



## **Learning partnerships for adaptive programming in fragile contexts**

Community of Practice meeting report  
28 May 2020 – online meeting

Co-organised by the Food & Business Knowledge Platform  
and Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law

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# Content

- Summary ..... 3
- Introduction..... 3
- Case pitches..... 5
  - Building Bridges in Burundi (BBB)** ..... 5
  - Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement through Market Expansion (PRIME)** ..... 6
  - Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS)** ..... 7
- Breakout round 1 (three rooms) ..... 8
  - BBB** ..... 8
  - PRIME** ..... 9
  - BRCiS** ..... 12
- Breakout round 2 (two rooms)..... 14
  - PRIME** ..... 14
  - BRCiS** ..... 16
- Reflections on central questions by case owners and final questions..... 18
  - BBB** ..... 18
  - PRIME** ..... 18
  - BRCiS** ..... 18
- Closing remarks ..... 19
- Participant list..... 20

## Summary

On 28 May 2020 more than thirty representatives from practice, policy and research joined the first digital Community of Practice (CoP) meeting, co-organised by the Food & Business Knowledge Platform (F&BKP) and the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law (KPSRL). The meeting about learning partnerships for adaptive programming, provided a space to discuss what works well and what not in joint learning in consortia with partners with diverse expertise, experience and focus areas. The two-hour online (Zoom) meeting included pitches of three large multi-actor programmes implemented in Burundi, Ethiopia and Somalia. The meeting included two rounds of breakout sessions to allow for more in-depth discussions of aspects and experiences related to learning and adaptive programming in the respective cases.

## Introduction

The need for adaptive programming in fragile contexts is evident. Conflict-, climate- and other types of shocks, as the current pandemic, may disrupt programming at any time. Yet, the generation of knowledge and lessons on how to effectively adapt is not naturally a priority or clear-cut process in programme implementation. Learning partnerships, in consortia, can help to better deal with foreseen and unforeseen shocks. However, challenges and questions remain as to how diverse learning partners can best operate and feed back into programmes.

The F&BKP and KPSRL therefore co-organised a Community of Practice (CoP) meeting about learning partnerships for adaptive programming. Specifically, the exchange focussed on learning partnerships to support food security and agricultural development programmes in settings of fragility and protracted crisis. This meeting built on the findings from an earlier [series of meetings on adaptive programming](#) organised by KPSRL, and follows-up on the need for exchange of lessons on this topic voiced in previous meetings of the food security and stability CoP of the F&BKP.

### Welcome and introduction by Rojan Bolling, Knowledge Broker at the F&BKP and The Broker

Meeting moderator Rojan Bolling explained that although adapting programmes is not necessarily new, the development of adaptive management as an approach, as well as learning and adaptation of programmes, has become more structured and advanced. Organisations that apply this approach, emphasize the need to be more transparent about uncertainties and the inability to control what happens in dynamic contexts. For instance when facing conflict or crisis. They also see that there is a need to systematically already include this in the design of the programme. Because of this structured approach, we can now also start to learn lessons about how to do this more effectively, about what works to try to do this and what does not work very well. A set of overarching questions about joint learning processes were formulated to guide this meeting.

### Central questions

Given the different expertise and focus areas of consortium partners, what works well and what does not in joint learning?

- Does learning for adaptive management deliver more benefits for partners with certain types of activities (e.g. humanitarian/food security, peace, development/agriculture)?
- How to prioritize learning objectives (with local actors)?
- How to capitalize on complementarities of consortium partners as well as local actors?

These issues were discussed with the three case owners beforehand, who each decided on a set of topics and questions that relate to this from the perspective of their own programme – as discussed in the breakout rounds.

### **Word of thanks to case owners**

We are most thankful to the case owners for their valuable contributions to this meeting by sharing their experiences and lessons learned with the Community of Practice. Many thanks to Geert de Jonge (Help a Child), Tilahun Asmare (Mercy Corps Ethiopia), Martijn Goddeeris and Balint Nemeth (NRC Somalia).

### **Welcome by Megan Price, Head of Office at the KPSRL**

Similarly to the F&BKP, the KPSRL is about creating a broad Community of Practice and helping that community find opportunities to share their knowledge, share good practice and work collaboratively in solving common challenges and documenting lessons. One more concrete way in which this is done, is through Practice Labs such as this one, where practitioners come together and have an open and honest discussion about best practices, what works and why, what does not work and why not, and see if they can inspire and inform each other. Another way in which this is done, is through the Addressing Root Causes (ARC) programme, with the aim to bring together Dutch MFA funded programmes on security and rule of law, in learning partnerships and communities of practice.

### **Recap previous meetings on adaptive programming by Messina Manirakiza, Knowledge Broker Programming and Practice at the KPSRL**

Last year the KPSRL initiated a series of Practice Labs as part of an initiative called Learning about Learning, with the objective of offering space for practitioners to share challenges, best practices and approaches which have been tested in the field and deemed effective. The intention was also to create a bridge between policy and practice. We first identified, in partnership with our Community and Practice Lab participants, the topic of adaptive programming in order to make sure we understand what it is, what it seeks to achieve and why it is imperative in fragile settings. Several topics were covered, but the main focus was on:

- adaptive tools in practice, such as political economy analysis, problem-driven iterative adaptation based approach and gender political economy analysis;
- assumptions guiding and driving theories of change, as well as tools and ways of testing these assumptions and respective evidence collected on their validity;
- learning portfolios and collaborative learning and programme adaptation.

During the Practice Labs it was revealed that, while most programming partners are currently engaging in learning processes, these processes mostly take place within projects and at best within organisations. Cross-organisation learning initiators remain an exception.

