PIVOTING APPROACHES IN THE FACE OF A CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE: COMPARATIVE CASE

CASE IN BRIEF

Two education projects operating in Sierra Leone prior to Ebola responded to the crisis in dramatically different ways. Both implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), they demonstrate how adaptive management allows projects to achieve outcomes in the face of a changing context. One project had an iterative design from the beginning, with a flexible donor that trusted the implementing agency and empowered field staff. The project quickly shifted its approach and continued to support education in Kenema district in southeastern Sierra Leone throughout the crisis. The other project had a convoluted consortium and rigid donor requirements. It suspended activities for nearly nine months at the peak of the Ebola crisis, before finally re-launching with a new approach that quickly became irrelevant. Staff from both projects, and across the IRC, worked flexibly to support the overall Ebola response.

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) was managing several education projects in Sierra Leone when the Ebola outbreak began in May 2014. Despite progress made since the end of the country's civil war in 2002, education was characterized by poor retention, gender disparity, poor learning outcomes, and an education workforce where fewer than half of teachers were trained, qualified, and on salary.

One of the IRC projects that addresses these challenges is called "Lɛ Wi ɔl Lan"—also known as the "LWOL" project. It began as a relatively small-scale project in 2011, supported with an annual budget of $600,000 from a private US-based foundation that focuses on education. LWOL's goal is to improve in-school learning opportunities and outcomes for girls and boys in Kenema district, in southeastern Sierra Leone. The project was designed to be iterative, with built-in annual reviews, budget revisions, and opportunities for adaptation.

Another project is the the "Supporting marginalized girls in Sierra Leone to complete basic education with improved learning outcomes" or "Girls' Education Challenge" (GEC) project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), administered by a Fund Manager, and implemented by a Consortium of international agencies. The GEC project launched in January 2013 with a three-year timeline (now extended) and a total budget of approximately $9 million (of which the IRC's component was approximately $2.9 million). The IRC was responsible for a range of activities (including distributing textbooks and uniforms, organizing study groups, and training teachers) in the three districts of Kenema, Kailahun, and Kono.

The Ebola outbreak rendered both the LWOL and GEC projects impossible to implement in their original forms, as schools were closed nationwide from July 2014 to April 2015 (though when initially closed, there was no re-opening date in sight). With schools closed, hundreds of thousands of children were left without access to education.

While the two projects faced the same unforeseeable change in their context, their responses to the shift took them on completely different trajectories. The GEC project suspended all field-level programming in July. The following March it eventually adapted its model to focus on improving access to radio lessons.

Photo: Erika Perez-Leon/IRC

Students take part in small learning groups in January 2015.

Meanwhile, soon after schools closed, LWOL conducted an informal risk assessment of the outbreak's impact on learning. This lead the program to develop an alternative model focused on small group learning, facilitated by unsalaried community teachers and supported by community members. Putting this model into practice required sensitization and preparation from July through September. Education activities began in October, only one month after the start of the normal school year.

Adding to the delays from school closures and new planning, IRC staff from both projects were seconded to health-related activities during the outbreak. Another stark difference between the projects became apparent here. When approximately half the LWOL team were seconded to work on health surveillance activities in Bo district, staff were still covered by the project's budget, and the donor allowed general support costs to be redirected to the health response. On the other hand, while the Fund Manager committed to cover the salaries of GEC staff during the project's suspension, it was on the condition that staff were *not* involved in any non-GEC activities. Seconded GEC staff had to be funded from other sources.

The crux of this comparative case lies in the way one project leveraged existing adaptive capabilities and enablers in the face of crisis, while the other was unable to overcome its constraints and inhibitors in a meaningful way.

LWOL: ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS

DONOR FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST IN THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTER

The IRC and the donor that funded LWOL had a collaborative and supportive relationship, sustained by regular informal communication between the project manager, education coordinator, and donor. The donor was supportive in connecting the project team with leading thinkers in education and development, and also recognized that project staff were the experts in what works on the ground. The donor encouraged an iterative project design that piloted innovative approaches, scaling up the successful ones and dropping the others.

