STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

CASE STUDY: CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES GUATEMALA

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CONTEXT

Guatemala is a Central American country of some 17 million people, approximately 40 percent of whom are indigenous. In 2018, the country had the fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world, with almost 70 percent of the population in indigenous areas chronically malnourished. Some regions have experienced consecutive years of drought, while others are characterized by severe dryness, resulting in poor harvests of staple crops and food insecurity.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has operated in Guatemala since 1963. From 2012 to 2018, CRS implemented Food Security Focused on the First Thousand Days (SEGAMIL), which focused on reducing chronic malnutrition in eight municipalities in the departments of Totonicapán and San Marcos. The progam's first strategic objective was to improve food access for farmer households, and one of the ways it worked toward achieving this was by training producer families in "integral human development field schools" (ECADIs). ECADIs were critical to the larger project— as the SEGAMIL exit strategy notes: "The ECADIs are the key structure to integrate all learning activities and behavior change promotion from the three strategic objectives and a principle strategy in the design and sustainability of the SEGAMIL program." The SEGAMIL sustainability plan, developed in close consultation with target communities, called for capacity building and support to institutionalize these ECADIs within local communities, thereby ensuring their survival beyond project close.

STORY OF TRANSITION

In mid-2016, CRS began developing a sustainability strategy in order to maintain the benefits of the SEGAMIL program after the withdrawal of resources. This sustainability strategy was based on five pillars:

1) Institutionalization of project platforms and interventions.
2) Market-driven demand for project interventions.
3) Accreditation of local human resources.
4) Formation of partnerships.
5) Behavior change communication.

As CRS thought through its sustainability strategy, it developed an exit plan to "… outline the steps CRS will take to transition key program elements to local actors." The exit plan documented the sustainability mechanisms selected (phase down, phase over, and phase out), what actions would be taken toward sustainability, and the benchmarks CRS hoped to achieve. For example, one benchmark ECADIs was "… institutionalization of the project formalized through signed agreements with 60% of ECADIs."

CRS supported institutionalization of the ECADIs in several ways. First, it worked with municipal governments to foster ownership and support for the ECADIs. Additionally, CRS and implementing partners sought to institutionalize ECADIs at the community level. CRS also invested in organizational and strategic development activities. Significantly, some of the ECADIs were supported by local CRS partners that had received long-term institutional capacity-strengthening training from CRS over a period of approximately four years, while others were supported by CRS implementing partners that had not received such training. One line of inquiry in terms of the case study was whether there was any difference between ECADIs working with local partners versus those working with other CRS implementing partners after the end of the SEGAMIL program.

KEY LESSONS

Inclusivity lays the groundwork for sustainability. A program director explained: "One of the lessons learned during the process was to work with both mothers-in-law and male partners to encourage their support for best practices in health care and child nutrition, and to offer support for the women to participate in the program activities."

Strong leadership is key to sustainability of outcomes. Allowing for a rotating leadership—especially when this rotation is built into the activities themselves—can avoid organizations becoming dependent on a single leader. Some ECADIs found an annual rotation useful, though the timing of such a rotation will vary depending on institutional context.

Building trust over time, rather than around a single project cycle, is a critical first step to sustainability. This may mean sacrificing efficiency or pursuing short-term strategies—such as distributing food—that seemingly detract from long-term goals.

Investments in institutional capacity strengthening can cascade through local partnerships. Over a period of four years, CRS headquarters invested in intensive, repeated capacity-strengthening activities, composed of trainings and technical accompaniment with eight local partners. This capacity development was well received by participants. ECADIs from the SEGAMIL project benefited from these capacity-strengthening activities, as the local partners involved subsequently executed organizational development activities.

Programs can benefit from distinct sustainability and exit plans. Although "sustainability" and "exit plans" are sometimes used interchangeably, the terms are not the same. CRS conceptualized sustainability in terms of the benefits resulting from the program. In contrast, the exit plan consisted of a series of steps to be taken by the program in order to achieve these desired sustainability outcomes.