The context of consortia we are discussing today is quite illustrative because it comes with a lot of governance structures, power imbalances, and different organisation approaches. All this can lead to tensions and stiff or competing learning dynamics. Therefore we decided to structure our Practice Labs this year in such a way that they allow for raising insights that are useful at both project level and a more generic portfolio level of policy and programming.

## Case pitches

Each case representative briefly pitched their programme, already focussing on several aspects related to their consortium and learning for adaptive programming, to set the scene for the more in-depth discussions in the breakout sessions.

### Building Bridges in Burundi (BBB)

*by Geert de Jonge, Manager Expertise & Development at Help a Child / Red een Kind*

With peacebuilding in Burundi as the overall goal of the programme, the Theory of Change is drawn as a bridge, supported by four pillars:

- 1) Improved social and economic resilience;
- 2) Increased social cohesion and mitigation of conflicts;
- 3) Improved social contract through participation and accountability;
- 4) Improved informal justice and transitional justice.

- 4 INGOs (Help a Child (lead), Mensen met een Missie, Cord, AFSC)
- 11 local NGOs
- 6 provinces (50% of Burundi)
- 5 year programme (2016-2021)
- Budget around €8 million
- Funded by Dutch MFA, via Addressing Root Causes (ARC) Fund

Because of the diversity of these topics, the types of partners within the consortium are equally diverse. Since this has an effect on the shared learning agenda and because it takes a lot of time to coordinate well in such a large consortium, the importance of its governance is underscored.

Lessons learned (so far) on content:

- Changed to a new transitional justice strategy, as the one that would have been started was not functioning that well. Therewith one of the pillars was changed completely, but the bridge was kept standing.
- Aligning much closer now to the commune planning of the local governments (Plan Communal de Development Communautaire - PCDC).
- Renewed gender policy to ensure that the project is fully gender transformative. As this is a mainstreaming issue, it was an interesting topic for all different types of partners and one of the learning points on the agenda.
- Linking all activities clearly to the end objective of peacebuilding; ensuring that the four pillars do not turn into silos.

Learning by the BBB consortium:

- One of the strengths of the consortium, which enabled learning and adaptation: working with one external evaluator from the start, doing baseline-midline-endline (later yet to be conducted) and using this for consortium wide in-depth reflection sessions. Besides these top-down marked moments to allow for learning, many more informal learning moments happen as well.
- What inhibited learning and adaptation is the governance of the consortium: top-down enforcement of learning. Taken that a lot of adaptations are happening on field and partner level, learning should actually trickle-up. The lesson learned is that we really have to see with such a large consortium how we can ensure that we're not top-down learners, but that we learn from the bottom up and strengthen each other?

## Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement through Market Expansion (PRIME)

by Tilahun Asmare, Country Level Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Manager at Mercy Corps Ethiopia

The main objective of the programme was to increase household incomes and improve resilience to climate change through market expansion. To achieve this, PRIME concentrated on five technical areas (intermediate results):

- 1) Improved livestock productivity and competitiveness;
- 2) Enhanced climate change adaptation;
- 3) Strengthened alternative livelihoods for households transitioning out of pastoralism;
- 4) Enhanced innovation, learning and knowledge management;
- 5) Improved utilization of nutritional products.

- 3 INGOs (Mercy Corps (lead), CARE, SOS Sahel)
- 7 local NGOs
- 6.5 years of implementation (2012-2019)
- 3 pastoral dryland areas (Afar, Oromia, and Somali regions) in lowland regions
- 8 offices - co-locating the 10 consortium partners
- +250 staff members
- Budget: \$70 million
- Funded by USAID

The complex programme was implemented by a consortium of 10 organisations, working through partnerships with the government and private sector. While the seven local implementing partners had a better understanding of the respective context and better connection with local governments and community leaders, they had no previous experience implementing a market system development (MSD – a core principle of PRIME) programme. To promote cross-organisational and cross-regional learning and adaptation amongst consortium partners with different capacities, experiences and specific (regional) responsibilities, a clear learning and knowledge management strategy was designed. This was aided by consortium wide staff interviewing. An important tool that was designed for that purpose is the Concept Note System.

The Concept Note System (discussed more in-depth in Breakout Round 1) helped:

- to maintain the quality control and consistency of implementation amongst diverse partners;
- to promote cross-organisational and cross-regional learning and adaptation;
- to do bottom-up planning, implementation of activities and promote innovation at field level;
- to bring sustainable impact and ensure linkage among intermediate results – with submitted activity concept notes being reviewed and approved by four senior technical advisors.

Other factors that boosted learning and adaptation among implementing partners:

- co-location of different consortium members in the offices;
- mandatory partner meetings;
- 100% budget line item flexibility from the donor.

The Crisis Modifier Interventions (discussed more in-depth in Breakout Round 2) were conducted through the Concept Note System. PRIME's emergency intervention approach, which evolved through learning and adaptation through the partnership, can be categorized into three generations:

- 1) Feed and fodder procurement and distribution;
- 2) Feed and fodder vouchers for marketing through local retailers;
- 3) Commercial destocking through smart subsidies; veterinary drug vouchers to livestock traders through private veterinary pharmacies; and cash transfers through microfinancing institutions with integrated nutrition messaging.

## Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS)

by Martijn Goddeeris, BRCiS Chief of Party at NRC Somalia

To make vulnerable and marginalized communities more resilient to recurrent shocks and stresses, the programme looks at long term gains on resilience, but also strongly focusses on shocks. Especially in a country like Somalia, which is a stabilizing context, dealing with shocks and stresses is central part of the approach. The five main objectives are:

- 1) Collaboration and Adaptive Learning;
- 2) Crisis Modifier & Scalable Safety Nets;
- 3) Enhancing Opportunities for Sustainable Livelihoods;
- 4) Governance (NRM, DRR, etc.);
- 5) Integrated Basic Services (WASH and H&N).

