MercyCorps

Climate Resilient
Development
at Mercy Corps

Insights on How to Operationalize Climate Integration

Climate Resilient Development

Climate change is a complex problem. It can affect all areas of society—from making food and water resources more scarce to causing or exacerbating conflict—which means development must integrate climate resilience across program areas.

Unfortunately most development programming operates as if climate change is not already a significant challenge—and programs often ignore potential future climate impacts. Additionally, in the rare instances where adaptation strategies are included, they are almost always treated as a standalone objective. As a result, development organizations frequently design separate programs for climate change adaptation or create isolated pillars of CCA strategies within broader programming. While these approaches can result in adaptation gains, true Climate Resilient Development (CRD) requires a higher degree of integration. Mercy Corps' experience has shown that integration is synergistic; the more integrated a program, the more successful all development outcomes are—not just climate-specific ones.

Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) strategies are actions specifically aimed at reducing vulnerability to actual or expected changes in climate; Climate Resilient Development (CRD) is the ultimate goal of development programming that integrates climate change adaptation and behavior change strategies while improving overall well-being that can be maintained within shifting climate conditions.

Currently, resources are limited when it comes to available documentation, structure, or guidance about designing and implementing climate resilient programming from an operational standpoint. In an effort to fill that gap, this report aims to extract and briefly discuss some early operational insights from PRIME, a Mercy Corps lead program which sought to integrate climate risk considerations across programing, while also documenting some of the processes and mechanisms utilized by senior management and program staff.

PRIME (Pastoralists' Areas Resilience Improvement through Market Expansion)

PRIME is a five-year multi-agency program in three dryland regions of Ethiopia; it focuses on supporting pastoralists via expansion of markets and long-term behavior change. Working across the following five program areas, PRIME strove to integrate climate risk considerations via a set of climate informed strategies by component:

- Livestock Productivity
- Natural Resource Management*
- Alternative Livelihoods
- Learning and Knowledge Management
- Nutrition

*Natural Resource Management was technically grouped together with Climate Change Adaptation; this proved somewhat confusing, as it created a gap in perceptions about how CCA fit into PRIME.

"There is no nutrition without improvement in livestock productivity. There is no improvement in livestock productivity without well-maintained land and water resources. And there is also no improvement if there is no financial incentive—so there needs to be market demand for livestock products. All of this—alternative livelihoods, livestock productivity, the nutritional component, and the natural resource management and climate change adaptation—they all work together in order to support a specific environment for economic and social development."

—Jeton Starova

Mechanisms for Climate Integration

The following discussion highlights operational mechanisms employed by the PRIME management team. The team's goal was to integrate climate risk considerations across the program components noted above. Each mechanism is accompanied by a brief description, as well as insights and relevant quotes from interviews carried out with program staff. The intention is to outline and describe while also constructively evaluating what areas PRIME has been successful in—and what areas it should continue to develop.

1. Staffing

PRIME has been successful in terms of recruiting capable and skilled staff. Some staff members had been trained to work with climate data and were also familiar with local communities. This meant that they had the capacity to immediately develop CCA strategies from the outset and were also in a position to earn trust with users.

One reported staffing concern was that while CARE staff working on Natural Resource Management were trained to use climate data, and even part-nered with the Ethiopian National Meteorological Agency (NMA), most other project staff did not have a baseline climate skill set and were not trained to interpret climate data. Staff in NRM sometimes linked other PRIME components to the NMA, yet an overall asymmetry in terms of climate skills meant more centralization and reliance on staff from natural resource management. To a certain degree, this limited the ability of other components to effectively integrate CCA strategies.

Key Insight:

CCA programing requires staff (especially those in management and strategy development positions) who not only conceptually understand climate change adaptation, but can also undertake technical work such as leading a climate vulnerability assessments, interpreting data, and communicating those results effectively. Staff should also be prepared to monitor climate trends and respond appropriately. Most importantly, staff with these skills should be integrated across sector-based programming, not confined to a single sector.

2. Program Coordination

At the start of PRIME, several evaluations were carried out to look at natural resources and the different groups that interacted with those resources along the value chain. Component leaders met immediately after evaluations to debrief and assess results, then continued meeting weekly throughout the project to discuss their work. Their overall goal was to keep assessing how all components could continue adapting to meet climate and market needs. Such conversations were useful for fostering dialogue across components. That said, some PRIME staff reported that those conversations of-ten ended up dealing with immediate issues, rather than being used to look strategically at integration.

