

Building a Coherent Program Asia Regional Leadership Team Study Tour

Introduction

This case study focuses on experience in moving towards longer term, more coherent programming, drawing from experiences in Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Regional Management Unit, and has the intent to help build a common language, understanding and commitment to what the program shift entails in Asia.

What excites us about this shift?

Across the Asia region there is increasing agreement that CARE needs to make much longer term commitments to poor, vulnerable and socially excluded communities and, in particular to women and girls in those communities, if we are to make real inroads in addressing underlying causes of poverty and social injustice. This will include addressing not only the apparent and visible symptoms of poverty but also confronting the underlying causes, whether these are systemic, structural, behavioural, or rooted in social beliefs systems and practices – in short to work across all three levels of CARE's Unifying Framework. As we describe in this paper, these commitments also require us to challenge the gap between the values we stand for and our current ways of working, further it shows how, if we want to have a lasting impact on poverty, then we must respond to the shifting nature and complexity of the poverty situation. In Asia this means contexts marked by drawn out instability and conflict, poor governance, changing social norms, discriminatory practices, persistent patriarchy, as well as newly emerging aspirations of the poor in some of the rapidly growing economies of the world.

We are excited because evidence so far indicates that a programmatic approach will allow us to implement the unifying framework in a meaningful way and to influence rights, advocacy and constructs of civil society. Lining up our work with the unifying framework will create a market niche, making it possible to demonstrate our long term impact and establish an identity for CARE that will ensure we remain relevant in this complex and rapidly changing world. Being clear about who we are and what we stand for will not only help us be more effective in meeting our strategic objectives but will also help in ensuring the long term financial sustainability needed for our work.

Of equal importance is that fact that our constituents have expressed their own excitement. They are sharing their growing sense of empowerment and building on their successes to expand programs in new directions. We are excited to see natural leaders emerging who are pushing us to be less hierarchical and are demonstrating that our constituents can be some of our best teachers.

We started out as a savings group, but now we provide funding for new businesses, we've reinforced the flood controls on our road, participate in community management of our forest and water and we have been asked by others to resolve disputes within families and between other village members. (Bardibas community women's group chair-woman, Churia region Nepal)

Lastly, our field staff are also excited. They are demonstrating an understanding of the complexity of doing programmatic work. They are sharing some early insights into the organic nature of longer-term programming. And they are voicing their commitment to the long haul.

What we mean by a coherent program approach

Our shared understanding of what we mean by program approaches is a *focused and sustained commitment to women and girls in poor and vulnerable communities*.

For effective field implementation, a program must:

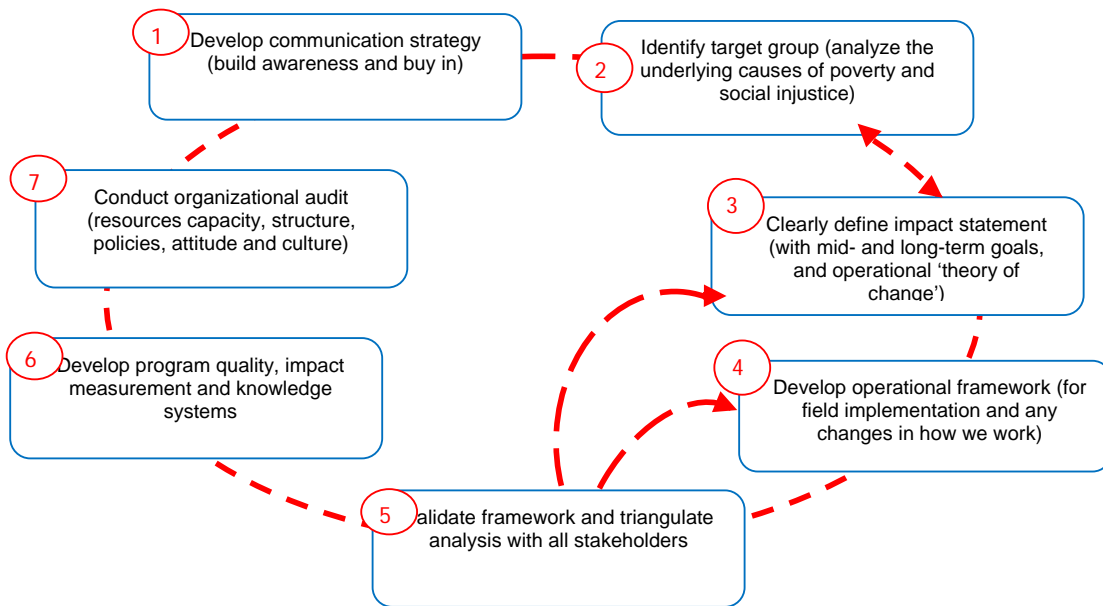
1. Have a clear and measurable impact on the key underlying causes of poverty and social injustice.
2. Incorporate a deep analysis of poverty issues at systemic, structural and policy levels on a continuing basis.
3. Comprise a set of focused and mutually reinforcing activities – some project based, some non-project based; some carried out by CARE, many carried out by others.

