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PRACTITIONER CASE

Managing an integrated project : experiences from the Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition project

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SYNOPSIS

Over the last several decades there has been a tendency within the international development sector to organize projects in a siloed manner. In the development sector this translates to projects narrowly managed according to pre-defined parameters, which are considered by donors to be easier to administer, and for which project managers are held responsible. However, there is a gradual move away from these silos and a return toward an integrated managerial approach, combining technical specialists who work on common objectives in a coordinated and collaborative manner. For Concern Worldwide integrated projects are interventions which address multiple needs, through coordination across a variety of sectors and with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, to achieve common goals.

PROJECT SETTING

This paper reflects on the experience and evidence gained to date with integration, drawing on the Concern Worldwide's work in Zambia. The Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition project in Zambia highlights the practical challenges and lessons of managing an integrated project.

YEARS OF PROJECT

2011-16

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TARGET READER
Development Sector Practitioners

LESSONS LEARNED
To avoid fragmentation, competition, and conflict there needs to be a move away from silo thinking, toward an integrated managerial approach reinforced through a clear goal, defined objectives, an understanding of context, and strong leadership.

COMPETENCIES HIGHLIGHTED
Strategic Leadership, Contextual Analysis, Developing Shared Plans, Widening Siloed Perspectives

RELATED THEORY
Programme Management, Change Management, International Development

Keywords

Integrated Projects, Project Management, Emerging Practice, Aid, Nutrition, Agriculture

Introduction

When defining integration, the available literature suggests the best approach is to think of it as a continuum. Shigayeva et al. (2010) place the notion of integration in organizational theory, where complex organizational systems are composed of separate but interconnected elements, which, in a functioning system, play complementary roles in the conduct of tasks in the pursuit of common aims and goals. They go on to distinguish between the why of integration (a response to real or perceived fragmentation of functions and services for users including gaps, duplications, and inefficiencies); the what of integration (including questions that relate to the structures and functions at different levels); and the how of integration (the dynamic interactions between organizations, programmes, individual providers and stakeholders). They identify four stages of integration: no formal interaction, linkage, with unstructured interaction and separate programme objectives, structures and functions, coordination with other sectors, usually with an interaction at the goal level, but with separate programme level objectives and integration – bringing together two programmes and their structures, with common funds, human resources and functions, including strategic planning and delivery of certain interventions.

Similar continuums have been identified by Himmelman (2002), who sees strategies of working together running from networking (exchanging information for mutual benefit), to coordinating (which includes altering activities to achieve a common purpose), to cooperating (which includes sharing resources) to collaborating (which includes enhancing each other's capacity). Harris and Drimie (2012, p. 2) identify that "*These various definitions are approaching a consensus on hierarchies of integration, based on the premise that different individuals or sectors each possess distinctive assets that can be combined in various productive manners to solve complex problems*". They represent the continuum as stretching from sectoral (with a focus on line functioning), to multi-sectoral (focussing on cooperation and coordination), to inter-sectoral collaboration, to finishing with trans-sectoral integration.

In keeping with the literature on integration, this article seeks to advance our understanding of how integrated development projects are managed. This will be achieved by examining the evidence and experience of the Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition project (RAIN). The RAIN project is implemented in Zambia by Concern Worldwide (also referred to as Concern). The RAIN project aims to prevent chronic malnutrition in children (known as child stunting) through interventions mainly focussing on agriculture, with strong links to nutrition and health interventions, in Mumbwa District, Central Province. In order for the RAIN project to achieve its goal of eliminating malnutrition, specifically child stunting, different actors across government, civil society, and the international aid community must work together in a collaborative and coordinated manner.

The article proceeds as follows. After this introductory section the next section examines the literature around integrated development projects. The advantages and challenges inherent to managing integrated development projects will be discussed in detail. The second section presents the case study. This section gives the reader an overview of the RAIN project. The third section presents the evidence and experience around managing the RAIN project. The final section presents some concluding thoughts on what project management professionals can take from the RAIN Project.