"Toward the end, there was a notion we needed to talk strategy more. We were very iterative within our projects, but there was a sense that we needed to be more iterative across the different components."

This contributed to an imbalance between components. In particular, some staff (including those working in NRM) commented on the particular challenge created by having a single partner (CARE) lead Natural Resource Management. The tettrms

NRM and CCA were also used somewhat inter-changeably. This ran counter to the goal of climate integration, and as well as to the overall consortium model applied to all other components.

Key Insight:

CRD programming requires a contextualized understanding of vulnerability in order to be effective. Processes like climate vulnerability assessments should be prioritized during the earliest stages of program design and consider the impact of climate shocks and stresses across scales. They should also provide a foundation for integrated program coordination.

3. Communication

Due to the many different agencies and partners that make up PRIME, staff reported that it was sometimes difficult to balance all the different interests at stake in any given moment. As one member of the Addis-based management team said:

"The scope of this project is so big, it's really hard sometimes because you have all these personalities, and some of them are quite strong, and they feel strongly about their particular component of the project, and they'll push hard to make it the most important."

Without proper communication, interactions between PRIME and beneficiaries can even become unintentionally contradictory:

"Our marketing team may say, 'You have cows, you have milk, sell your milk.' But the nutrition team may be saying 'Go ahead and drink your milk because it's good for nutrition.' So we have to work to ensure that integration also means not stepping on each other's toes. We need to make sure that messages we are giving to the community are always clear [and don't contradict each other]."

The challenges of communicating about multi-sector, climate integrated projects was apparent even in the initial CVCA and EMMA evaluations; the CVCA was carried out solely by the NRM component team, while market-oriented teams carried out the EMMA. The information they collected proved useful across various components, but even during that first evaluation phase collaboration was challenging. The NRM team, for instance, asked the more markets-oriented teams to include some questions about environmental shocks and stresses and how it affected business, but it never happened. Given that this was at the outset of the program, some collaboration glitches are understandable. Nonetheless, such gaps should be addressed; otherwise they turn into lost opportunities.

Key Insight:

Management should emphasize to staff that no program component is more essential than another, and show the value of striving for truly multi-sectoral programming. Ensuring the use of early assessment tools, such as climate vulnerability assessments, which are often called on to help frame details of a program, can also be an efficient way to ensure all staff understand the value of integrating climate risks into their work. This will likely continue to be a challenge as most assessment methodologies are sector specific. Management and program staff should seek ways to either develop integrated assessment methodologies, or a process to ensure multi-sector analysis of research findings.

4. Budgets

PRIME staff at different levels of organization said budget flexibility has been helpful for streamlining the project as much as possible. Because PRIME is not required to get donor approval for line item changes (which is often the case for other programs), it has enabled the program to be more agile about budgeting and disbursing money. This in turn allows teams to be more responsive to unexpected climate shocks and stresses.

"Basically we are a very opportunistic type of program [in that] we do not bring in concepts and ideas that are outside what is in demand. One for sustainability, and two for efficiency."

That said, one challenge is that PRIME has multiple funding streams, with different sets of parameters and goals.

"The other thing about the architecture of this project that makes it difficult to fully integrate climate is that the project itself is funded by two different funding streams from USAID."

One of those funding streams was climate-specific, while another was not. This sometimes created tensions and conflicts of interest, separating funding for activities that fit squarely into climate from funding activities that were more focused on other areas (such as markets or nutrition) yet also integrated with climate adaptation, and vice versa. To avoid such pitfalls—which add another layer of unneeded complexity to budgets and create tensions within a program or project—integration of climate must also take place on the donor side.

Long-term programs with correspondingly large budgets are often the ones that present the most opportunity for long-term change. It is also important to ensure staff, donors and stakeholders all share a common vision when it comes to that change.

"People are constantly trying to turn our attention to short term gains, which do not help us with climate change and behavioral change. The challenge here is keeping that long-term vision."

Key Insight:

Development programs that aim to be truly climate resilient should refrain from separating out parts of the budget for CCA, recognizing that integration means understanding—and funding—how different components fit together to support the overall goal of greater climate resilience. This is true for donors as well as implementing agencies. It can be challenging to ensure staff are focused on strategies that a support long-term vision while there are also many immediate needs.