- 6 INGOs (Norwegian Refugee Council (lead), CESVI, Concern Worldwide, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Action Against Hunger)
- 3 local NGOs
- Created in 2013
- 10 projects, 4 ongoing
- 34 districts
- + 500 communities
- + \$200 million invested since 2013
- 3 Donors (UKAID, World Bank, EU)

While the last four objectives are more specific, the first one on collaboration and adaptive learning is an overall objective and key component. How do we adapt as a group? How do we learn from the bottom up from our communities? The second objective, crisis modification and scalable safety nets, looks at what the value for money activities are for early actions, to scale up with crisis modifiers and the Internal Risk Facility - a DFID mechanism to scale up in emergencies. Aspects and questions related to this are discussed in the two subsequent breakout rounds and introduced here.

Whereas a lot of resilience programmes consist of a mix of livelihoods activities, BRCiS' approach is based on needs that are coming from the communities themselves and on the wider learning by the consortium. This is realised in several ways, including for example:

- Using the community-led and people-centred approach from the People-First Impact Method - a methodology which has been used now in 30-35 countries and is stepping away from the needs based approach - for an iterative process with these communities. The result after four years of this process is that all community action plans got adapted.
- Working closely with self help groups and village savings and loans associations; where these groups have often shown to be the first responders during shocks. That leads to further advocacy where the consortium comes in as a collective.
- Area based programming; operating from an area lens instead of a community lens as done in the first four years of the programme. This shift evolved from the understanding that the communities BRCiS is working with actually share resources with the wider communities surrounding them. Therefor BRCiS has also invested a lot in health, nutrition and water.
- Community early warning and early action; communities are central to the collection of data and feeding it up to the consortium. This is used to bring forward money that is flexible within the resilience budgets, topped up with crisis modifiers, depending on MEAL and linked to early warnings. In the last 1,5 years, early actions from communities lead to further crisis modifiers activities within the consortium and also the donor to scale up very fast during responses.

While operating in a complex and fragile context like Somalia - with four major shocks in the last nine months, going from drought to flooding, to locust swarms and eventually the COVID-19 with restrictions becoming a social and economic crisis - the main elements to keep in centre focus are:

- that it is a coordinated and de-centralized response;
- good and open communication with the communities and networks;
- continue looking at it as a holistic and multi-sectorial need.

## Breakout round 1 (three rooms)

### BBB

- How are learning priorities of consortium partners, working from different perspectives and areas of expertise, aligned throughout the programme?

- Does the consortia model (and the implicit role of “learning partners”) have comparative advantage in different knowledge and learning processes?

*Speaker: Geert de Jonge, Help a Child*

The session was kicked off with a short recap of the programme objective. It was recalled that the BBB programme focuses on the creation of social and economic capital and assets among young people, aimed at reducing persistent poverty, unemployment and insecurity caused in part by increasing competition and tensions over arable land.

The case presenter reflected afterwards on how **learning priorities** of consortium partners, working from different perspectives and areas of expertise, are aligned throughout the programme. He emphasized the fact that the programme has multiple thematic pillars, and is implemented in 6 provinces in Burundi, by a consortium of multiple stakeholders including 1 lead organisation, 4 INGOs, 11 local NGOs, which poses an additional challenge when it comes to collective learning. In terms of learning dynamics, the case presenter explained that there is always a general tendency for organisations to prioritize/defend their own pillars of interventions (and related strategies, approaches) and learning agendas.

To prevent/mitigate conflicts which might arise due to competitive learning demands, the consortium has set an **inclusive governance structure** with specifically a steering committee where all members are equally represented. That structure strives to strike a balance between various learning demands and priorities, but the extent to which one can be “democratic” within a consortium is always debatable and poses practical challenges.

Another challenge identified is the fact that Burundi constitutes a **repressive environment** which makes it difficult and/or impossible to have some types of learning conversations, especially with local NGOs, who might be endangered; or preclude learning to be captured and documented.

An additional challenge discussed is **how to financially plan** ahead for adaptation and learning, given the fact that you never know what you’ll learn about, and what adaptation will entail in terms of technicalities but also budget (it might be minor or major, but in any case, budget will be needed). Shifting the budget to be able to adapt will require to be democratic in terms of decision making, and all consortium members will have to agree on that shift, which is not always easy, especially when the budget is already strained. Most of the organisations are in general attached to the portion of budget they have been allocated, and additional questions will arise when it comes to determine how to use “leftover” budget for adaptation.

Although there are no clear cut answers to those issues, participants to the session have shared some **good practices** which can prompt healthy adaptation and learning dynamics within a consortium:

- **An inclusive governance structure at the onset of the programme:** Deciding on a governance model is important at the very formation of a consortium, as the governance model is key for all other decision making. Inevitably, members of a consortium will have different priorities and interests that need to be reconciled. Thus, before forming a consortium, it is important to plan in advance how decisions will be made and how differences of opinion will be resolved. While



there is no single solution that will enable every disparate interest to be accommodated, establishing rules of the road early on can greatly help to smooth disagreements, or even prevent them altogether.

