of the most sought-after interventions in RING districts because women understand the sustained impact it can have on their families. We have also seen positive effects of using VSLA as a platform for other interventions; it reduces the time and cost associated with forming new groups and engaging with new women about the RING project, its goals and objectives, and implementation strategy.

Given this, we have strong evidence that intentional sequencing and layering is an effective approach in an integrated program striving to build resilience at the household level. Going forward, we will review historical performance data for households where sequencing of activities was varied to see if there is a difference in performance in key activities. We also plan to hold focus group discussions to provide data on how many women took out loans for sanitation purposes, or have been able to successfully manage recurring costs for agricultural activities without external support. For small ruminants, initial data is positive, but the intended impact of the intervention itself is yet to be seen. Had we not opted for this intentional sequencing of activities and deliberate scale-up, we still would have likely achieved laudable success under VSLA as the trajectory was already promising. We could have also achieved similar results in vegetable gardening and OFSP cultivation, but with added time and cost.

7. What factors affected the success or shortcomings of your collaborating, learning and adapting approach? What were the main enablers or obstacles?

The most important factor that affected the ability to successfully integrate CLA into the project approach has been the good relationship and rapport with government and USAID/Ghana partners. The teamwork and collaborative spirit that has been built through the life of the project ensured that, even in the midst of potentially risky scenarios, activities were carried out in a supportive environment with a deep commitment to the mutually-agreed upon objectives.

In addition, the demand-driven nature of RING's design ensures true ownership of outcomes. RING activities are promoted based on global and local evidence that they build resilient households in a holistic manner, addressing food security, economic, health, and sanitation areas, all while strengthening the existing systems of our host country counterparts. These interventions are successfully carried out as a result of the technical expertise of district and regional partners who select interventions that are aligned with government priorities, leading to a greater likelihood of sustainability. Community members also have some say in what interventions they receive and play an active role in their management. By having an element of listening to communities already embedded in the project's structure, we were already poised to adapt depending on their needs.

The most challenging aspect the programmatic shift was ensuring all government partners were in agreement with hiring performance-based short-term consultants to support their work. At first, some districts refused the assistance. However, it became quickly apparent that additional human capital was needed to reach all target communities. Positive reports from colleagues in other districts helped ease initial reluctance, and the eventual acceptance of short-term help was also buoyed by community demand for VSLA.

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

1. Don't be afraid to look outside the box: A standard approach to scale up was not going to solve the challenges we were facing and make the impact that we felt the project had the potential to make on the lives of the families we were working with.

2. Be patient: We had to accept that results would take time. The initial roll-out of the short-term support was rocky —the community entry element in some districts was misunderstood and communication channels from district leadership down to the implementation team was sometimes ignored. This was a learning process that, had it not been for our strong relationships with our government counterparts, could have derailed the process. But through continuous engagements, review meetings, and best practice sharing forums, the approach has been deemed a success where districts still maintain ownership of the intervention, full-scale implementation was achieved, and households, most importantly, have been the true beneficiaries.

3. Be more systematic about your efforts: Incorporating CLA as an approach may seem like additional work at first glance. However, many of the steps recommended in the framework, such as collaborating with local and donor counterparts and paying attention to program data, are measures that we were already undertaking in routine activity. The beauty of CLA is that it provided a blueprint to be more systematic in the overall structuring of our project efforts, such as identifying gaps and improvements we needed to make, documenting successes, and ultimately being more deliberate about the decisions that we undertook.