



PROMOTING PARTNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNING TO FIGHT EBOLA IN LIBERIA

CASE IN BRIEF

As the Ebola crisis reached its peak in Liberia, the Mercy Corps team launched an ambitious experiment in adaptive management: to implement an emergency, social mobilization program with a technology-intensive learning platform. The Ebola Community Action Platform (ECAP) gave significant autonomy to 77 partner organizations to design their own outreach efforts. ECAP encouraged localized decision-making and supported a number of learning channels which enabled partners to make regular improvements during implementation. The ECAP team learned from many challenges, including the burden of their technology-intensive monitoring system, rapid team growth, internal communication challenges, and strained operational capacity. Despite these issues, the program reached 2.4 million people in nine months and helped drive improved learning systems in later programs.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Liberia confirmed its first case of Ebola on March 30, 2014. The number of new cases in the country would erupt in July, reaching a peak in September. In the two years following the first case, approximately 10,700 Liberians would contract the disease, resulting in over 4,800 deaths nationwide.

Mercy Corps' Ebola Community Action Platform (ECAP) launched just after the peak, in October 2014. This social mobilization program sought to address a nation-wide gap in localized awareness raising and information sharing on Ebola. It had the ambitious goal of reaching two million people in six months, later extended to nine months, with the support of \$12 million from the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the technical guidance of partner Population Services International (PSI).

ECAP was designed around a two-pronged approach. First, ECAP sub-granted 77 geographically spread, locally trusted grassroots organizations. Of these, 71 were community-based organizations such as women's groups, youth groups, and religious organizations. Some had previous experience with health issues, and some had none. Most had never accessed international funds before. Each partner could define (and, importantly, change) their own mobilization strategy, so long as they articulated a plan for influencing community knowledge and behaviors related to Ebola. Partners were then trained in the "Listen, Learn, Act" methodology, a flexible framework provided by PSI to guide their message focus in communities.

Second, ECAP established a nation-wide, technology-centered monitoring and learning platform to help partners improve

their mobilization activities. Mercy Corps sent 1,000 mobile phones to the partners' community mobilizers, who would use them to report on their mobilization activities and on community knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Data from the technology platform fed into an online dashboard, self-reflection workshops held by the partners, and broader lessons learned workshops hosted by Mercy Corps. In response, many partners shifted their mobilization approaches and messaging emphasis over the course of the program.



Community educators for Centre for Liberian Assistance, an ECAP partner, mobilize for community outreach on the dangers of Ebola.



We used the bottom to top approach. We listened to the communities, and then were able to listen to communicators, and the mobilizers were able to work as a team, and then there was support from management."

Local ECAP Partner



What was good was that the NGOs got to make their own decisions – we didn't have the capacity to manage these NGOs, we didn't know the communities or how to go to them."

ECAP Program Director

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS



PARTNER AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENT DECISION MAKING

Community organizations were best placed to quickly and effectively spread messages about Ebola prevention and care as Mercy Corps and other international partners like Population Services International (PSI) lacked the localized knowledge or networks to reach communities nationwide or respond to changes in context at a community level.

The ECAP team created very few rules for its partners in their grant applications. This allowed them to define mobilization activities that drew on their local strengths. Partners' ability to shift strategies over the course of the program was eased by a funding mechanism (Fixed Obligation Grants – FOGs – recently renamed Fixed Amount Awards) which did not require the burdensome screening or financial reporting of standard sub-grants.

Reporting through the mobile data-collection platform also helped to protect the autonomy of partners. The presence of a publicly available dashboard reassured the OFDA and the Ministry of Health that the program would stay on track. This confidence gave ECAP and its partners the space to test and improve their work. In fact, OFDA and Mercy Corps intentionally limited the number of required reporting indicators to give partners the contractual flexibility to change their detailed approaches over time.

Nonetheless, the sub-granting plan had its challenges. Setting up sub-grants and FOGs required significant time; partners were not approved until two months after the initial program approval. FOGs could also be constraining. Even

as they helped ECAP to include grassroots organizations, the reliance on fixed budget values and pre-determined deliverables meant that partners could not easily amend their budgets to add, for example, communication materials for their field work.

To spread the management burden, Mercy Corps used standard sub-granting with some higher-capacity partners, who then sub-granted to grassroots organizations through FOGs. In all, Mercy Corps managed 26 partners directly, and another 51 through consortium lead partners. The program's results would not have been possible without the cascading partnership structure. Still, the complicated nature of the partner application, approval, and contracting process call into question whether another system could have been faster and more responsive.



ECAP mobilizer collecting community data using a mobile phone.