- **Learning at the local level:** Involving local partners from the early stages of project design, and taking their inputs on board in the process is key. Allocating sufficient time and budget to genuinely involve local partners, so these local organisations get a sense of ownership, strengthens relationships between partners (reduces risks power imbalances) and enhances comprehensive learning. This helps promote coherent activity planning within the consortium as proposed. During implementation further involvement of local partners needs to be supported through learning activities, primarily at the consortium and national levels. In the specific case of the BBB consortium, involving local partners and field coordinators in learning exercises was also facilitated by the size of the country.
- **Capitalizing on external evaluation:** In the specific case of the BBB consortium, an external evaluator played (and continues to play) an active role in the whole learning process, bringing an outsider perspective, objectivity, lack of vested interest, and the ability to look at matters from a fresh perspective. He was involved since the baseline study of the programme and has been advising the consortium throughout the process. This takes off course serious commitment from consortium members as they need to maintain healthy dynamics, open atmosphere, be receptive to recommendations and follow up on them.
- **Budgetary flexibility since the onset of a programme:** Some organisational practices/activities (especially learning) have been seen as somewhat incompatible with 'traditional' budgeting's hierarchical command-and-control orientation. Annually determined budgetary targets, and the delineated responsibilities associated with them, are seen to limit the scope of organisations to operate flexibly, inhibit innovative responses to unforeseen contingencies, and stifle the creativity required for innovation and learning to occur. Budgetary flexibility is key. Financial forecasting and management processes need to facilitate adaptive planning, allowing financial resources to be moved around and deployed where necessary. Regular budget review and continuous re-forecasting are essential.

## PRIME

**How did the Concept Note System contribute to the improvement of ongoing interventions while the team faced two day-to-day management challenges; responding to changes in its complex context and effectively operating under a large and diverse organisational structure?**

*Speaker: Tilahun Asmare, Mercy Corps Ethiopia*

The Concept Notes System was introduced further, in addition to the information provided in the earlier pitch. The case presenter explained that it can be understood as a mini proposal; a 3-4 pager with a detailed template of an activity, in which *how* questions in particular play an important role - how it will be implemented, how it will be linked to other components, and how it will contribute to the overall objectives - to ensure sustainability and matching with the market systems. While there were approved work plans for each implementing partner, this system was used to determine what and how activities should be implemented. The Concept Notes System was designed according to six principles:

- 1) **Technical responses:** Technical activities were critically adapted to changes in the field and the market by enabling regional field teams to do so or to initiate a new activity or working consortium, with different technical capacities from 10 different partners. These field teams know the context and what should be done in an area through their presence in the field and their learning.

- 2) **Inclusive programming:** All consortium partners were empowered to design an activity, from field staff to management level staff. They would be held accountable for the implementation, but get support from their senior level programme leaders.
- 3) **Progressive learning:** By tracking the creation, approval and reporting process of activities, the Concept Notes System captured lessons learned from the design to implementation of these activities. This informs future activities and creates cross-learning from one region to another, from one component to another.
- 4) **Quality control:** Repetition of bad practices was prevented via learning from previously approved or rejected concept notes, as well as tripartite approval of new ones from seasoned technical experts. Feedback provided by five technical experts for each intermediate result, could be viewed by all PRIME staff in order to understand how to initiate a working consortium for their respective intermediate result.
- 5) **Innovation and integration:** Because markets change very dramatically and frequently, PRIME staff was empowered to be proactive and creative in their technical design. Starting from recruitment, there was due diligence to create proactive and creative team members in technical design, while the system ensured a unified programme.
- 6) **Budgetary flexibility:** This helped to adapt activities and programmes to meet the changing context in each area, with regards to the market and drought shocks.

The case presenter reflects on **major successes and challenges**. One of the major successes of the system was the heightened organisational capacity of local implementing partners, leading to direct funding of these local partners by USAID from the second year of the programme. Challenges encountered by the system and in the field included internet-connectivity as well as some resistance from local implementing partners who expected that this new system would require extra efforts and add an additional administrative burden. The Concept Notes Management System was continuously revised and based on the learning from PRIME, almost all programmes by Mercy Corps Ethiopia are currently using the system and it is being scaled up to work for all their programmes in the country.

The questions that followed particularly enquired further about those successes and challenges. Responding to a question to elaborate on the connection between helping local partners in their own adaptive management capacities and abilities and how that might also **help with fundraising** elsewhere, the speaker explains in which ways this **capacity of local partners was build:**

- Co-locating in the same office (across eight offices).
- Concept Notes designed by local partners and uploaded into the Concept Notes Management System, were reviewed by four approvers:
  - 1) Technical lead of a specific intermediate result: this highly technical expert gives technical feedback on how to make it sustainable and work in a certain area.
  - 2) Budget holder: gives feedback about the budget and the compliance requirements of USAID to each and every staff member.
  - 3) Cluster programme manager: reviewed it from a logistics and operational perspective.
  - 4) Field level technical advisor: who is similar to the technical lead, but is located in a specific region to be provide feedback from a better understanding of the context.

This whole **feedback loop** takes about one week. Finally, more than 1,000 concept notes were processed. All these **review and reporting processes helped to improve** the financial policy of local implementing partners.

- Coaching and mentorship also helped to improve technical staff capacity and management skills.
- Presenting this learning back when submitting their proposal using this Concept Notes Systems.

The questioner notes that it's interesting to make that connection, as in their experience they find barriers in learning specifically at the local implementation level where there is not necessarily a very immediate pay-off. While such learning takes quite a lot of energy, time and focus, it might not be in

the results framework. The presented system provides a good example of how to incentivize local implementing partners to do the work of learning - which can be quite a lot of work - as well as a way in which it allows them to create more and direct sustainable funding sources from it.

