Pre-Implementation Learning Sessions for Institutional Memory: Lessons from the Kickoff of BHAKARI

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ACTIVITY/PROGRAM
Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin (BHAKARI)

ORGANIZATION
Mercy Corps

COUNTRY
Nepal

CONTEXT

What is the general context in which your example takes place?
What problem were you trying to solve with your adaptive management approach?

BHAKARI, which stands for "Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin," is a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance program run by Mercy Corps in Nepal. The three-year program kicked off on October 1, 2020 and is part of a pilot approach to implemented longer-term (>12 months) emergency programs. BHAKARI's three purposes are to increase household-level food availability and access; improve access to sustainable water sources for productive purposes; and reduce the impact of natural disasters. It also has a cross-cutting intentional focus to address the root causes of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI).

The program was preceded by three similar USAID-funded activities, including two that were also implemented by Mercy Corps:

- Promoting Agriculture, Health and Alternative Livelihoods (PAHAL) implemented by Mercy Corps from 2014–2019;
- Sustainable Action for Resilience and Food Security (SABAL) implemented by Save the Children from 2014–2019; and
- Managing Risks through Economic Development (MRED) implemented by Mercy Corps from 2016–2020.

For most emergency programs, proposal writing teams (usually composed of headquarter staff) differ from implementing teams (mostly local staff). When programs are awarded, implementing teams do not necessarily understand the concepts behind the program design unless there is strong institutional memory or knowledge transfer. Then, implementing teams are disconnected from the Theory of Change and overall program design logic.

Mercy Corps decided to take the time to break this cycle by convening experienced staff from PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED to collaborate on the BHAKARI proposal and, once awarded, incorporate learning from these previous activities into planning and implementation from the very beginning.

The BHAKARI MEL team reviewed baseline survey findings during a CLA session. Other topics included discussion on ICAAP findings and household registration data to ensure incorporation of findings into program activities. Photo Credit: Yugdeep Thapa

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

Describe your adaptive management example. Why did you choose to implement it this way?

The first step in our adaptive management approach was orienting the new BHAKARI team to takeaways from PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED in order to build on learning and avoid falling into similar pitfalls. We did this by designing a series of pre-implementation learning sessions to convene the new team and partners around the history of these previous projects, key concepts, and processes for the new program.

A former member of the PAHAL team who had first-hand knowledge of the activities and operating environment organized these sessions. Fortunately, PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED had robust knowledge management and learning capture processes[1] that meant we had plenty of documented lessons-learned on which to draw.

Because BHAKARI began during the COVID-19 pandemic, the series of three 2–3 hour-long pre-implementation learning sessions took place over Zoom, one session with a select topic per week. While we were disappointed to be unable to meet in person safely, there were advantages to using an online platform, like being able to include certain participants such as district implementing partners, who would not have been able to attend otherwise.

The pre-implementation learning session topics were:

- **Proposal Development Background & Resources:** Staff from Mercy Corps PAHAL and the MRED project shared how they designed the BHAKARI proposal and how lessons-learned from these programs fed into the BHAKARI proposal. When Mercy Corps was designing the BHAKARI program, we adapted and pulled over several fundamental building blocks on food security, including proven technologies from PAHAL particularly relating to governance, disaster risk reduction, water, agriculture, and nutrition. We also had good learning from PAHAL on consortium and program management as well as collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA). We also shared and discussed information and links to the PAHAL knowledge management website and USAID digital library resources. Using these tools and approaches helped us to avoid duplication of effort in BHAKARI.

- **Targeting and Sequencing, Layering, & Integration:** We discussed tools and methods that Mercy Corps used for PAHAL and SABAL that could also apply to BHAKARI. A 2019 learning event, convened by the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity, shared learning about addressing resilience in Nepal. During the event,[2] PAHAL and SABAL reflected on the fact that existing approaches were not sufficiently flexible for adaptive management (e.g., work planning in silos with an insufficient resilience lens). Both programs initially struggled to show collective action in achieving resilience outcomes that would lead to household food security. Utilizing CLA sessions, both programs developed simple tools to capture integration and sustainability. For example, PAHAL, being Mercy Corps' resilience flagship program, used a sequencing, integration, and layering approach and used integrated monitoring tools to ensure integration among program activities and layering and sequencing during activity implementation. We discussed how we could apply these learnings to BHAKARI during participant selection and implementation.