4. Allow for continuous reflection and learning with all constituents, partners and stakeholders in a manner that (a) challenges our traditional beliefs, attitudes and the ways in which we choose to work; and (b) incorporates honest and ongoing critique.
5. Evolve and improve as learning occurs and the capacities of CARE staff, constituents and stakeholders grow.
6. Hold fast to all CARE programming principles

What does it take?

In order to help field staff understand what it means to move beyond our definition of a program, we have described a flow of work streams and processes (Fig 1). At the outset, it is important to note however, that operationalizing a program strategy is an iterative rather than a linear set of processes.

Fig. 1 Ensuring the sustained impact of our work on poor and vulnerable populations



Ongoing analysis and learning are integral to our work. Analysis leads to identification of issues, which allow us to identify entry points and to chart pathways towards addressing the causes of poverty and social injustice through the achievement of higher program goals. Ongoing analysis and learning allows us to monitor if we are on track, or if we need to change course at a particular moment in time.

Using analysis to identify multiple entry points and pathways often completely changes or influences our approaches to working with complex and interdependent issues facing communities. It also changes how communities implement and expand their projects. In our traditional project based approach, we typically come to the field with a two-dimensional “X will lead to Y” blueprint for the project. But by allowing pathways to develop over time, we also open up the possibility to start small before going to scale; to learn, experiment, reflect and unlearn; and to change the intervention paths as we go. Poverty and communities do not stand still, and thus pathways need to change as people’s priorities change.

In fact, there is no longer a blueprint, because when and where the community will identify new pathways is unpredictable, especially at the outset of a project. What this means is that we have to be open to uncertainty and, perhaps, confusion. Uncertainty and confusion are both healthy and important pieces of the puzzle, for they allow the necessary space to adapt to a constantly changing environment. In order for this to work, though, we must partner with our communities as equals and trust they will choose the pathways that are best for them.

So what are we learning from the field?

Programs addressing the underlying causes of poverty have the potential to provide coherence, direction and impact, and they are the natural, logical evolution of our organizational strategy. But we must also look seriously at challenging our accepted ways of working if we are to maximize the full potential of this shift to coherent programming and bring about the flexibility and learning described above. We have identified four critical and interconnected breakthrough arenas.

Empowering frontline staff to get the work done

The more we push decision making down and across our frontline staff, the more targeted and effective our programs. (Navaraj)

We have found that decentralization promotes program quality and learning. Decentralization allows program staff to dialogue and work closely with communities, implementing partners and other actors and to engage them in the identification of the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice. It allows staff to engage with communities and other actors in participatory learning and action-oriented analysis and implementation.

Decentralization requires the 'centre' to devolve power and to embody enabling and inclusive leadership. This allows the 'centre' to re-focus its efforts on the linkages across national, regional and international boundaries, research and development, advocacy and knowledge sharing.