Noting that the consortium consists of **10 partners**, it was asked whether the process indeed works for all of them and **if all of them are engaged in the same way**. The speaker explained that while all of them engage in the same way, the adoption rate differed from one to another. NGOs or local partners who were determined for impact, embraced the market system development approach and worked a lot on improvements. **Transparency and accountability played a key role** in getting partners to embrace and work with the system. Even though the budget was in the work plan, that did not guarantee that you could implement that activity; the financier would not process any payment without an approved Concept Note (by four approvers). This functioned like a carrot and a stick. If partners would not get an approved Concept Note, they would not be able to implement anything and be dropped out.

The issue of **initial resistance** was discussed further, as this is important to comprehend in order to take everyone aboard. Whereas PRIME programme leaders quickly adopted the Concept Notes tool, particularly local implementing partners were initially resistant. Different from the 'traditional' way of doing things, this system did not allow direct implementation of activities and required more evidence (information and assessments) before designing and initiating an intervention. Several actors initially found themselves challenged by this added burden, resulting in a low budget spending rate during year 1 and 2. However, from year 3 all team members started to embrace it, aided by regular refresher trainings and transparency through presenting which organisation had submitted concept notes and which were approved or rejected. This transparent way of discussion during monthly partners meeting, helped to build their understanding and incentivized them to be more proactive.

Follow-up questions were asked about the **transparency and accountability** increased by Concept Notes practice in relation to learning: whether it posed a challenge for allowing people to learn in a way where they can be open about what went wrong or failed. Although this is a rich source of learning, it can be inhibited if people feel that it can have negative consequences for them later on. The speaker explained that for most components this was not a challenge, because there was openness to learn and improve the programme - with adaptive management as a specific principle of PRIME. The PRIME leadership underscored to consortium members that they are one implementing organisation and embracing failures. Because Concept Notes were always reviewed by four people, accountability was also shared among those reviewers and not considered a problem of a specific local partner.

A final question concerned the dependence on and variety of Concept Notes that are submitted in relation to **maintaining a balance with stated objectives**. The speaker explains that there was some imbalance in regions where the private sector was in its infancy stage and most Concept Notes focused on clusters not requiring private sector engagement - such as natural resources, climate change adaptation and nutrition. It was up to the intermediate result lead to make sure there is a right balance in activities to achieve to overall goal of the programme, which was possible through flexibility of activities and budgets for each component according to the context.

## BRCiS

### How does BRCiS' approach to adaptive management realise community-lead learning, engagement and adaptation?

*Speakers: Martijn Goddeeris and Balint Nemeth (Monitoring and Evaluation Expert), NRC Somalia*

M&E Expert Balint Nemeth kicks-off the session by introducing their community-led approach. The basis of this is to start building up a **relationship of trust**, by and for allowing two-way engagement and open discussions. Instead of conducting surveys with closed-ended questions or hour long needs assessments when going back to communities, they ask three open questions: What are the challenges that your community is facing? What does the community do to address those? What kind of additional support do you need? By coming without an agenda and through active listening, discussion **allow communities to express themselves** better. When real trust is build up, communities are also open to speak about very sensitive issues, such as child soldier recruitment. The extend to which different and more sensitive topics come up through their community engagement, is taken as indicator for the effectiveness of this approach.

Input from communities is aggregated for vulnerable groups, including women, young people, disabled people and the marginalized class, to ensure their priorities and preferences of and are not lost in the process. Then **community action plans** are formulated, which all differ across communities, that serve as an action plan for the resilience programming. Responding to the question how do this community engagement and actions relate to adaptive management, the speaker explains that a **flexible funding** from the donor is a key factor. The idea is community action plan, such as savings groups to construct a market, are going to be adapted based on changing context and changing priorities of the community. Formal and informal ways to promote such change are. **Formal:** annual participatory review where all the different pieces of evidence are brought together. This allows Community Residence Committees (CRCs), consisting of community groups and field staff, to review what activities are working well or are underperforming and to re-prioritize the budget. **Informal:** field staff are instructed to keep engaged with communities by checking it with them at least two times per month, giving communities the opportunity to express any ideas and preferred changes.

The importance of community led initiatives as well as understanding communities' existing resilience capacities to reinforce and build on is underscored by one the participants. Considering BRCiS' broad mandate and approach, he wonders whether with such **broad perspective**, leaving the topic rather open and programming to local context, contributions are targeted enough to make a difference. Does it allow to balance short term interests of communities, particular in time of shocks, and linkage to development as well as peace and stability work? The presenter acknowledges that the relation between "free style conversations" and resilience building in a challenging context like Somalia, is a repeatedly raised topic, also by the donor. The response is that building **trustworthy and long-lasting human relationships** is the first goal, with the primary purpose of allowing communities to express themselves - which is difficult to achieve when donor priorities are laid out.

The **added value of open-ended questions** was shown during community consultations on COVID-19, through which they learned about community concerns that are not covered in quantitative surveys, e.g. local drug transport and border closures. That said, it is field staffs' responsibility to make sure that community action plans align with the mandate. With BRCiS' broad mandate, there is **no strict format** for how to build resilience, it means different things in different communities. However, there is a blacklist for programming of what does not contribute to resilience.

It is commented that the **lack of a common understanding of what we mean by resilience**, both in terms of policy and practice, is one of factors hampering a joint-up approach on resilience. The

participant argues that we need a common set of principles that fuel resilience as a new paradigm and can drive the resilience agenda, including the need for adaptive programming. This also includes understanding what it is at the level of communities on the ground, but also what it takes for donors to make changes. While the link with communities on the ground is indeed very important, a question is what that means in terms of resilience. In communities engagement, one generic component is the mutual learning and sense making of information that should flow between stakeholders - instead of just extracting or bringing it. He underscored this as an element of the resilience agenda. The speaker acknowledges that there are hundreds of different definitions, but that BRCiS handles the definition by Mercy Corps, highlighting where the attention should lie as resilience practitioners, following a very pragmatic approach.