Addressing development issues using an integrated approach

Throughout much of the developing world, the 1970s were associated with large-scale state development interventions and integrated rural development programmes (Phuhlisani Solutions, 2009). These were characterized by complex, top down, blueprint approaches to rural development, often too complex for the management capacity of the implementing institutions. Writing about integrated rural development, Rondinelli (1979, p. 391) identified that:

> *Nearly all analyses of rural poverty and underdevelopment have concluded that well designed, closely coordinated, multiple-policy interventions, sustained over long periods of time, are essential for stimulating equitable growth. Still, integrated rural development programmes often depend for their success on those political and administrative resources that are least likely to be found in developing countries and least susceptible to rapid development. Indeed, the problems of rural poverty persist in most developing countries precisely because of the weakness of political commitment to change, and because administrative structure and coordinative capacity are inadequate for expanding participation in economic activity.*

Rondinelli (1979, p. 394) goes on to highlight that attempts to stimulate agricultural productivity through single-purpose government programmes yielded poor results. Rather, to increase output the government must make simultaneous investments in services, facilities, technical inputs, and marketing in rural areas. Nearly 20 years later this was re-emphasized in the World Development Report (World Bank 2008a, p. 21), which highlighted:

> *a multi-sectoral approach must capture the synergies between technologies (seeds, fertilizer, livestock breeds), sustainable water and soil management, institutional services (extension, insurance, financial services), and human capital development (education, health) — all linked with market development.*

More recently, the Millennium Villages Project was established to provide an integrated package of tried and tested interventions, such as improved seeds and fertilizer, insecticide

treated bednets, and school feeding programmes, with the intention of delivering community led development strategies. Early results suggest synergies between increased yields, better nutrition, and subsequently better enrolment (Buse et al. 2008).

Challenges to integrated projects

Any integrated project or inter-sectoral initiative requires high-level political leadership. Speaking about earlier experiences with integrated rural development, Rondinelli (1979) highlighted they did not succeed without strong and sustained commitment by national political leaders to the goals of equitable economic growth. Similarly, Roth (1994), writing about his experiences in Indonesia around land reform, highlighted the flaw in designing such a programme as a purely technical and administrative operation, without addressing the social and political sensitivity of interventions in land tenure or identifying a leader to take the issue forward. In a more general review of inter-sectoral programmes, Kalegaonkar and Brown (2000) highlight the need for conveners who are credible to all involved to get such interventions off the ground. Writing about the Millennium Villages Project, Buse et al. (2008) identify that to sustain the achievements and take them to any form of scale, there is a need for a national champion who can lobby for institutional and structural reforms.

Specifically examining nutrition, Benson (2008) identified that maintaining political support for addressing malnutrition is essential and that "*cross-sectoral coordination only becomes important if the problem of malnutrition itself is treated as politically important*". On this, Harris and Drimie (2012) highlight that one of the major impediments to effective inter-sectoral coordination is that, in many contexts, nutrition is not prioritized because policymakers see it as an outcome from, not an input into, human development. However, this lack of prioritization can lead to long-term negative effects on a country's socioeconomic development.

In the case of Zambia, where the RAIN project is being implemented, 45 percent of children below five years of age are suffering from chronic malnutrition, according to the most recent Demographic and Health survey (Drimie et al. 2014, p. 73). Chronic malnutrition in children, also known as child stunting, is shortness in stature compared with a child's age. It has long-lasting, irreversible effects on the child's development, including mental development, health, school performance, and later on, work productivity. Diets have low diversity, which increases the risk of inadequate nutrient intake. Extreme poverty, a low focus on diversity of production beyond staple foods, population growth, and the high prevalence of HIV and AIDS, among other diseases, also contribute significantly to undernutrition in Zambia.

The Government of Zambia recognizes the importance of prioritizing nutrion. This is in keeping with international good practice. For example, the Lancet 2008 series on Maternal and Child Undernutrion signalled a global shift from a nutritional treatment to a preventive approach, that is, addressing the problem of malnutrition before a child actually becomes malnourished. Zambia is considered an early riser country within the global Scaling Up Nutrition movement.

A report from the World Bank (2008b) titled "From agriculture to nutriton: pathways, synergies, and outcomes" noted that the links between nutrition, health, agriculture, food security, and livelihoods are well recognized. The report indicated that potential pathways between agriculture and nutrition have been suggested: improved production for consumption, production for sale on markets, food price reduction through increased supply, empowerment

of women as change agents, and indirectly, macroeconomic effects through improved productivity of the agricultural sector.

