What is a Program Approach?

We have always known intuitively that short-term projects are an ineffective medium for achieving sustainable impacts on underlying causes of poverty and social injustice. The findings from the Women’s Empowerment Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) attest to this and, consequently, there has been wide endorsement of the shift to a longer-term program approach from across CARE International. This shift encapsulates the program quality actions of the CARE USA strategic plan and it is aligned with the direction to improve knowledge management in the CI strategic plan. The commitment displayed throughout the discussions in the Istanbul workshop of April 2008 makes this a watershed event in advancing CARE globally toward a program approach. We already have sufficient evidence from the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) Region to show how a program approach can increase relevance, quality and impact of CARE’s work, and now eight additional Learning Laboratories will test further the shift to programs in the next two years.

Participants at the Istanbul workshop agreed on a consolidated definition of a “program” and a set of eight characteristics of a program approach. This is an important starting point for realizing a broad, common understanding across the organization of what a program approach entails. The definition and characteristics will be followed up with further guidance emerging from the experiences of the Learning Laboratories as they make the shift.

Definition of Program

A program is a coherent set of initiatives by CARE and our allies that involves a long-term commitment to specific marginalized and vulnerable groups to achieve lasting impact at broad scale on underlying causes of poverty and social injustice. This goes beyond the scope of projects to achieve positive changes in human conditions, in social positions and in the enabling environment.

What this definition also connotes is that a program’s boundaries are not defined by geography or a Country Office, as we have often tended to think based on a project orientation. A “program” revolves around a specific poverty-affected population group. So, a departmental unit, regional unit, CO unit, CI member, sector or even the global organization may have a program if it has defined its population group based on an underlying cause analysis. C-USA’s signature programs are an example of a “program” held by a CI Member with a scope spanning several countries.

The Learning Laboratories will include programs designed by a Country Office, C-USA (signature programs), a departmental unit (the Water Sector of C-USA) and a region (LAC). Most of the Learning Labs however, are Country Office experiments which will have 3-5 programs aimed at specific population groups situated within their countries.

Characteristics of a Program Approach

CARE believes that in order to achieve significant and lasting impact on poverty and social injustice, especially for women and girls, all of our programs should include the following eight characteristics:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Characteristics of a Program Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1   | A clearly defined **goal** for impact on the lives of a specific group, realized at broad scale.  
   - The program must define what “**broad scale**” means, but, in general, we mean at least at national scale or for a whole marginalized population group.  
   - Impact should occur across three areas of unifying framework (human conditions, social position, enabling environment).  
   - Impact should be seen and evaluated over an extended period of time. |
| 2   | A thorough analysis of underlying causes of poverty, gender inequality and social injustice at multiple levels with multiple stakeholders.  
   - **“Multiple levels”** means community through global.  
   - Analysis includes scenarios based on potential risk (including disaster risks).  
   - Analysis identifies and prioritizes the causes that MUST be addressed in order to achieve the goal.  
   - This analysis is updated regularly to incorporate changes in context. |
| 3   | An explicit **theory of change** that is rigorously tested and adapted to reflect ongoing learning.  
   - A theory of change outlines the key assumptions and hypotheses that underpin the program design.  
   - The theory should be robust enough to be applicable in various scenarios of risk. |
| 4   | A **coherent set of initiatives** that enable CARE and our allies to contribute significantly to the transformation articulated in the theory of change.  
   - At a minimum these initiatives will challenge power relations, achieve systemic changes in institutions, work at multiple levels, contribute to policy change. |
| 5   | Ability to promote **organizational and social learning**, to generate **knowledge and evidence** of impact.  
   - Evidence and knowledge will be used for advocacy, risk analysis and mitigation, adapting the theory of change and leveraging resources. |
| 6   | Contribution to broad **movements for social change** through our work with and strengthening of partners, networks and alliances.  
   - This means clearly understanding and strengthening our organizational credibility, legitimacy, identity and positioning. |
| 7   | A strategy to leverage and influence the use and allocation of **financial and other resources** within society for maximizing change at a broader scale.  
   - This requires protecting and developing our knowledge and talent base, demonstrating impact and cost-effectiveness of strategies, and building new types of donor relationships. |
| 8   | **Accountability systems** to internal and external stakeholders that are transparent.  
   - To the marginalized groups whose rights we seek to see fulfilled.  
   - To allies and partners, including donors and governments.  
   - All staff are accountable for their contribution to the program.  
   - Stakeholders have the information they need. |

The production of these characteristics underwent multiple rounds of vetting and dialogue. Hence, strong arguments have been made for the choice of language, what was included and what was not included in each characteristic. Further, the discussion was guided by the question, “What is **different** about a program approach from the way CARE has been conventionally implementing projects?” To ensure consistent interpretation, the characteristics will be accompanied by a definition of terms and set
Achieving the Programmatic CARE

of explanatory notes for wider distribution. A communication strategy will be elaborated to enable both internal and external audiences to understand the characteristics and their importance for the shift CARE is making.