Martijn Goddeeris, Chief of Party, adds that in recent months they are trying to determine what **niche** BRCiS should be providing in the learning agenda. This reflection has been fuelled by the programmes' fast growth - from a pilot of \$22 million to \$210 million in six years and having investing \$100 million in cash as a consortium during the famine - focusing both on longer term resilience but also a very strong crisis modifier and recovery response component, while the definition of resilience is so broad. He believes that a niche is in their **early warning systems and early actions** in combination with their community engagement, through which information flows very fast in order to trigger those early actions. Another one is providing creating groups with follow-up perspectives, e.g. by linking them to banks to get loans by themselves and be interactive with the private sector.

He explains two more interesting and advantageous points of **having that broad approach**. One, in BRCiS they have been **able to pilot** a great amount of things over the course of six years. He exemplifies this with the IDP youth group initiative in Mogadishu, where the group turned an annual two-week cash for work clean up campaign after two years into a systematic clean-up campaign in the wider city with their own tuck-tucks – which they acquired with the same project support and monthly contributions of community members.

Secondly, the open approach contributes to a **mentality change**, especially in contexts such as Somalia, CAR and Afghanistan where people for twenty years have been conditioned to express their in standard terminologies - "you need a jerry can", " you need a hygiene kit". By better being able to pick up what works and what we should done better and how, **value for money activities can be stimulated**. The question remains how to ensure everybody starts doing this systematically, which is also something the consortium struggle with a lot.

To the final question **how to deal with these struggles and how to prioritise**, the answer is a quality benchmark document, which pushes the consortium in a common way forward. This document is informed by two annual review processes where staff from all agencies discuss the different outcomes. Through such processes, there is a lot of ongoing learning on the ground. As a result of this learning, all agencies are investing in VSLAs in the second phase of the programme, after it was first tried out by one or two organisations when BRCiS started in 2013.

## Breakout round 2 (two rooms)

### PRIME

#### How were crisis modifiers co-developed and adapted to tackle the feed and fodder challenge in drought affected areas?

*Speaker: Tilahun Asmare, Mercy Corps Ethiopia*

To provide a practical example of adaptive programming, the case presenter further explains the development of the crisis modifiers for the feed and fodder challenge. Budgets for these crisis modifiers were build into the proposal with the main objective of protecting the development gains, resulting from the programme's resilience building, against drought shocks. Trigger indicators were followed in each area of implementation, to initiate a Concept Note for crisis modification when a drought hits.

Before explaining the **three generations of the crisis modifier interventions** more in-depth, the presenter briefly explains the context of the specific implementation area: the Oromia, Somali and Afar regions. In these lowland areas, pastoralist use rangeland systems and free grazing practices, but do not reserve any feed and fodder to use during drought periods. The main source of feed and fodder at national level are the highlands of Ethiopia, mainly surrounding the capital Addis Ababa, on average 500km away. The closest slaughter houses are also located here.

The below summary of the evolvement of the crisis modifiers shows that adaptive programming is not always a straightforward process of improvements only, but also requires room to **acknowledge drawbacks of adaptations and learn from those** to build on further. Several **multi-stakeholder after-action reviews** proved to be instrumental in this process. The presenter also stresses again that this concerned efforts of the consortium as a whole, taking one approach, made easier by office colocation and mutual learning through transparent feedback loops.

- 1) When the first drought hit in 2014, feed and fodder was procured from the highland and distributed directly to targeted beneficiaries through programme staff. According to an after-action review with government actors, community members, programme participants and private sector actors it **helped to** improve milk production and nutrition of the households. However, it also revealed serious **drawbacks**: high costs and long transportation time; significant time needed for distribution (targeting, registration, etc.) compromising staffs time for planned activities for 3-4 months and challenging the programmes budget spending rate; and no linkage with local fodder retailers.
- 2) When the second drought hit, the intervention was tweaked according to a Concept Note for a voucher system to encourage the role of feed and fodder retailers in the drought stricken areas. From an after-action review the team learned that this updated intervention **helped to**: give programme staff more time to focus on other activities, as distribution was now done through retailers; create linkage between wholesalers in Addis Ababa and those in the lowlands; sustain this value chain through linkage with and awareness by pastoralists about the location of those retailers in the business model. However, the serious **drawback** of high costs and difficulties of transportation remained. The consortium discussed with the government, local implementing partners and communities what should be done.
- 3) For the third generation modification, two innovative components were developed which evolved from the market systems approach and activities of the resilience programming supporting livestock traders, private veterinary pharmacies and micro-financing:
  - a. Veterinary drug support through private veterinary pharmacies: agreements were signed with private veterinary pharmacies (supported through PRIME) to redeem vouchers distributed to targeted household. On the basis of this agreement, the government was

convinced not to do free drug distribution in that area, which previously put pharmacies out of business during drought.

- b. Commercial destocking through smart subsidies: small subsidies (10 USD per livestock) were provided to livestock producers to cover the high transportation costs to the closest slaughter house. This resulted in the destocking of 67.000 animals in almost two years and signed agreements with more than 50 livestock traders. This **helped to** producers to earn enough income to purchase fodder to maintain core livestock assets in dairy production.

For those pastoralist households that had completely lost their livelihood assets, an unconditional cash transfer activity through microfinance institutions was developed, with the innovation of integrating nutrition messaging.

Post-disbursement studies showed that households maintained dairy production to meet market demand and used increased incomes to purchase nutritious food. The presenter underscores that this integrated emergency response shows the importance of **harmonizing approaches** on a regional level, to prevent inconsistent approaches with activities of other NGOs. Discussing such issues at donor and government level is therefore important.