While the literature is clear on the need to prioritize the design, implementation, and management of nutrition projects using an integrated model, applying this in practice has proven to be a herculean task. One of the biggest challenges toward integration at either a national or programme level is that a large proportion of interventions are developed on a sector basis, often influenced by budgets and international donor priorities, which can introduce an element of competition rather than collaboration between implementing agencies of the state. The institutional structure of sectors (such as health, education, agriculture, or water) rarely reflects the ways in which poverty, health, nutrition, gender, education and other issues are interrelated in people's lives (ACF et al. 2013).

A further challenge to integration lies in capacity building. Kalegaonkar and Brown (2000) identify the need to strengthen local capacities to facilitate cooperation and start new initiatives, while Kadiyala et al. (2009) found that one of the major problems for integration was the insufficient orientation of personnel to project objectives, and their level of qualification in terms of monitoring and evaluation. In his earlier work on integrated rural development, Rondinelli (1979) suggested strong administrative support was required, highlighting that it cannot simply be assumed that national officials and lower-level administrators will support programmes of rural development, even after they have been enacted. Rather success depends heavily on creating a strong network of local institutions to support and implement projects and programmes.

In one of the more recent incarnations of integrated programmes, the Millennium Village Project, availllable financial resources were considerably higher than existing district budgets, allowing the project to employ a staff of highly qualified sector coordinators (Buse et al. 2008). These administratively demanding large-scale integrated programmes require considerable capacity building and institutional reforms, with a focus on the processes through which project deliverables are generated, including planning, budgeting, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation (Buse et al. 2008).

The Realigning Agriculture to Improve Nutrition (RAIN) project

The RAIN project aims to prevent child stunting through interventions mainly focussing on agriculture, with strong links to nutrition and health, in Mumbwa District, Central Province. Concern Worldwide Zambia and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) collaborated to design and implement the project: Concern leads the overall implementation together with partners in Zambia, while IFPRI leads the learning and evaluation component, and technically supports the integration component of the project.

The overall objective of the RAIN project is to develop a sustainable model that combines agricultural with nutrition and health interventions to effectively prevent child and maternal undernutrition among rural poor communities. The project's strong monitoring, evaluation, and research component has been designed to detect a significant impact on the prevalence of undernutrition (stunting), and to monitor and evaluate the critical steps along the intended pathways to impact. In this way, the project will help to address a critical gap in the evidence base regarding the degree to which agricultural interventions, when combined with nutrition and health activities, can reduce the prevalence of stunting in young children. It will ideally establish proof of concept for an intervention model that can then be replicated and scaled up within Zambia and beyond.

Project Implementation

The project has several components, summarized below. A unique component of sectoral coordination/integration is at the core of the project: at district level, but also extension (field) and community levels, the project facilitates and promotes collaboration and integration between the agriculture and health sectors, to align them for achieving the common goal of improving nutrition.

Agricultural activities focus on homestead gardening and small-scale animal husbandry; nutrition and health activities focus on behaviour change communication for improved child and maternal nutrition, especially infant and young child feeding, as well as linkages to the existing health system, including the prevention of mother to child transmission services. Gender equality and women's empowerment activities are implemented throughout the project area.

The project is being delivered through the existing agriculture and health sectors at district, extension and community levels. Cascading trainings build up capacity for specific agriculture and nutrition skills, but also contribute to improved cross-sectoral understanding and coordination. Groups of 15 to 20 women receive recurring agriculture and nutrition training, delivered by small-holder farmers (SMFs) and community health workers. The SMF system is similar to the lead farmer system; the focus, however, is on vegetable/fruit and small animal production, and the farmers are usually women. SMF farms serve as demonstration and training sites for the women's groups.

