Case Study 2A.

Kenya — Adaptive learning in the Nutrition sector

Context

Several factors contribute to the contextual environment within which the Real Time Learning Process for Nutrition (RTLP-N) was carried out in Kenya. These include devolution, which resulted in the decentralization of government ministries, including the Health Ministry, to county level. The health system environment has therefore changed considerably during the review period for this project. A second contextual issue is the significant degree of progress made at national level in integrating Nutrition into the health system, which can obscure the extent to which county-level nutrition investments are contributing to or hindering the integration and systems-strengthening processes.
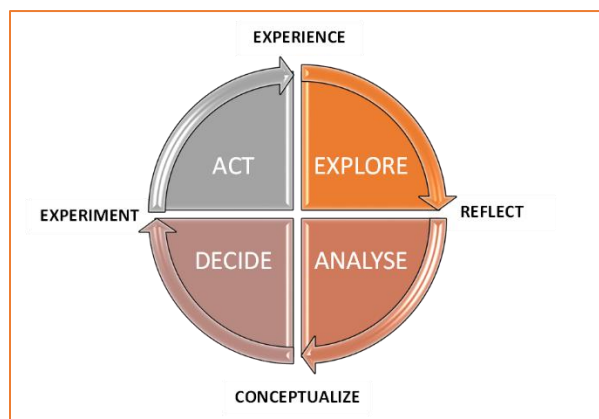
Activities

In May 2015, the Center for Humanitarian Change (CHC) was funded by UNICEF and DFID to develop the Real Time Learning Process for the Nutrition sector (RTLP-N). The objectives of the process were as follows.

- Generate learning of how nutrition-focused interventions and activities have contributed to or hindered each of the seven building blocks required for an effective health system
- Use that learning in real time to improve policy practice in selected counties and in other counties across the country and at national level
- Identify the extent to which DFID and UNICEF programs and partners have aided or hindered the strengthening of the nutrition sector in the counties studied
- Identify the extent to which nutrition programs and interventions have aided or hindered the strengthening of the overall health system in the counties studied and the process through which this has happened
- Identify the extent to which approaches to nutrition programming are sustainable

Five counties, representing the diversity of arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) in Kenya, were selected by the Nutrition sector: Marsabit, Kwale, Turkana, Wajir and Baringo. RTLP-N was conceptualized based on two learning models: 70:20:10 Model for Learning and Development[1]

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[1] McCall, M. W. Jr., & Lombardo, M. M. (1983). *Off the track: Why and how successful executives get derailed.* Technical Report No. 21. Greensboro, NC: Center for

Toolkit for Synergised WASH & Nutrition Programming, October 2016

and David Kolb's Model for Experiential Learning[2] (2014). Overall, these models emphasize the importance of learning from experience by incorporating 'pause and reflect' moments on your own or your teams' experiences and using these reflections to strategically conceptualize adaptations to processes and interventions, leading to incremental changes at various levels of programming.

Learning cycles were used to demonstrate how RTLP-N could be applied at the county level. The learning cycles rotated through the following stages: **a learning event, an action and continuous reflection period, and a review event**. The cyclical nature of the learning process was informed by the concept that learning does not necessarily follow a predetermined, linear direction but is more likely to occur in a messy, self-organizing way.

A specific example of how learning cycles were conducted is the exercise in Kwale County whereb the County Nutrition Technical Forum (CNTF) members chose to explore the challenges around use of evidence from District Health Information System (DHIS) to inform action. To promote a problem-focused approach, CHC used a purely facilitative approach during the **learning event** to allow participants to take the lead in analyzing their experience with regards to what was or was not working. The output of the learning event was an action plan developed through a participatory approach by the forum members. This entailed describing what the participants wanted to change, deciding what actions to take, setting timelines and nominating responsible persons.

The learning event was then followed up by an **action and continuous reflection period** during which the participants implemented their action plan. As this process aimed to augment the learning process, continuous reflection on what was enabling or hindering the change process ensued on learning platforms such as WhatsApp groups and CNTF meetings. At the end of the learning cycle, which took about 3–4 months, **a review event** created the space to pause and reflect on what had happened, experiences, results and learning, and how the change process was conducted. Using creative facilitative approaches, the CHC team took the participants through a non-judgmental process aimed at openly interrogating their successes and failures and the way in which they had used their learning experiences to make adaptations to the program design. The review event focused not only on technical aspects but also on soft issues such as relationships, trust, collaboration, motivation, peer support and supervisor support, among others.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted during the final learning cycles to explore participants' perspectives on the Real Time Learning Process.

Creative Leadership.
[2] Kolb, D, Experiential Learning, 2014

Results

A key finding was that most change seemed to have occurred at the individual level, in actions that participants controlled. For instance, on being asked what had enabled the participants to complete actions assigned to them in the action plan, most responded that they were self-motivated to apply what they had learned in their day-to-day actions. However, it was hard to complete the tasks when they had to rely on colleagues who had not participated in the learning events.

Lessons learned

This first, pilot phase of the program had many challenges and the implementation team learnt a number of lessons.

- The right people at all levels have to be involved in the learning process from the start
- There is a need to establish an enabling environment for learning <u>before</u> engaging at the program level. This ensures that learning is embedded in the regular processes of the health system instead of being seen as a one-off event
- Learning has to be relevant to the learners. It must directly relate to the day-to-day activities of the individual nutrition professionals rather than focus on activities or results which are beyond their control.
- Learning should be a continuous process not restricted to occasional learning events
- Managers at different levels must be accountable for learning within their own teams. This can be accomplished by strengthening the enabling environment.

Next steps

The first phase of RTLP-N focused on how learning could be applied at individual and activity level. Based on the findings from this phase, the next phase will focus on

- The learning environment, including such factors as the role of management in creating a supportive environment for learning and change by promoting accountability for learning, incentivizing learning and incorporating pause and reflect resources within programs
- Rigorous monitoring of the influence of learning on the change process at the program level
- Exploring opportunities to expand the model across sectors to encourage learning on synergized WASH and Nutrition activities

References

Kolb, D. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT Press.