Some critical **questions and comments** from participants concerned the suitability of a market-oriented programme for pastoralists groups and to what extent it is their own choice to enter markets. It is commented that pastoralists have great expertise themselves in terms of resilience and adapting their livestock livelihood activities. How is this considered and how to ensure adaptations are putting interest of beneficiaries first, instead of donor or government objectives?

The presenter explains that he specifically focused on the crisis modifier component in this session and could therefore not go more into the market systems component. He explains that due to the severity, scale and frequency of drought shocks, it is **necessary to balance market system interventions and crisis modifiers**. He elaborates with several practical examples, such as the support of a milk processing plant in Afar. During drought, the owner of the plant gave loans to the milk collection cooperatives to buy feed and fodder in order to maintain a sustainable supply for his milk plant. While this is a small case, all pastoralists in an area are affected when drought hits. This requires such type of market-based crisis modifier interventions. He clarifies that that these are not hand-outs, but ways to strengthen existing market actors.

It is acknowledged that feed and fodder is a critical component and a market-based approach important. It is commented that a comprehensive **understanding of resilience** with regard to fodder production **at different levels** might be an important element as well, considering that the Ethiopian government has started to invest in irrigation based fodder production. In response to a final question on whether market approaches confine pastoralist to one place, the presenter shares a recent success: earlier this year the government of Ethiopia approved the pastoralist development policy, which was drafted supported of PRIME almost a year ago. The government previously did not accept pastoralism as a viable way of life, but this has changed with the new policy.

## BRCiS

### How is the shock-responsive safety net pilot used to activate early action top-ups and what are main learning objectives?

*Speakers: Martijn Goddeeris and Balint Nemeth, NRC Somalia*

In a brief recap of the previous round, the moderator recalls that **community led learning is key** in BRCiS adaptive management approach. A struggle is the tension between what people express and what you want to achieve as an organisation. M&E Officer Balint Nemeth is asked to reflect on this **tension between top-down and bottom-up** community visions when he introduces their main learnings related to the shock-responsive safety net pilot and early action top-ups.

The speaker explains that there is always tension in the case of top-down implementation, but that they address this by placing the **communities at the heart of the programme**. For instance, they are not only consulted, but also decide about funding with the staff, they co-select the beneficiary households for life saving emergency cash transfers, and make own contributions, usually through manual labour, e.g. for building a community building. **Important learning** from this is related to the acknowledgement that communities are not politically neutral places where everyone knows everyone, but can be places of very harsh **exclusion and marginalization**. These community based approaches are found to be more straightforward and easy to work out in homogeneous rural settings as opposed to urban contexts, with IDPs and urban poor, where there are different interests and preferences.

They try to tackle this by **building the capacity of field staff** to navigate in such contexts - including training in qualitative research, how to properly do community engagement, how to negotiate with local authorities, and how to speak with women – e.g. always go to the field with female staff to talk to women separately in order to get meaningful input from them. **Community feedback systems** and complaints mechanisms are also mentioned as channel to acquire valuable learnings for adaption, underscoring that the channels need to be accessible and actually usable for community members – e.g. a central hotline can pose a barrier with regards to different languages.

The speaker introduces the two year **safety net pilot** as a way for them as resilience actors to make sure that some of their learnings and approaches they believe in are piloted to inform a larger safety net system pilot that will be rolled out by the government in Somalia. The safety net is shock responsive, but needs to be **predictable and reliable** for beneficiaries on the longer term. Therefore targeted households - chronically ultra poor households or individuals that are not productive - receive a baseline an unconditional and unrestricted \$20 baseline value each month via mobile account on a fixed day. Following a graduation approach, household are supported to increase their savings capacity.

Because market prices can double or triple when shocks hit, BRCiS developed **early warning data collection system** together with the community. Part of this is are price thresholds. When e.g. the price of sorghum reaches this threshold, early action is activated **in the form of a top-up** on the baseline value. This was done at times of droughts, floods, locust infestations and now due to COVID-19, seeing evidence that the livelihoods of beneficiaries are very much at risk.

Responding to the question if **communities' priorities** are already incorporated in this shock responsive system, the speaker explains that strengthening existing community structures is their point of departure, but looked at through a **marginalization lens**. Taken that marginalization within communities is a serious issue, other programme elements, such as self help groups, are piled on top of the safety net programme to help a non-productive person to be included and be seen as a productive resource within their communities. Responding to a follow-up question on dealing with



community marginalization induced by the existing community structures that the programme aims to strengthen, Martijn Goddeeris, Chief of Party, underscores **open discussions on marginalization** with those communities as a basis to start from. Working with existing structures also included making them understand what the programme is about; that addressing marginalization and strengthening the non-productive people within their societies is actually one of the key issues you are addressing with them through your activities. He emphasises such open communication as something we should be doing as a systematic approach.

Since BRCiS has focused on community led learning, a participant is asked to elaborate on how aspect of **power imbalances** looks like within the programme: 1) In terms of the consortium structure, considering the possible experienced hierarchies between implementing actors including international NGOs, but also CSOs. Does this happen within BRCiS and how do you mitigate that? 2) In terms of community structure and especially with regard to gender or youth. While it is community led, how do you make sure this is in an inclusive way?

Martijn's response on power dynamics **within the consortium** clarifies that since last year all consortium partners - local and international - who have a budget through BRCiS, are part of a programme steering committee (PSC) and is part of decision making processes within the consortium. Although being part of a PSC does not automatically mean being part of all the projects, through that PSC information is shared in a very transparent way. With regards to power dynamics within **community structures** and making sure their perspective is inclusive, goes back to their different approach to start with: to build trust and a relationship with the community. This is also constantly monitored from a consortium perspective, such as the gender balance in the Community Resilience Committees (CRC).