For example, the initial design of LWOL included adult literacy classes, based on the assumption that improving adult literacy would enable parents to better support children's reading and writing. However, it was found that adult literacy classes were not having the expected impact on children's reading outcomes. The LWOL team decided to scale down adult literacy classes and instead invested in piloting other approaches, such as Teacher Learning Circles. The donor supported such shifts, though they demanded rigor in justifying decisions to change directions.

The relationship established prior to Ebola supported increased adaptability once the outbreak began. The donor quickly contacted the IRC to check on the safety of staff and offer support in approving any project alterations needed. The donor also provided bridge funding during the suspension of normal activities from July to September 2014, allowing

the IRC to scope out new activities, engage in community sensitization around education needs, and second LWOL staff to the Ebola response. This enabled the team to start appropriate education activities in October.

As schools prepared to re-open, communities expressed concern over the furniture broken and buildings damaged by the military use of schools during the outbreak. The LWOL donor allowed funds to be redirected for school maintenance and refurbishment, despite not normally supporting infrastructure. Throughout the project's adaptations, the lack of intermediaries between the IRC country program and the donor allowed budget re-alignment and grant re-approvals to move quickly.

DEVOLVED DECISION MAKING AND EMPOWERED FIELD STAFF

Change within LWOL often came from field staff suggesting different ways of working. The iterative project approach and management's efforts to empower and mentor staff have created an environment where field staff have great ownership of the project. Field teams critically appraise the project's progress toward goals, identify problems, and craft solutions in consultation with community stakeholders. This often occurs through a series of weekly and monthly reflection meetings, established by the field-based project manager as a way to encourage staff to discuss successes, challenges, and ways to mitigate problems.

This reflection and empowerment is complemented by a short and direct decision-making chain: the project manager, in consultation with the senior education manager and education coordinator, has the authority to make decisions about project changes and can discuss issues directly with the donor.

Field staff's observations laid the groundwork for the LWOL project's new approach in response to Ebola. The team noticed that unsalaried community teachers (who constitute the majority of teachers in rural areas) were moving away, as the school closures meant they no longer received financial support from the community. At the suggestion of LWOL field staff, the IRC continued to work with the teachers and paid them stipends to support small group learning activities. This approach provided education activities during the school closures, while the stipend ensured that teachers would still be present in rural communities when schools re-opened.

Similarly, based on observations from field staff that families could no longer afford learning materials as the economy shut down, the project started providing pencils, paper, and books to small learning groups.

"

Everything starts from us, from the field. If we see something challenging, we know we have to find a different way of working. So we as field staff give suggestions to the manager."

Teacher Training Officer

TEAM CULTURE AND FLEXIBILITY

Across the IRC in Sierra Leone, the team's willingness to change roles and responsibilities was a key adaptive capability in the agency's Ebola response. Though all staff were given the option to take extended leave in the face of the outbreak, none took this up. Instead, the vast majority offered to change roles to support the response, including 13 national education staff (about half from the LWOL project) who moved to Bo district to support surveillance activities. At the leadership level, the expatriate education coordinator became the Ebola response coordinator.

Staff motivation was supported by the senior management team who consistently highlighted the importance of the IRC staying for the emergency, and put in place trainings and transmission prevention measures that helped staff feel safe.

LWOL staff seemed to emerge as natural leaders within this context. As they were seconded to surveillance activities, they drew on their previous experiences with exchange visits (where they had spent time shadowing counterparts in different chiefdoms to encourage learning among staff) and cross-project collaboration (where they had supported the design and inception of other projects). LWOL staff were retained in surveillance roles the longest, at the request of the District Ebola Response Centre and the District Health Management Team.

An IRC contact tracing supervisor, Hawa (seconded from her role as an Education Officer), gets ready to visit communities in Bo district.

GEC: INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

CONSORTIUM CHALLENGES

Frustrations with the GEC consortium pre-dated the Ebola crisis, largely due to the number of links in the complicated decision-making chain, the lack of timely and transparent communication, and barriers to collective decision making.