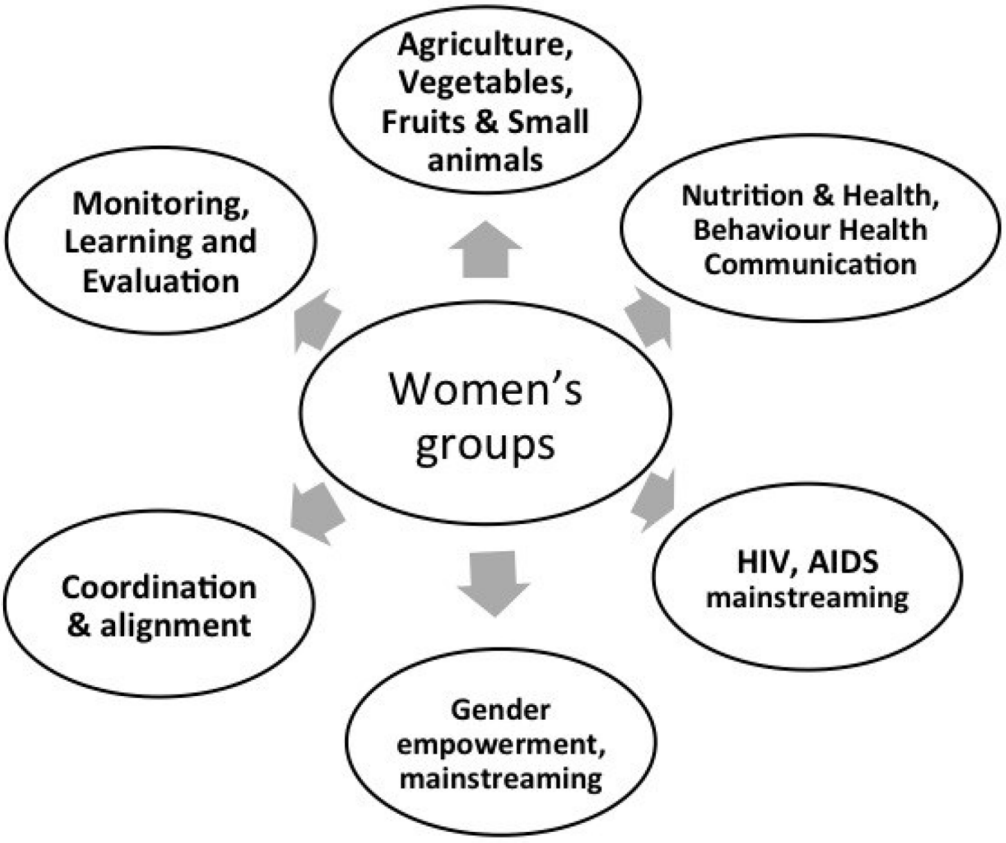

Figure 1 Components of the RAIN Project

Emerging practice from the RAIN project

The RAIN project started in 2011 and will end in 2016. While final evaluation of the project is yet to be completed, initial results are promising (see Drimie et al. 2014; Kumar et al. 2015). At this stage of project implementation, a picture is starting to emerge with respect to having integration at its core. The emerging practice that is discussed below has been gleaned from a desk review of project documentation, literature review of open source publications, and interviews with project staff. The discussion below provides the reader with an understanding of how the RAIN project has sought to grapple with integrated project management, an area that has been described as suffering from "*fragmentation, competition and conflict rather than integration and commonality of interests*"(Roth 1994, p. 379).

THE CENTRALITY OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Strategic leadership is essential to ensure activities are integrated across sectors, and can be one of the major stumbling blocks to achieving integration. On a global level, Concern has been at the forefront of discussions around nutrition[1]. This leadership role has been pivotal to getting the RAIN project functional in Zambia. Furthermore, internally strong leaders were required to make sure that disparate teams working in agriculture and nutrition could come together, and to gain acceptance of the project, with its heavy emphasis on research (a relatively new departure for Concern).

Continued need for strong leadership at a global level has been re-emphasized in the recent process evaluation of the RAIN project (Harris et al. 2013). The evaluation sought to establish whether managers in various organizations involved in the project have a good understanding of the reasons for linking agriculture and health. They found that while such an understanding may exist on paper, "*in practice there is limited strategic interaction and planning between sectors at all levels in all partner organizations*" (Harris et al. 2013, p. 14). Part of the reason for this contradiction is that managers are not able to see beyond the activity level and the production of immediate outputs, directly under their control.

Understanding the local context and operating environment

The RAIN project has addressed the issue of local context in a number of ways. First, the project team had the advantage of being able to take its time during the inception phase to understand the challenges in the specific rural area, Mumbwa, and develop a project that could address a variety of factors causing high levels of undernutrition. This resulted in a project that addressed specific local factors beyond improving the diversity, quality, and quantity of food produced through agriculture.

