8-year project succeeds in boosting CRS' capacity strengthening expertise by creating new resources and expanding staff knowledge: final evaluation

SiS Final Evaluation Findings - January 2022

In 2012, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) began a project to improve the ability of its staff to strengthen the capacity of its implementing partners. Funded by the GHR foundation, the Strength in Solidarity (SiS) project was designed to transform the systems, processes and skills used at CRS to help partner organizations become more effective, stronger and more sustainable. The final evaluation of the eight-year project was carried out by two external consultants and released in July 2020. This brief summarizes the key findings and identifies how they have helped achieve the project's three main goals.

Goal #1   For staff to share partnership and capacity strengthening opportunities with local partners

The following results indicate that this goal has been achieved:

1) Strong gains among staff in all Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs) categories
When contrasting the evolution of KSAs during the life of the SiS project, two trends become apparent: 1) most areas that were robust at the onset of the project had gained strength throughout its duration, and 2) other "newer" areas, very relevant to PCS work, have also become robust. The new aspects emerging as strong by the end of the project include elements that embody the comprehensive CRS approach to PCS: accompaniment, mentoring, and sensitivity to partners' institutional culture.

2) Increase in PCS Tools & Resources
At the onset of the project there were eight major PCS tools available, and seven other major tools were added during the project, for an increase of 87.5% in the number of existing tools. Thus, the project has been fruitful in generating more tools available for PCS work.

3) Significant gains among staff in knowledge and use of PCS tools
During the life of the project there . has been a tremendous growth among staff in familiarity with PCS tools. From very low levels of knowledge in 2012, as low as 9% and most around 30-40%, to the end of the project, recognition about PCS tools has grown strongly. Percentages in all cases were at 60% or higher. The use of PCS tools has grown strongly from the beginning to the end of the SiS project even though it is still under 50% in most cases. This progress matters especially when considering the very low levels of usage at the launch of the SiS project, when utilization of most tools was less than 20%.

4) New resources added with strong intake: ICS
A major initiative of the project was the creation in 2015 of the Institute for Capacity Strengthening (ICS) with its own website. Fifty percent of respondents among staff have taken an ICS course. more than 40% have taken Level 1 courses while Level 2 courses have a lower intake. Much more can be done to engage staff into Level 2 courses that were introduced much later in the project. As indicated by staff, the usefulness of the courses' content for their work is rated as high by most respondents.

5) New resource for expanding PCS application in working with partners: Perfecting Partnership.
The Perfecting Partnership initiative 2 was not a resource considered at time of the SiS proposal, but it developed as a result of the work and reflection taken during the process. Respondents from the Perfecting Partnership Alumni group have a very positive view of this .initiative, with 89% of respondents stating that they have improved their core PCS competencies. Participants have been able to apply more than 75% of the workshop contents in both partnership and capacity strengthening. This result highlights the good design of the workshops to provide content that is useful to participants as well as the interest among participants to put it into practice. Furthermore, Perfecting Partnership Alum participants are intensely sharing over 75% of the knowledge acquired.

6) Enhanced resources: Experts contribution to PCS work. A key result for PCS related activities is the availability of experts in the agency who can support staff in their work with partners. Two of the threeexisting groups have been fully created within the SiS project: the experts at the Partnership and Capacity Strengthening unit at CRS, and Perfecting Partnership Alum.

Encouragingly, 53% of staff indicate that they have worked with experts from the Partnership and Capacity Strengthening unit at CRS, and with and with PCS experts at regional/country programs. While Perfecting Partnership Alum have a lower level of engagement, considering they only started as experts in late 2017, their degree of engagement is relatively high, with 36% of staff acknowledging working with them.

| Goal #2 | To enhance resources and opportunities to carry out the agency's capacity strengthening mandate |

This goal has been achieved as indicated by the following results:

1) Staff is adapting tools in working with and accompanying Local Partners
Most staff have been diligent in adapting tools, providing accompaniment in areas needing improvement, helping partners understand the PCS approach at CRS, and its value added. 65% and above of staff who work with partners have been conducting activities that reflect the agency's approach to PCS. This is a clear expression of the fundamental changes the SiS project intended to achieve. There is room to improve with about 20% of staff who, in their work with partners, are not yet engaging fully with them to the expected degree defined by CRS.