Decentralization also requires a shift in attitude amongst all staff towards inclusive decision making and open and trustful communication. It requires all staff to be open to looking at the world through different perspectives and genuinely to hear the concerns and hopes of the communities we work for. And it requires us to engage with those in power whose worldview we may not share.

In the Churia region in Nepal, for example, the open and collaborative relationship we had with the government provided several core discoveries that influenced development of the program, relating to conflict between different government policies, and the lack of land rights of immigrant populations that had lived in the areas for decades. (Alka)

Critically assessing how we manage and develop our staff

Institutional memory is critical to continuous and ongoing reflection, learning, evolving and improving over time, and thus to successful program management. But short-term project cycles, by design, tend to lead to the loss of institutional memory. When projects end, people leave. Losing that institutional memory in the country offices inhibits our ability to build on previous learning, to refine and grow our programs, to identify problems early in the process, and to develop lasting relationships.

Of vital importance throughout this whole process is the knowledge and experience of our staff – both in the field and in management positions – who not only have the institutional memory but who also continue to challenge the organization to retain its coherence and relevance. Without those individuals we would have lost our compass in terms of our long term programmatic work. The organization relies heavily on these individuals – individuals who in times of crisis are only too willing to step up to the plate. As an organization we need to ensure that we give significant recognition for this. (Nick)

There is a genuine need to continue developing skills currently weak within our staff. However, a more pressing issue is the way that we manage talent to ensure we have the right people in the right positions at the right time: how we attract and orient new talent; how we nurture those who are already in place; how we recognize and manage difficult performance discussions; how we ensure that learning opportunities are acted on; and how we deliberately provide project managers with the experience and training to develop into program managers. If we are to "hold onto our compass" and respond to the human resource challenges that the programmatic shift is creating, then we must invest in and link global capacity (expertise that can be drawn on across different locations) and country office capacity.

Building the 'right' relationships

One of CARE's core strengths has been our ability to manage relationships with communities. However, working at all levels of the unifying framework requires us to build diverse multi-disciplinary alliances and networks across regional, national and international borders. We need to engage all stakeholders – including those who may not agree with us – and involve them in shaping our strategy. Currently we feel CARE does not have enough people with high level experience in strategic partnership development.

Building the “right” relationships also means looking at the types of relationships we develop within the organization. We see two challenges: first, we do not adequately connect with frontline staff and partners (those who interface with communities on a day-to-day basis) so as to shape our advocacy work, nor do we engage them enough in planning. There are many reasons why we don't refer to the opinions of frontline staff, including language and cultural barriers, and issues of hierarchy to name a few. Without developing a closer, mutually supportive relationship with those frontline staff and without creating the space for staff to feel free to express their opinions, we are cutting off a main communication channel vital in our operational processes.

...sharing the strategic plan with our staff in the field ...created a high level appreciation amongst our staff and ...brought an awareness of the type of identity we wanted to establish for the future. Importantly staff provided feedback on the plan that helped us better understand the realities in the field. [This led to] further clarification. (Nick)

Second, we need to strengthen working relations between CARE USA and field offices, and we need to begin to find ways to listen to and understand each other's priorities. Without working together more effectively, we lose the ability to take advantage of important strategic opportunities or to decide on organizational advocacy priorities. This is a loss to the organization – advocacy is about finding where our niche is and making a difference. We – the field – would like to help and are looking for pathways that will add the voice of the frontline to the stories we tell about CARE.

Getting serious about our business model and how we allocate resources

The key [to getting the funding] was to establish a successful relationship with a donor who understood that, for a response to be anything near sustainable, you needed to move beyond just meeting immediate needs, and address the underlying causes of poverty - issues associated with social exclusion and weak governance. (Nick)

It is possible that over the long term programmatic work will be no more costly than project-based work. But in the near term it will require multi-year unrestricted resources that will help country offices do the ongoing analysis and research and development; develop the relationships with external partner institutions; and invest in the retention of talented staff. It will also require us to dedicate more staff resources to marketing CARE's impact, so as to raise more funds.