MULTIPLE CHANNELS FOR PARTNER LEARNING

ECAP had many learning channels to support partner learning and adaptation. Direct observations, monitoring data, and spaces for reflection were all necessary, in different doses and combinations, for partners that made shifts in their approaches.

Savvy partners made quick, local changes based on field observations, daily meetings, texts, social media, and phone calls to understand what was not working. These were light-touch, informal monitoring mechanisms that relied on

PIVOTS IN PARTNERS' APPROACHES

One ECAP partner recognized the Ebola-related risks posed by female genital mutilation, a widespread practice in some locations. Though addressing or challenging these cultural practices was not the goal of ECAP, the partner was able to hold conversations with female leaders to discuss locally relevant messages about hygiene and safety around bodily fluids. These conversations were also structured to improve the partner's understand of the local context, a key piece of PSI's "Listen, Learn, Act" methodology.

In another case, this same organization struggled to get entry in another area due to informal, political dynamics. Through an ECAP Lessons Learned workshop, the partner's leaders had met another ECAP partner with strong ties to the area; they called on this other partner to facilitate an introduction to the restricted areas.

localized information flows (including using the “Listen, Learn, Act” methodology), independent from Mercy Corps’ data collection efforts.

Meanwhile, the technology platform gathered data nationwide and made the full monitoring data available to all partners through an online dashboard. Those who accessed it or interacted with the analysis at workshops found it useful. For example, some partners redirected their mobilizers’ activities in response to activity-level data on geographic coverage and mobilization methods.

For other partners, learning was crystallized in “lessons learned” workshops. The Mercy Corps monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team presented aggregate data showing activity outreach, types of mobilization activities implemented, and the kinds of messages emphasized. Data helped to show how communities’ attitudes were changing, including how message types were correlated with improvements in attitudes toward survivors over time, which helped partners understand the importance of certain messages.

The workshops also provided space for partners to share their own experiences. Many kept in touch after the workshops (via Whatsapp and by phone) to source ideas and advice from one another. Unfortunately, the demands of an emergency program led one planned workshop to be cut, while another focused primarily on data quality and capacity building to get the monitoring system running. In the end, only two lessons learned workshops were held during the course of the program.

These various channels for learning helped some partner organizations make multiple changes to their mobilization approaches over time. They moved mobilizers around to cover geographic gaps in coverage or border hot spots; changed mobilization schedules to reach farming households when families would be home; switched from repetitive door-to-door visits to more creative community engagement, like drama and puppetry; and shifted focus of messages to address relevant issues (such as stigma) when Ebola cases waned and communities demonstrated knowledge about transmission.



OUTCOME ORIENTATION

The clear goal of “getting (Ebola cases) to zero” through social mobilization was shared by the ECAP program’s wide partner base. While many programs rely on leadership to clarify objectives and motivate the team, the unique nature of the Ebola crisis provided a goal that was felt personally, even viscerally, by every person involved.

This motivation translated into a desire to improve. Partners were intrinsically motivated to adapt their mobilization activities to be more effective, and Mercy Corps team members worked quickly to solve partners’ issues. As one manager put it: “The enthusiasm and desire of the Liberian people is what made this work.”

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



BURDENSOME DATA SYSTEMS

While it was a bold undertaking, setting up a real-time data system with functional feedback loops at a national scale required more time and effort than was perhaps expedient in a short-term emergency program.

The technology platform required mobilizers to submit monthly data on: mobilization activities, including location, methods, and topics covered; challenges faced in the field; and the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) in communities. Partners would then have access to an online dashboard that showed the monthly report results.

The two team members responsible for the system faced a daunting task: training 1,000 mobilizers on mobile data collection, designing a dashboard with a programmer who was based remotely, addressing connectivity issues, and ensuring that partners sent in reports. The database was online after only six weeks, but fixing data quality issues on activity reports took another two to three months. Testing and iteration were also needed to craft the right questions in KAP surveys to improve data quality. In the end, the time

SEEING THINGS FIRST-HAND

Three months into implementation, the Program Director realized that a lack of field-level observation was limiting the Monrovia-based Mercy Corps team’s ability to support partners. Partner support officers had been doing most of their work via phone and email, which limited their tangible understanding of activities in the field. They were struggling to collaborate effectively with partners.

To address these issues, the partner support team joined the PSI staff for mobilizer trainings and field visits. These trips included time to observe mobilization activities in communities, and to reflect with partners and PSI on what was working and what could be improved.

This new approach led to Mercy Corps and PSI supporting several adaptations by partners, including shifting schedules to accommodate the farming season, clarifying mobilization methodology with partners to improve message quality, and pushing partners to focus on the right types of messages for their areas. The exercise also strengthened relationships and communication among Mercy Corps, PSI, and partners, improving their ability to jointly solve problems for the remainder of the program.