Second, enhanced sectoral coordination and alignment between various government ministries achieved more effective interventions, and increased sustainability and scale-up[2]. This led to the creation of the District Nutrition Coordinating Committee (DNCC), within the existing government-led system, to establish mechanisms to align the activities of key

1 For more on this, see http://scalingupnutrition.org/

2 One of the objectives is to specifically realign and integrate activities and mechanisms within the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, especially at District level, to more effectively and efficiently achieve sustainable nutritional outcomes.

stakeholders in the district toward addressing malnutrition. Ultimately, the DNCC aims to demonstrate that inter-sectoral coordination and alignment, bringing in health, agriculture and other key sectors, is a more effective (Concern Worldwide and IFPRI, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014).

A third element in addressing local context has been the ability to implement the project in a single, contiguous area. While this may sound like the most obvious element for an integrated project, it is often not the case. Project teams are often put under a lot of pressure to serve a larger number of clients, with perhaps a smaller number of interventions, to make the project more politically acceptable (everybody gets something), with agricultural interventions being delivered in one area and nutrition or health interventions in another (and potentially water and education in separate areas again).

Developing shared plans that identify roles, responsibilities, and resources

Because integrated projects bring together actors with their own interests, goals, and ways of working, it is important that plans and roles are jointly developed. Often, moving from shared general goals to specific plans for implementation raises a host of issues that are not initially obvious. But developing agreements on implementation is essential to holding each other accountable for the performance of the project. Not all disagreements can be foreseen, of course, but negotiating action plans and division of responsibilities at the outset can reduce the potential for misunderstandings and conflicts later.

Differences provide the rationale for coming together to work on a common problem such as child stunting, but they can also threaten to undermine the relationship if not addressed properly. Clear plans and assignment of responsibilities can help parties understand fundamental organizational and sectoral differences, and find ways to work together around them. Lack of such understanding can lead to misunderstanding, conflict, and inability to appreciate each other's contributions.

The DNCC has played a crucial role in this regard by facilitating district, extension and community level institutional arrangements to enable sustainable dialogue, in which shared plans are discussed, and roles, responsibilities, and resources are identified and agreed upon.

ENSURING THE RIGHT MESSAGES ARE DELIVERED

The process evaluation (Harris et al., 2013) found that even though trainings were generally functioning well and the pre-existing training materials were of a high quality, there have been challenges. For instance materials were designed with a sectoral focus and would have benefited from being linked to each other and to RAIN objectives, as many do not contain a nutritional focus. As a result, frontline workers are unlikely to consider agriculture, nutrition, and health holistically –either thinking through the issues of aligning messages or planning an integrated programme – as this is not happening at training level.

OVERCOMING THE DEFAULT APPROACH: THINKING BEYOND SILOS

As identified previously, most agencies implement interventions in a siloed (vertical) manner, and this is also the case for Concern, which builds budgets, programmes, and advisory support on a sector basis (around work on health, education, and livelihoods), with attempts to address cross-cutting issues (including equality, disaster risk reduction, and (HIV and AIDS) built in.

The RAIN project was designed with a single budget and management structure, which should have allowed Concern to overcome the default silo approach.

However, the process evaluation (Harris et al. 2013, p. 16) found that while most frontline RAIN workers "*are aware that the project aims to reduce malnutrition, most are not recalling core elements of the project outside of their own sector*". It went on to find that frontline workers continue to operate within their own sectors in a "business as usual" manner and that (Harris et al., 2013, p. 17) "*there is very little interaction across cadres, and any interaction that is occurring is piecemeal and is not resulting in strategic planning or delivery of harmonized messages or aligned services*".The process evaluation also found that while managers understand the objectives "on paper", there is limited strategic interaction and planning between sectors at different levels.

One of the reasons offered by Harris et al. (2013) is that agriculture implementation is essentially under the Mumbwa Child Development Agency and nutrition implementation is essentially under Concern Worldwide Zambia, which hindered coordination in practice at the beginning in particular. Even now, all organizations involved appear to be defaulting to "business as usual" in terms of implementing sectoral projects. The recommendation offered by Harris et al. (2013) is to have a bigger drive for planning and action that is truly across sectors, rather than side by side.