We are coming to realize that while CARE does a reasonable job of marketing projects per se, it does not do well at marketing its contribution to those projects, and this is a barrier to obtaining long-term funding.

But “getting serious about our business model” is not just about raising new funds; it is also about more skillfully addressing how and where we allocate funds, so that we can use, for instance, short term emergency funds also as an investment into our longer term programmatic work.

To conclude this section, while programs continue to develop, change, and grow over time, a shift to a coherent program approach is transformational and requires adaptive solutions to how we work. It requires us to look at ‘new’ ways of allocating resources. It requires us to move away from management structures that are convenient to ‘new’ structural configurations. It requires us to “line up,” together and to be clear about our identity. It requires us to take a fresh look at people management. And it requires us to let go of some of the language we use, language that holds us back. In short, it requires us to invest now for the future.

Investing in the future

We started out by describing why we are excited about the organizational shift to longer-term programming and to a focus on women and girls. We have also posited that this shift will not be possible without investment and support in a number of areas. Accordingly we are making the following recommendations for consideration.

1. Alignment

A coherent program aligns current and future projects and programs under a long-term goal linked to the underlying causes of poverty. But we must ensure the rest of the organization is also ‘lined up’. That is, we make the structural changes that will promote learning, the ability to demonstrate impact, and the flexibility to assess where functions are most effective in different country office

locations. That being said, we find ourselves puzzled by some of the structural decisions made in the CARE USA strategic plan.

- We recommend that during this global Country Director meeting we genuinely look at the following three issues and articulate some clear answers or at least next steps to:
 - a. Structure
How will the structural changes in HQ provide greater support to country offices? How is the decentralized global organization strengthened and connected to the frontline? How will Atlanta support the structural reorganization required by country offices?
 - b. Advocacy
How will advocacy be aligned throughout the organization and how will it draw from evidence based field analysis? On which issues and how will we take collective and principled positions on issues affecting poverty at the country level? How and when will we build the linkages to social movements (national, regional and global levels)?
 - c. Managing expectations
Can we agree to stick with non-negotiables (as defined in country office strategic plans) with CARE International members and other stakeholders? For example, can we ensure that emergency responses will be linked to and supportive of country office program strategies (and not a second-wave flood of disconnected emergency responses from within CARE International that leads to the organization functioning with a split personality)?

2. Resources

Long-term programming requires us to re-think how we allocate resources.

- We recommend that CARE USA commits to adequate levels of multi year unrestricted funding and that the country offices be entrusted with investing their unrestricted funding judiciously and to maximize returns.

Such investments could include: analysis and research; freeing up core staff to focus on proof of impact; marketing; retention of talented staff; withstanding the shocks from emergencies or civil unrest; and expanding and contracting without losing core strengths and capabilities.

- We are also seeking a high level organizational commitment to raising new and flexible funds as demonstrated through aggressive marketing and ambitious targets.

3. Mind shift and understanding

We have come to appreciate that dealing with complex social change requires shifting people's hearts and minds and challenging the gap between the values we stand for and current conditions.

We must view dissent and disagreement as a way to finding creative solutions. We must encourage innovation and action by creating non-fearful, non-hierarchical learning environments. We must draw on and make use of ideas from the frontline and recognize community voices in our decision making. These are adaptive challenges, and the solutions are not ready at hand, and so we must also encourage ourselves to remaining open to testing our own worldview and to learning new ways of working.

On reflection most of the challenges we've faced have not been solvable with technical solutions – we've had to be very adaptive in the way we address issues. Sometimes that hasn't been particularly structured or easy. In fact, it's been messy. (Nick)

- We recommend that these insights are captured in the work being done on organizational performance management (whether this be the organization-wide balanced score card, country office-level impact measures, and recognition and reward incentives).
- We also recommend that in the flurry of changes going on in Atlanta, to prepare for delivering on the new strategy – that the organization does not lose sight of its commitment to leadership development and to gender and diversity.

Written by Asia Leadership Study Tour
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