

Using a Quality Improvement Verification Checklist to Build a Learning Culture

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ACTIVITY/PROGRAM
Apolou

ORGANIZATION
Mercy Corps

COUNTRY
Uganda

CONTEXT

What is the general context in which your example takes place?

Apolou, which means “growth” in Nga’karimojong, is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded activity with the goal to improve the food and nutrition security of vulnerable households in the sub-region of Karamoja, Uganda. The activity is implemented by a consortium of organizations that include Mercy Corps (prime), Save the Children, Whave Solutions, Tufts University’s Feinstein International Center, and the three local organizations, RiamRiam, KAPDA, and NARWOA. The activity works with households, community leaders, the Ministry of Karamoja Affairs, the Government of Uganda, the private sector, and other development actors to address underlying causes of chronic food and nutrition insecurity while building a foundation for community and household resilience. Drawing on the technical expertise and contextual knowledge of this consortium, Apolou aims to improve the food and nutrition security of 310,000 direct beneficiaries.



Photo Credit: Fredrik Lerneryd / Save the Children

The Apolou team created a Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) function under the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) department at the end of its third year of implementation because the team wanted a more systematic, intentional, and resourced approach to learning and adaptive management. The CLA team is composed of a CLA Manager and four CLA Officers stationed across the different Apolou intervention areas. Apolou’s CLA approach aims to maximize food and nutrition security by generating, synthesizing, and fostering the use of evidence from monitoring, evaluation, and research.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

Describe your Adaptive Management example.

What problem were you trying to solve? Why did you choose to implement it this way?

Before the CLA function was created, Apolou’s continuous learning and improvement practices were not very robust. Program teams rarely used monitoring data for adaptive management or informed decision-making. The CLA team saw this as an opportunity to use a new process as part of regular monitoring to identify potential areas of improvement and work with the teams to adapt their implementation plans.

One of Apolou's target outcomes is for communities to "take collective action on identified needs and priorities." To achieve this outcome, Apolou works with communities to establish Resilience Action Committees (RACs) and empower them with community mobilization and advocacy skills. RACs utilize the gained knowledge and skills to help their communities better prepare for and/or respond to disasters, communicate with the local government, and hold the government and private sector accountable.

To ensure the sustainability of the outcome and continuous improvement of the RACs' functionality, the CLA team worked with the program team to create a Quality Improvement Verification Checklist (QIVC) that would be completed by the program team each time they interacted with a RAC in the community. The QIVC focuses on four main categories: 1) group composition; 2) group capacity from training; 3) group functionality; and 4) group sustainability. The QIVC guides program staff managing the RACs when identifying areas that need improvement and the type of support required.

The activity chose to have frontline program staff implement the checklist because they have more regular interactions with the groups and are better positioned to adapt the way they deliver support to the groups on a day-to-day basis. After decentralizing the adaptive management process to the field level, there was initial pushback from teams who viewed this as additional work. More importantly, some teams resisted the checklist because they saw it as an evaluation of their leadership of the RACs and feared negative consequences if the RACs did not score well.

To encourage the team to create a more open learning culture, the CLA team held sessions with program managers and officers focusing on adaptive management and how performance monitoring of community structures could be used to improve the quality of the work they were doing. In addition, the CLA team accompanied the program officers to the field in the initial months when the QIVC was rolled out and supported with completing the checklist, engaging the RACs to understand why some areas were performing poorly, and brainstorming ideas with program officers on how to better adapt their support.

IMPACT

Describe the impact your adaptive management approach had on your activity and its objectives. If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Our adaptive management approach required significant social capital, time, and attention to help team members understand the value of the QIVC as part of a culture of learning. Eventually, they began to see the checklist as a tool for the good of the community and connected it to Apolou's overall goal of addressing chronic food and nutrition insecurity in the region. Overall, the tool has helped the team to coalesce around the goal of continuous learning and improvement.

Furthermore, the QIVC helped us use data to identify when approaches needed to be adapted and generate team conversations around decisions. For example, the draft checklist required at least 50% of RAC group members to be able to read and write. During the rollout, the team realized that most RACs (composed of around 30-35 members) often only had two to three members who were able to read and write. The program team requested the CLA team to adjust the criteria and only require a minimum of three members to have the ability to read and write. However, during the intervention design, literacy was identified as a key factor to achieving the Apolou targeted outcome. Therefore, the CLA team used this as an opportunity to discuss with the program team why reading and writing were essential for achieving the outcome. As a result, we are now considering adding a literacy component to the RACs to address this gap and build the groups' overall capacity and sustainability. Without the QIVC, we would not have known that literacy was a key factor and likely would not have catalyzed a team-wide conversation to generate ideas for solutions.



Photo Credit: Save the Children

REFLECTION

What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?

In our situation, having the CLA team as part of the MEL department was helpful because we were able to leverage the existing MEL systems to understand the available data/information, data gaps, and how best to fill these gaps to promote adaptive management within the activity. All MEL team members (including the CLA team) acted as adaptive management champions across the different intervention areas and encouraged program teams to create a culture of learning. It also greatly helped that Apolou leadership values learning and provided resources for CLA initiatives.

If our team could do this again, we would work with managers from the beginning to ensure that they understand the importance of adaptive management and the different opportunities that teams can use to improve the quality of their work. This would help them in hiring more adaptive team members and encouraging their teams to be more open to learning and using data to inform implementation decisions.

TOOLS

What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach? Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.

The Apolou RAC QIVC is a checklist with 31 criteria under four main categories: 1) group composition; 2) group capacity from training; 3) group functionality; and 4) group sustainability. The QIVC is implemented by frontline program officers, and it monitors the performance of the RAC. The data enables program officers to identify areas that need improvement and guides them in identifying the type of support required by each RAC based on their needs. You can access the Apolou RAC QIVC [here](#).