The Learning Laboratories will be the testing ground for the eight characteristics, bringing greater rigor and insight to what the shift to programs entails.

As a further aid to understanding the program approach, it is also helpful to think about what it is not.

### What is not a program approach?

- A basket of projects that are not directly interconnected; geography alone does not qualify as a programmatic connection
- A long-term project
- Changes at outcome level (and human condition level) only
- Implementation that only targets a limited number of people and remains at the local level
- Activities that bring about only short-term change, and do not address systemic and structural issues
- Activities that are not rights-based
- An organizational structure built only to support projects
- Relationships with partners and other actors that are contractually-driven, even though they are referred to as "partnerships"

### Changes Required by a Program Approach

Shifting to a programmatic approach, as explained above, signifies changing our practices in all business units across the whole organization. Our signature programs, regional programs, sector programs and CI member programs all need to include a programmatic approach and logic. Let’s take a closer look at the defining characteristics and how they differ from most current practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements of a Program Approach</th>
<th>Changes from the current approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A clearly defined <strong>goal</strong> for impact on the lives of a specific group, realized at broad scale. Program impact goals will need to be developed within a broad vision of how we will achieve relevance in specific contexts, including how we will operate, and the kinds of changes envisaged in the lives of people. Each program impact goal will need to delineate a specific constituency population, for instance not just “women and girls” but the kinds of “marginalized and excluded” groups within this broad category, and the nature of the impact changes that will be sought.</td>
<td><strong>Small to Large</strong>: The shift implies an actor-centered approach versus a “problem focused” approach, requiring, among other changes, new forms of accountability to constituents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2. A thorough **analysis** of underlying causes of poverty and social injustice at multiple levels with multiple stakeholders. For a coherent program strategy to be developed, it requires a deep understanding of the barriers preventing sustainable change in the lives of the key constituent groups. | **Modest to Large**: More detailed analytical work is required than is often undertaken at present, with the inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives. |
### Requirements of a Program Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change from the current approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> An explicit <strong>theory of change</strong> that is rigorously tested and adapted to reflect ongoing learning. A program strategy must be based on a “theory of change” that sets out the envisaged pathway to achieve the impact goal in the lives of the constituent population. This theory will contain a number of hypotheses that will require regular testing and adjustment over time, through a reflective learning system. Evolution of the program strategy will be guided by this reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large: Less than 15 percent of projects have explicit hypotheses, fewer test the hypotheses and the change pathways they envisage to foster the long-term learning needed to deliver on the strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> A <strong>coherent set of initiatives</strong> that enable CARE and our allies to contribute significantly to the transformation articulated in the theory of change. This set of initiatives will include advocacy and implementation activities that operate at multiple levels, some being project based and some not. While CARE may be involved in a few direct implementation activities in order to develop operating models, CARE will mostly act as a facilitator and networking organization, ensuring the linkage between all initiatives in the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large: Typically projects act in isolation of one another, even when having overlapping geography. Building this coherence requires program staff to understand their role and identity is wider than a single initiative or project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> Ability to promote organizational and social learning, to generate knowledge and evidence of impact. There are two requirements here. First, a reflective learning system whereby the explicit and implicit knowledge being generated is reflected upon and used to question the assumptions and principles underlying the design. And second, identification of a core set of output and impact indicators, compatible with the global system being established, and a knowledge generation and management strategy for producing and understanding relevant information, so that a story can be developed of the kinds of impacts we are contributing to over a 10-15 year period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large: Limited reflective learning has taken place in most projects. The project cycle tends to limit us to making improvements within an existing set of rules and routines. Large: Neither CARE nor other organizations yet have meaningful, common indicators of quality, output and impact that are broadly utilized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> Contribution to broad movements of social change through our work with and strengthening of partners, networks and alliances. We will need to work with others in ways where we are not necessarily defining the agenda and their roles. Programs will also require an advocacy strategy that emerges from the program’s position within a broader movement of social change. An advocacy agenda may be aimed at causes that originate outside the geographic location of the constituency population, thus requiring advocates working in various locations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest to Large: We do not yet work well with social movements. The advocacy work necessary in a program approach will also expand the scale, scope and investment required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> A strategy to leverage and influence the use and allocation of financial and other resources within society for maximizing change at a broader scale. Shifting to a program approach will enhance both the quality and resource-generation potential of projects, and will attract donors who wish to support longer-term efforts (particularly philanthropic foundations and private individuals). We expect major growth in CARE’s size and influence in the development sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest to Large: Changes will be required in our approaches to fundraising and this will alter the nature of some donor relations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8.</strong> <strong>Accountability systems</strong> to internal and external stakeholders. We will require greater 360° accountability to all stakeholders, especially the constituent population whose lives we are seeking to impact. Donor accountability will remain important, with donors receiving information on how their contribution is leveraging broader change and impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest to Large: as we seek to develop greater levels of 360° accountability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing and Operationalizing a Long-Term Program