The consortium had a Lead agency, with four main implementing partners responsible for interdependent activities across the districts. The implementing partners (including the IRC) had a limited relationship with the fund managers and no relationship at all with DFID. Information had to travel from the IRC to the Consortium lead in Sierra Leone to the Consortium lead in the UK to fund manager and then to DFID, and then back down the chain. The process caused significant confusion and delays.

When the Ebola outbreak began, those barriers to timely adaptation were compounded by risk aversion on the part of other consortium partners. Rather than developing Ebola-related initiatives to propose to the Fund Manager for funding, the consortium coordination unit instead put the GEC project on standby. The eventual decision to modify the project for Ebola response took many months, delayed by the extended decision-making chain and poor communication in the approval of adaptations.

DONOR RIGIDITY, DISCONNECT, AND DELAYS

Even without the consortium challenges, the GEC project design and donor arrangements were inherently non-adaptive. The IRC was required to create a rigid annual work plan, with little flexibility on a monthly or quarterly basis. The project was initially structured as Payment by Results, and then changed to Payment by Activity Milestones, whereby the IRC received funds based on hitting the predetermined targets. The team was left with limited space to explore whether the design assumptions were correct. Even if evidence emerged that activities were not having their intended impact, the length of time needed to secure approval for changes to milestones created a strong disincentive to attempting to adapt.

> "Payment by activity milestones created an incentive to keep doing activities even if they were not working well. We've had to rush activities due to fear that IRC would not be paid. Our focus ends up being on reaching milestones, not on quality education."

Education Manager

As the consortium attempted to modify the GEC project in response to Ebola, engaging with GEC's fund manager became a problem. The Fund Manager showed no understanding of the rapid changes or limited predictability inherent to emergency work. Instead, they approached the process of adapting the GEC project from the perspective of auditors, requiring a full proposal, logical framework (log-frame), milestones, and budget to be developed in a process taking two months to complete. This was followed by extended back-and-forth, rather than the support for rapid decisions needed in an emergency context. During those exchanges, implementing partners were expected to respond to requests for information immediately, yet had to wait months for communication in return.

Following the suspension of the GEC project in July 2014, the consortium managed to submit a full proposal for

the "Education in Ebola" project in November 2014. It was approved four months later, in March 2015. The radios needed for the new project design arrived the following July, by which time their relevance was greatly reduced as schools were open again. On the contracting side, the IRC operated on email approval of the project changes until the signing of a revised agreement in December 2015.

> " The Fund Manager take so long to approve things that proposed activities become obsolete before they are approved."

Senior Education Manager

> " Everything came to a standstill. The project became its name itself – a challenge."

Education Officer

Photo: Erika Perez-Leon/IRC

Students take part in small learning groups in January 2015.

KEY REFLECTIONS

Staff flexibility and leadership decisions enabled adaptations across the IRC's programs in the face of Ebola. However, the structure of relationships surrounding each project shaped the extent to which it adapted during the crisis. The GEC project struggled against a complicated consortium and rigid donor requirements. The inability to adapt the project caused damage beyond the missed opportunities: GEC-targeted communities felt they had been abandoned, and the resulting anger has created problems as the team tries to implement the extension to the GEC project.

Meanwhile, the LWOL project's adaptations were enabled by a flexible donor and trusting relationships, which supported internal capabilities like devolved decision making and empowered field staff. The donor made it safe to fail so that the team could try different approaches, reflect, and quickly get to the core of what works in that particular context. Though LWOL itself was a relatively small project, it directly inspired the approximately $23 million DFID-funded "Improving School in Sierra Leone" program that supports 450 schools across eight districts. This demonstrates the value of small but adaptive projects that can inform future delivery at scale.

The contrast between these two cases reveals the extent to which adaptive capabilities and enablers developed during periods of stability can have major impacts during periods of crisis.

> " To improve the adaptability of development and humanitarian work, the nature of communication with donors needs to change. We need to be able to communicate the situation in communities and for donors to accept this. Even with a good assessment you cannot know everything, so you find things out during implementation and need to adapt to issues that arise."

LWOL Project Manager

Written in April 2016 based on interviews conducted in December 2015.