HAVING A COMMON AND WELL-UNDERSTOOD THEORY OF CHANGE

Within the RAIN project a lot of effort has been dedicated to producing a comprehensive theory of change for the project (see figure 2 below). Theories of change can be set at organizational level, programme level and even project level. Although there are endless variations in terms of style and content, the basic components of change theory include a big picture analysis of how change happens in relation to specific thematic area; an articulation of an organization or programme pathway in relation to this; and an impact assessment framework, which is designed to test both the pathway and the assumptions made about how change happens. Developing a theory of change can be seen as an ongoing journey to better understand the what and why of projects. The RAIN theory of change has provided various interested stakeholders with a visual and narrative understanding of the what and why of the project.

Seeking mutual influence in decision-making

Mutual influence in decision-making is central to successfully managing an integrated project, since it enables action plans and agreements to be made with commitment from all parties involved. Jointly setting objectives, determining work plans, and identifying roles, responsibilities, and resources are important building blocks to implementing the vision of inter-sectoral cooperation. Consequently, organizational structures or processes that enable all parties to participate in shaping the outcomes are critical.

In the case of the RAIN project, the DNCC was structured to allow collaboration. The DNCC allows various stakeholders to jointly discuss ideas and share good practice, with the aim of improving understanding and aligning activities for nutrition at local level.

Recognition that different sectors bring key resources to solving child stunting fosters effective participation in the problem-solving process. At the very least, different sectors are able to influence how resources are used; more broadly, they can affect decisions relating to the larger activity. Creating formal processes or organizational structures, such as the DNCC, can foster mutual influence in decision-making.

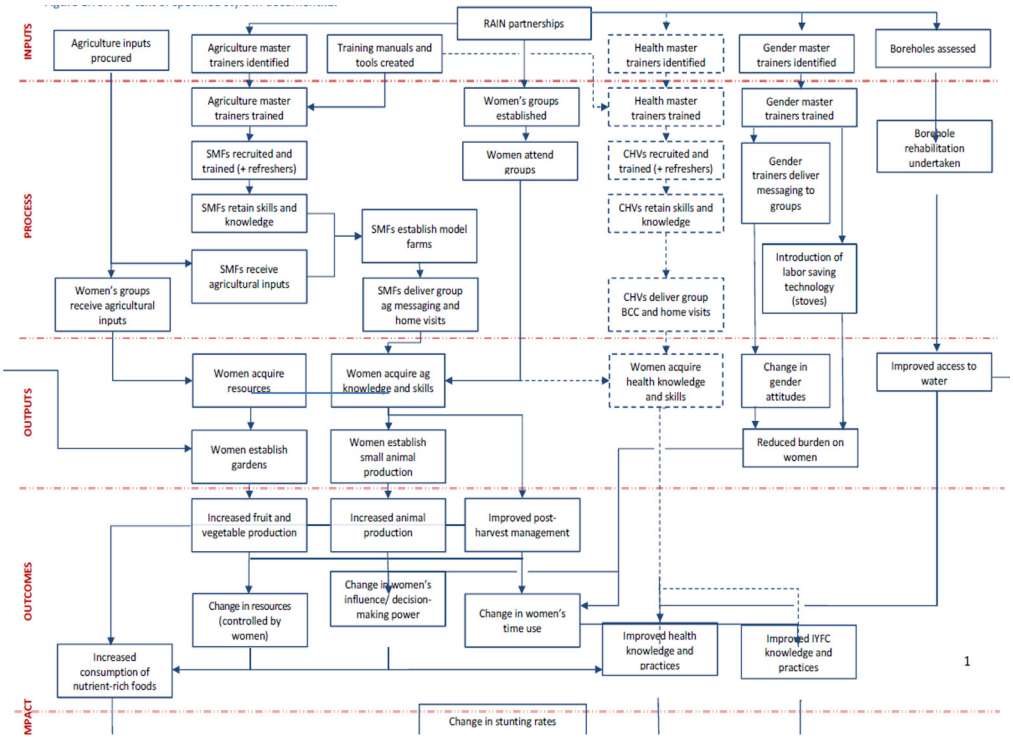

Figure 2 RAIN Theory of Change

Given the centrality of the DNCC to the integration of the RAIN project, one has to question how sustainable it will be once the project ends. As Drimie et al. (2014, p. 74) note, *"creating a new structure is relatively straightforward; creating and sustaining a structure that effectively aligns and coordinates activities to address undernutrition is, however, somewhat different"*. The final evaluation of the project (due in 2016) will seek to provide answers around whether the DNCC is sustainable.