LEARNING FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

The team members who were responsible for ECAP's technology-intensive M&E system moved on to design systems for ECAP 2 and a youth economic empowerment program. They took lessons from the ECAP experience to design improved, leaner monitoring systems with sharper focuses on the types of information and best channels for reflection.

On the technical side, the ECAP system has moved from an ona.io platform to CommCare. In addition to computer-based access, teams are able to view activity reports from the field on their tablets. Individual community data, which was difficult to track under ECAP's first phase, can now be viewed longitudinally for each community and by the staff member responsible for a given area.

On the human side, Mercy Corps has focused on improving data quality by making a single M&E staff person in each ECAP partner organization responsible for data collection, and ensuring that person visits every community to collect baseline KAP information. With greater granularity and the ability to track individual organizations and communities over time, Mercy Corps and its partners are better able to monitor staff performance, motivate team members, and highlight good work. Individual organizations can see and comment on data submitted on the dashboard, helping them to better understand the activities they are implementing.

needed for capacity building and development of the system itself cut into other learning activities.

Even as data submission challenges were resolved, data use remained a problem. Partners lacked enough understanding of the M&E system to make robust use of it for ongoing learning. In an end-of-program survey, only 18 partners (of 24 respondents) reported having accessed the database at least once per month which fell short of the standards the ECAP team had set for themselves.

Similar challenges stood in the way of using the data for centralized, strategic decision making. Senior leadership was too busy to regularly guide the team on how and why the system's data could be used to improve the program. Meanwhile, the program's steering committee (a group created to make high-level shifts) was cut because of the volume of other work. By the time the Mercy Corps team was able to learn and improve, the program was coming to a close.



TEAMBUILDING AND COMMUNICATION

Forming a coherent team with clear roles and good internal communication was a major challenge with such a fast growing team. The demands of the crisis and the program's tight implementation timeline meant the team grew quickly. Mercy Corps' team in Liberia grew more than four-fold. Staff moved positions (Mercy Corps team members whose program activities had been suspended due to Ebola were moved to ECAP) and new staff joined, despite recruitment challenges – everyone in Liberia seemed to be recruiting, yet the pool for externally recruited staff was small for Ebola-affected countries.

Some team members, new and old, excelled in their new ECAP roles. Others lacked the hard or soft skills to do their jobs, often because their previous projects had been focused

on very different sectors, such as economic development. Brief on-boarding and limited on-the-job mentorship led to confusion over roles. M&E responsibilities were not clearly defined across the ECAP team which hindered the effectiveness of the monitoring systems. Moreover, mid-program transitions in management at senior and mid-levels made it difficult to establish a cohesive, collaborative team which could effectively support partner activities, learning, and improvement.

Some tension arose within the team, and sub-teams within ECAP began to function as silos. In the middle of the emergency, senior management did not have the space to build collaboration and transparent communication in the team. At times the communication breakdown would create frustration and confusion for partners, who received inconsistent and late communication about program activities. One team member roughly estimated that when communication was poor, up to 20% of some partners' time was wasted due to confusing messages received from Mercy Corps.

The challenges the team faced are common in emergency contexts. It is clear that improved on-boarding and mentorship in capacity-strained emergencies could enhance a team's ability to implement and adapt, even in the face of rapid shifts in funding streams and staffing needs.



OPERATIONS OVERSIGHT

The growth of the team in Liberia put significant pressure on the operations and finance functions. After support from Mercy Corps' emergency response unit and a short-term operations manager ended, the operations and finance functions were often too overwhelmed to quickly support program needs and adaptation.

Harvard’s Ronald Heifetz refers to strategic reflection as “getting off the dance floor, and on the balcony.” As one ECAP team member put it, the Program Director, “couldn’t get on the balcony because he was shouting at ops.”

This had three results. First, steps that would have reduced the amount of work needed in the future (such as getting preferred supplier agreements for basic supplies like paper) were delayed by many months. This increased the work load on both operations and programs teams, which created delays in procurements and reduced the amount of time available to spend on partner support.

Second, delays from operations limited the team’s time for reflection and energy to address strategic issues. Finally, delays in reconciling procurements made it challenging for management to monitor spending and have the information needed to adjust planned activities.

KEY REFLECTIONS

Decentralized decision making, the ability to network and learn from other partners, and opportunities to reflect on data gathered were important to partners’ ability to change their mobilization methods and focal messages. The ECAP team struggled to operationalize their technology-intensive learning platform in time to improve results, but their ambitious investments remain a promising source of learning for future efforts.



Photo: Sean Sheridan/Mercy Corps

ECAP mobilizers lead community outreach in December 2014 in Robertsport.