The following diagram illustrates the kind of steps inherent in developing a program. While not the sole pathway to accomplishing the task, it should help us all understand the shift so that everyone, not just those directly involved in the program, will be able to value the investment of time and attention required in the midst of competing priorities. This extends to partners, donors and other allies and stakeholders.

The organizational implications of the programmatic shift at any level, CO and beyond, are by no means modest, effecting both organizational culture and operating systems. The extensive discussions in Istanbul prioritized five critical areas of change:

1. **Organizational alignment strategy:**
   - Reorient and align organizational structure, policies, work planning, systems and internal relationships.
   - Achieve coherence and coordination between program and program support.
   - In HR, develop appropriate strategies for talent retention and a clear set of competencies.
   - In Finance, review the levels and use of unrestricted funds, as well as our forms of financial analysis.
   - The transition phase itself will have to be managed differently and for this, the Learning Labs are designed to inform the organization.

2. **Resourcing strategy:**
   - Seek new ways of mobilizing resources, especially from philanthropy and the private sector, using the program framework for leveraging purposes, even if the project remains the “unit of sale” for many donors.
   - Increasing flexibility and investment in resource management and social entrepreneurship; reviewing as part of our business policies and practices.
3. **Changing relationships and forms of accountability:**
   - Need to work with a range of stakeholders differently and improve 360° accountability to program constituents, partners and donors.
   - Careful attention and rapid improvement in “the basics” of project management, reporting and accounting, where possible as part of moving to a program approach.
   - Our allies and partners need to be co-creators of the program, engaging significantly and consistently through all phases of a program management cycle.
   - Clarify specific roles and responsibilities of senior management, CI members, regional quality teams and other relevant actors.

4. **Communication strategy:**
   - External communications to all stakeholders will need to be much more aligned to the knowledge and impact that is being generated through the CO programs.
   - Messages to external audiences need to be kept simple without compromising on quality and meaning of content.
   - Internally, concerted efforts need to be made to facilitate staff understanding of the programmatic shift and what it means for their work.
   - Different levels and units of the organization will need to communicate and work together in ways they have not done before.

5. **Knowledge management and learning:**
   - Knowledge management systems created around programs will need to aggregate or link up.
   - Create a global knowledge sharing and learning strategy around the eight characteristics of a program approach (or some subset) and around the signature programs.
   - New learning processes will need to be introduced at different levels.

**Program and Project Cycle Management**

The major implications of the program approach are that project cycle management will need to take place within a programmatic framework. This will lead to major changes in project design, as eventually all projects should be designed within the framework of a long-term program and its theory of change. Program life-cycles will be inherently different from project life-cycles and a country, region, and/or CARE member office will establish the timeframe through its long-range strategic planning process. Since program contexts and knowledge about the effectiveness of program initiatives will change over time, so programs themselves will have to evolve or phase out. However, it would be a sign of poor program quality management to stop and start programs on a regular basis.

New guidelines for quality program and project cycle management will be developed based on the characteristics of a program approach (above) and the evolving experience of the Learning Laboratories over the next two years. Preliminary discussions on program cycle management in Istanbul will be further developed into guidelines that will pertain to all levels – country, regional and CARE member offices – at which programs are managed.