CAPACITY AND HUMAN RESOURCES

Capacity of those involved in project implementation and management presents a challenge, particularly bearing in mind existing institutional constraints around budgeting and reporting.

Further, while the project has developed very strong relations with government at district level, this does not always translate into action on the ground. There have been challenges with the incentive structures in place ,and a disjoint between what is offered by an implementing non-governmental organization (NGO) and what government agents consider themselves entitled to receive, even though they do not have the ability to pay this themselves. In particular incentives in the field (*per diems*) have been raised as an ongoing issue and a possible long-term impediment to integrating government with the process, and subsequently to the sustainability of the project.

There are also challenges in terms of the capacity of agencies working at local level. While many may be strong in specific elements of the work, such as community mobilization or facilitation of trainings, they lack capacity at a management level to be engaged in such a project, and have been hampered in their ability to hire adequate and appropriate human resources.

CONCLUSIONS

The design, implementation, and management of integrated projects within the international development sector is, rightly, being pushed to the fore; however, as Concern's lessons show, simply saying a project is integrated is not enough. Similar to Roth's observation in Indonesia in the 1990s (Roth 1994) care has to be taken to ensure an integrated project is not the home to fragmentation, competition, and conflict.

Based on our experience with the RAIN project, we have identified a number of necessary conditions for success:

- First, the intervention has to have one overall goal, and a clear and well-understood system of objectives tied together with a strong theory of change – in the case of the RAIN project, Concern takes this to mean the prevention of chronic undernutrition.
- Second, a good understanding of context, with time taken to identify the most appropriate interventions for the area in question, is important. At Concern, all projects are supposed to carry out a comprehensive contextual analysis exercise before project implementation starts; however, these can take a long time to complete.
- Third, there is a need to move away from silo thinking in project design: this change of mindset remains a major challenge for Concern in many areas where we work, reinforced by a variance between focussing on grant management and project delivery, and the necessity to produce reports for donors. This will be a particular challenge in areas with a number of disparate projects, a problem the RAIN project did not have to deal with[3].
- Fourth, it is important to identify a clear funding stream for the project and avoid "chasing" any funding that becomes available. In that respect, Concern has been fortunate to receive long-term funding from Ireland's Official Development Aid programme, and has been able to access regular funding generated from the public, and to supplement this with specific and focussed private sector funding from the Kerry Group for the RAIN project.
- Fifth, there is a need to work constantly with teams to break down silos and shift away from a focus on activities, constantly re-emphasizing the overall objectives. One solution for Concern has been to focus at the community level on developing local governance and consultation structures, using tools such as Community Conversations, which cut across projects, but more research is needed into the efficiency of these tools.
- Finally, there was a need to strengthen human capacities and ensure there is a strong leader in place, initially to drive the process, but subsequently to make sure early gains are not lost after the initial euphoria of getting the project started. There is often a challenge in identifying the right manager – sometimes we are looking for people with a skill-set encompassing technical and organizational development, coaching and mentoring, and an ability to produce reports on time in a specific format. Such people are hard to find.

3 This is particularly a problem in areas where Concern has been operating for a number of years. One example of this is Concern's livelihood programme in Northern Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan. This has current commitments with a number of sources, as diverse as UNDP's Common Humanitarian Fund, predominantly focussed on relief, the EU's SORUDEV programme, which is focussed on the commercialisation of agriculture, the WFP's Food for Assets programme (and potentially DFID's BRACED programme with a focus on developing Climate Resilience). While all are dealing with livelihoods they have very different focuses and delivery mechanisms presenting a challenge to intra-sector integration, never mind moving to a greater focus on working with other sectors.

While there have been challenges for an intervention in Zambia (a relatively stable and now middle income country), the question has to be raised whether integrated interventions could be conducted in other contexts in which organizations like Concern work, such as Somalia, Yemen, and South Sudan. These countries tend to be plagued by conflict, weak systems, high rates of aid dependency, and ineffective governance mechanisms. It could be argued that integrated projects with a long-term focus and "joined up thinking" are even more necessary in these countries than elsewhere, given they face urgent needs across many areas of human development. Proving that integrated, inter-sectoral projects such as RAIN can work in fragile countries will be the next challenge, and is the focus of Concern's subsequent intervention in Chad and Sudan around resilience, the results of which will start to come on stream from 2016.

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Notes

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Concern Worldwide or any of its partners.

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