- **Internal Communication & Reporting Mechanisms:** We discussed the importance of frequent communication among the team and the desired reporting frequency for local partners in the field. Both PAHAL and SABAL found that local partners spent too much time writing reports in English and most of the time Mercy Corps did not use those narratives in the overall project's reports. For BHAKARI, we decided to just ask local partners to report every quarter in bullet points.

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1   Sabal submitted three cases in USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Case Competition, including one winner and one finalist: https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/data-improved-programming-use-technical-support-visits-nepal-sabal https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/promoting-sustainability-self-reliance-use-group-capacity-assessment-data-nepal https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/promoting-sustainability-self-reliance-use-group-capacity-assessment-data-nepal https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/theory-change-action-improving-implementation-through-review-revision
Also see this recording of a 2019 learning event from these programs: https://www.fsnnetwork.org/event/nepal-resilience-learning-event

2   https://www.fsnnetwork.org/event/nepal-resilience-learning-event

In addition to the learning sessions described above, Mercy Corps' leadership also convened small groups from previous projects and BHAKARI for more in-depth learning discussions. Topics for these small group discussions included: the Integrated Community Assessment and Action Planning (ICAAP) method for targeting/beneficiary selection; the technical components of BHAKARI (agriculture and nutrition, gender and social inclusion, water, and natural disasters); and human resource discussions regarding BHAKARI staff skills and team compositions.

IMPACT

Describe the impact your adaptive management approach has had on your activity and its objectives. If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

While it is still too soon to determine the impact of the pre-implementation learning sessions on BHAKARI's objectives, they did allow us to "hit the ground running". We expected a rapid pace in a three-year emergency program, but learning from PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED allowed us to start immediately. In addition, the learning sessions helped a wide range of stakeholders involved in the program understand what worked and did not work in previous activities. It also helped stakeholders get on the same page about our approach to targeting, sequencing, and layering, as well as expectations around communications and reporting.

A community inception meeting in Khatyad, Mugu. A total of 123 community inception meetings were organized in all six districts with the objective to share about the BHAKARI program goal, purpose, working approach and modality to the community people. Photo Credit: BHAKARI

REFLECTION

What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?

First, it helped that PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED documented some of their learning, so we had access to a trove of information before implementing BHAKARI. We had easy access to this information via the PAHAL knowledge management website[3] and via takeaways from a resilience learning event in November 2019.

Another enabler was that country leadership added key staff from SABAL, PAHAL, and MRED to BHAKARI. These team members were already aware of the activities and familiar with the context, allowing us to get to work immediately. It also created a livelier discussion during the initial learning sessions. The participants had often created the content and lived the experience, rather than just being secondary data sources.

Furthermore, from the very beginning, BHAKARI prioritized identifying and hiring a Knowledge Management and Learning Manager in the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) department to ensure we incorporated lessons from earlier projects into BHAKARI and that learning capture and documentation continued. With the position prioritized and strategically placed with the MEL team and focused on data analysis and documentation, as opposed to the communications team, BHAKARI leadership intentionally positioned this role to ensure we were using the data was after it was collected. In addition, the individual hired into this position used to be a member of the Mercy Corps team and thus brought in institutional knowledge.

This overall approach to pre-implementation was so successful that we would do it again the same way next time! In fact, the BHAKARI is careful to document learning in a knowledge management portal with follow-on programs in mind.

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3 https://sites.google.com/view/pahal/home

TOOLS

What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach? Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.

The PAHAL knowledge management internal website, which captured lessons learned from that activity, was an essential resource. In addition, we used Zoom to host the pre-implementation learning session and Padlet as a virtual whiteboard for collaboration during the sessions.