5. Planning Processes

Staff consistently mentioned Concept Notes as one way of streamlining climate integration. Concept notes are an online system where field staff can plan, propose, and get approval for new activities. These notes are particularly useful because the system is open to all staff, which means they are not only able to propose interventions in their area, but to look at—and learn from—any activity in the entire Concept Note database.

"The fact that we allow activities to be designed in the field allows people that are excited about programming the flexibility to come up with their own activities."

In terms of climate integration, any concept note that touches upon multiple components or crosses components gets tagged for that component. It then gets reviewed by team leaders from those different areas. This means that if a note is on, for example, fodder, three different team leaders will review it and offer feedback. For a program like PRIME, where CCA strategies were often aligned with the NRM component, this tool translates into increased communication across component leads and better climate integration.

Additionally, field teams are in regular contact, and have weekly planning updates. They also make frequent trips to sites to give backup support and to

monitor activities. In terms of planning at the regional level, meetings happen once every two months, and assess both actual outcomes of the previous planning period, and what needs to happen next.

Geography also posed its own challenges in terms of planning and coordination; to address this teams had recently started to map interventions to figure out what areas were well saturated, and where they might add activities so that each area would get the full range of programming.

"With all the plans and commitments we have, and the limited staff in large area, time is challenging. Five years is relatively good when compared to other projects, which are normally two or three years. But if you're at the level of commitment, and the objectives we're trying to achieve with PRIME, five years could never be enough."

While time may seem like an obvious and constant challenge for any development project, CRD usually requires more more planning and more time on the ground, which must be considered.

Key Insight:

Integrated planning tools and timelines are essential to any work that aims to be integrated and climate resilient. Tools like Concept Notes allow integration to become a constant when it comes to planning; something as simple as ensuring that component leads review one another's strategies—or more ideally those strategies are developed collaboratively. CRD programming is inherently complex and requires longer timelines to meet development objectives; it should also be rigorous about incorporating CCA activities across components.

6) Organizational Culture

CRD cannot simply be inserted into or overlaid onto any organization; a particular kind of organizational culture is suited to Climate Resilient Development.

"It's good to have some hierarchy to make sure things are connected at different levels—but it's also important to give more people the ability to make decisions. I would like to see strategic decisions still made at a higher level, but more tactical and technical decisions made at the local level."

Across PRIME, staff seemed to agree that climate resilient programming benefits from opportunities for horizontal decision making and decentralization. Within the organization, it was also clear that when different partners and teams mixed, it naturally supported integration; the key was facilitating those exchanges throughout the program, and making sure that CCA wasn't siloed into any one component, as often happened with PRIME.

Organizational culture for donor institutions is as important as it is for implementing agencies. Within PRIME, many staff members saw gaps between the scale of the vision of those working for PRIME, and those working on the donor or individual agency side—especially when it came down to climate resilience.

"If you're going to prepare people for climate change, you're talking about behavioral changes, which take a huge amount of time and effort to accomplish. So you have projects like this. Our goal is way out there, but over time we can reach that goal. I think one of the things I see as a huge issue is that donors and even taxpayers [often] don't really consider what it means to have a long term vision and stay the course."

Key Insight:

Programs should be designed to encourage horizontal decision-making, decentralization, and cross-pollination. Senior management should ensure that staff regularly have the ability to learn about each other's work, ask questions, and coordinate. This can be as simple as deliberately planning where people sit in an office. It is equally important to ensure all organizations and staff have an aligned vision and understanding of what it takes to achieve that vision.

Conclusions

When designing and implementing climate resilient development programs, special attention should be paid to how integration is put into practice within organizations. All too often the focus is mainly on technical approaches. While those approaches are important and necessary, experiences in PRIME show that staffing, program coordination, communication, budgets, planning processes, and overall organizational culture are equally important for effective CRD programming.

Some key strategies include:

- Hiring or training staff to be conceptually and technically familiar with CRD

- Ensuring program coordination is done with climate resilience in mind throughout the process

- Emphasizing the value of climate integration via collaborative assessments and communication strategies

- Making sure that budgets and other activities refrain from siloing or otherwise separating climate resilience from other development objectives

- Adopting integrated planning tools, and building an organizational culture founded on shared learnings and cross-pollination.v

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