Local Partners themselves have a very positive view of CRS efforts to support and accompany their institutions to improve organizational functions, to help them to understand and articulate CRS'

value-added and overall approach to strengthening partnership relations and organization capacities. Moderate efforts are attributed to CRS adaptation of its tools to the organizational context and needs of the partner's organization. Interestingly, CRS staff mostly reported moderate efforts in all three aspects, but partners are more optimistic in the first two and rank them higher.

2) Staff is sharing PCS opportunities with Local Partners
Encouragingly, staff has been actively sharing and encouraging the engagement of local partners with PCS related content at CRS: 70% of staff worked on communicating with partners about options available at CRS for mentoring, coaching and training, 72% had fostered connections with partners at CRS, and 72% had encouraged partners to join CRS communities of practice.

3) Diversification of partners and beginning work in preparing partners for transition

Forty percent of staff with some degree of supervision have worked in the past three years with more than ten active local partners, an encouraging sign of diversification. In fact, most supervisors have worked with at least three or more partners. Meanwhile, 27% of supervisors have reviewed MOUs for groups of either 3-5 or 10 or more partners. Given that formally intending to establish a partnership is a sign of trust among participants, this is a positive result for the active work conducted in PCS by the agency. Consistently, 28% of supervisors have signed more than ten MOUs in the last three years.

A relevant percentage of supervisors, 46%, work with 3 or more local partners who are direct recipients of donor funding. Though still a relatively low number, it is the beginning of helping local partners to transition to a more direct role in their own work. Furthermore, 33% of supervisors have 3 to 5 local partners that pass a prime-readiness evaluation, which is an encouraging sign of having at least some partners

who are becoming prepared for the transformational change taking place in funding and support at the international level. In this area, challenges do exist. A local partner in the survey comments that "At the moment, we have more responsibility [as] 'performer' which results in the mobilization of staff implementing soft activities when we want more responsibility in the conduct of hard activities". Another local partner survey respondent notes that "CRS should support the training of local partners staff in the area of governance, programming, and fundraising. This is important for sustainability of partners especially in the event CRS ceases to operate or could not have funds to support the running of its local partner organizations." ."

| Goal #3 | To facilitate learning and knowledge-sharing around what works in capacity strengthening |

This goal has been achieved as indicated by the following results:

1) PCS contributions to the work of staff is increasing its recognition within CRS
PCS learning opportunities and tools have changed the work undertaken by staff. This is not just their PCS related activities but the overall scope of their work. According to respondents, learning and using PCS tools and resources has been highly successful in improving the quality of relations with partners and improvement on their own (staff) job satisfaction. It has also resulted in moderate success in increasing productivity in their own work and that of their unit, better working relations within their unit, enhanced working relations of their unit with other CRS units, improved capacity and performance of partners, and improved job satisfaction among colleagues in their team.

2) Recognition among partners of CRS as a leading PCS organization
Local partners are much more positive than staff about the PCS work of CRS. 100% of partners agree that CRS ranks well compared with other international NGOs in strengthening partnership relations and organization capacities (HR, finance, programs, etc.), 95% agree that CRS has become a key source for knowledge about strengthening partnership relations and organization capacities (HR, finance, programs, etc.) by identifying knowledge needs, and 90% agree that CRS has become an agency that lives an authentic commitment to local leadership and localization. Finally, in the lowest mark, which is still at 61%, partners agree that CRS is successful in translating knowledge needs into ready-made applications in platforms for active dissemination and discussion of knowledge.

In their survey comments, local note that *"CRS has always proven to [be] a strong cooperative partner in my area compared to other organization"* while another local partner recognizes that *"CRS country office staff was really supportive"* and yet another that there is a *"friendly environment when deal[ing] with CRS staff."* Another local *partner summarizes the experience of working with the agency as the following: "CRS has proven to be a true partner. They have provided timely support to facilitate work when required. They have been able to provide necessary capacity for staff to undertake responsibilities, they have done back-stopping activities to ensure we meet required standards and we have undertaken monitoring exercises together on the project. Performance of our organization has generally been satisfactory. Despite some inevitable challenges we have encountered along the way […] over the years [my organization] has developed and has come of age because of the support that we received from CRS."*