Balint Nemeth adds an important learning on inclusion of women and young people is that their presence during community group meetings is not enough to **get their voices considered**. Therefore each meeting now also includes **separate discussions** just for young people, just for women and just for elderly. The staff researcher makes that the priorities of each vulnerable groups are separately reported in order not to be lost when aggregating all the information. To what extent e.g. women's preferences are reflected, should be tracked. This can be done with qualitative and quantitative monitoring data. Through high frequent monitoring as part of the community engagement approach, significant evidence was of the **improved results** when these voices are indeed included, which further **stimulates and supports this approach**.

## Reflections on central questions by case owners and final questions

The case owners are invited to reflect on the discussion they had in the breakout sessions by naming one key point that struck them and what this could say about what they have learned about working in consortia with regards to learning for adaptive management.

### BBB

As the most relevant and striking in their discussion, Geert names the points related to challenges posed by the repressive government in the country of implementation. Because of this, people and even organisation staff cannot speak openly and frankly about the political situation and how to engage with it within the consortium. If there is no environment at all to be open and honest to each other, it is hard for example to even have a good discussion on learning and how to cope with government.

Solutions to cope with this were hard to identify during the discussion. An aspect of the consortium with an advantage in the context of Burundi is that it works through a collection of different Christian NGOs: of different Christian NGOs from Protestant, Evangelic, Catholics, Anglican churches are coming together with their NGO branches. Whereas this can probably not solve the issues, it could be a possible entry point, since the Catholic church is one of the few that can be a bit critical and open towards the government. Solutions to create a better learning environment lack still.

### PRIME

Tilahun underscores that adaptive management is not an easy thing to implement, especially with a government as before the transition in Ethiopia. He provides an example of capitalising on the complementarities of consortium partners for adaptive management and learning. By standing together as a consortium and presenting the successes and show cases on resilience building to the government through the community leaders, they were able to influence the governments' stand on pastoralism in the recently revised pastoralist development policy. Particularly the local implementing partners have a good connection with the community leaders and pastoralists themselves, who could influence regional leaders and who in turn could influence the government. To help the federal government to listen to the feedback of the pastoralists, the programme sponsored consultative workshops in all the pastoralist regions.

### BRCiS

Martijn underscores that the definition of resilience was a key and recurrent question in the discussions. Taken that it is very broad and there are hundreds of different definitions, the question what we are really trying to do is called for. Starting off from such a brought vision and operating from a community centred approach in which everything could potentially be possible, led us to reflect on what BRCiS needs to come back to in the learning agenda and question what our niche is in this. Is it really providing the linkages with private sector engagement? Is that our strength or should we be leaving that to some of the USAID consortia who have more strength and expertise on that? Do we find our niche in how we bring the early warning and early actions, the value for money during shocks in a development context and to that resilience agenda?

A second element taken from the discussion, is that learning adaptation is quite a slow process. It is a mentality shift and an iterative process. Within BRCiS we have done a lot of learning in between our consortium members, but not find space to bring that learning outside the consortium. This starts with us to better articulate what we are actually trying to provide during a learning agenda, what our niche is as well as working with others, to help them find their niche in order to prevent duplicating each other.

## Closing remarks

Moderator Rojan Bolling thanks all participants and particularly the speakers and colleagues of KPSRL. He closes with a few notes on follow-up:

- **Online format:** While this was the first online CoP meeting online and therefore a bit of a pilot. A big advantage of this format is that it allows for participation of a lot of international guests, so this format might be used more often in the future.
- **Networking:** Since there is no networking possibility after this online event, participants are welcomed to contact the organisers if there is any connection they would like to make based on the discussions ([rojan.bolling@knowledge4food.net](mailto:rojan.bolling@knowledge4food.net)).
- **Topic next meeting:** When some of the COVID responses are a bit further along, a follow-up session may be organised to talk about how these responses went and what we can learn from that about doing flexible and adaptive programming.

Megan Price expresses thanks for everyone's engagement and valuable contributions, underscoring to be glad to see people continuing to be engaged despite the fact that we are all adjusting to this new online environment in which these come at an extra threshold. In a final forward look, Messina Manirakiza highlights points with regards to follow-up:

- **Variety of actors:** For upcoming practice labs we'll do our best to bring on board a variety of actors and voices, including implementing actors - covering both international NGOs but also local civil society actors - as well as portfolio managers and policy makers from the donor side. This is important to make sure we do learn at the project level, but also at the more generic portfolio level of policy and programming.
- **Post event survey:** This was shared immediately after the event, giving participants the opportunity to comment on both the content and format of this CoP meeting, for the purpose of improving the way in which these kind of meetings are organised.
- **Topic next meeting:** Participants are welcomed to reach out if they have suggestions or ideas with regards to adaptive programming, learning or any other topics which might be relevant to our work ([M.Manirakiza@kpsrl.org](mailto:M.Manirakiza@kpsrl.org)).

## Participant list

Name	Organisation
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Karen Stehouwer	Cordaid
Johan te Velde	Double Loop
Marion Janse	Dutch Embassy in Burundi (FNS cluster)
George de Gooijer	Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Sarah Casteran	Mercy Corps
Marina Antunovic	Mercy Corps
Louise van Schaik	The Clingendael Institute
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Working group	
Rojan Bolling	Food & Business Knowledge Platform
Megan Price	Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law
Messina Manirakiza	Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law
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Geert de Jonge	Red een Kind
Jacqueline Vrancken	The Broker