



EMPOWER Asia - Learning Report April 2024



Acknowledgement: My sincere thanks to all MEAL coordinators/officers of EMPOWER Asia, Gunjika Mishra (India), Bina Bagel (Nepal), Robert Sithu Aung (Myanmar) and Analyne Lucas (Philippines) for all the hard work they put in conducting the interviews and documenting the discussions.

Table of Contents

Executive summary	02
Objectives of the study	03
Most Significant Change	05
Challenges	06
Recommendations	07

Executive Summary

In October 2021, CRS Asia launched Empowering Partners Working on Emergency Responses in Asia (EMPOWER Asia), a capacity strengthening initiative with CRS strategic national partners (NGO and government). EMPOWER Asia aims to improve the partner's capacity to respond to disasters and play a leading role in the provision of humanitarian assistance. EMPOWER Asia funds implementation of improvement plans, led by strategic partners, accompanied by the CRS Country Program (CP) and the EMPOWER Asia Core Team. The project focuses on three project areas: strategic partners demonstrate strengthened organizational structures and capacities on emergency response; strategic partners demonstrate improved collaboration, coordination, and engagement with sub-national, national, regional, and global humanitarian platforms; and strategic partners seek and garner funds and resources to respond to emergencies. The project utilizes proven capacity strengthening models and employs a variety of strategies to strengthen capacity based on partner needs and priorities, potentially including trainings, workshops, learning events, simulations, coaching, and short-term deployments.

EMPOWER Asia is currently being implemented in India, Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia. For this learning reflection, data was collected from 4 CPs – India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Philippines from September to November 2023. This learning reflection aimed to understand if strategies and approaches were enabling partners to achieve the desired institutional strengthening objectives. As Vietnam and Indonesia had only started implementation in June 2023, it was too early to get any input or feedback on the activities and their benefits.

The reflection team conducted Key Informant Interviews and collected Most Significant Stories¹ from partner staff. MSC stories were not collected from CRS staff. For the learning reflection process, 5 CRS staff and 17 partner staff were interviewed. This document serves as a summary report of key findings and insights.

Key findings:

- More clarity is needed on what Local Leadership means for both CRS and partners. For partners, it is important to gain further insight on what local leadership means in the local operational context there is limited experience and understanding at both CRS and partners in what goes into development of a policy/procedure, including the enabling environment required for implementation of policies/procedures.
- CRS staff's knowledge, skills, and attitudes on the application of the Partner Capacity Strengthening (PCS) approach need to be improved, especially related to the critical role of accompaniment.
- Trainings for partners on different thematic areas identified in the improvement plans to strengthen systems and approaches need to be more structured and organized, with follow up from CRS to ensure it trickles down to all the levels of staff leading to improved implementation at the community level.
- The current allocated staff Level of Engagement (LOE) is not sufficient as partner capacity strengthening involves extensive coordination, engagement, and accompaniment.

Key recommendations:

- Ensure CRS and partner senior leadership understand that institutional strengthening processes take a long time and require long term commitment.
- During the design phase, include a visioning exercise, which identifies performance goals (this could be technical skills, management systems, or organizational sustainability goals. Also identify the enabling environment required to achieve those goals, the technical support from CRS, and internal changes that need to happen within the agency and incorporate a structured accompaniment plan along with the improvement plan. The design phase should also look at incorporating organizational change management cycle/process, and sustainability considerations.
- Allocate sufficient, minimum of 50% LOE of CRS and partner staff to ensure the required level of coordination, technical support and accompaniment is provided.

¹The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach involves generating and analyzing personal accounts of change and deciding which of these accounts is the most significant – and why). <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/most-significant-change>

Objectives of the study

The learning reflection questions were developed based on the 5-evaluation criteria framework— Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability². Two questions from the EMPOWER Asia learning agenda were also explored.

Below is the list of questions that were discussed with CRS and partner staff:



Relevance

How well are we meeting the needs of our partners in the context of the assessment findings and development plan, the environment they are operating in?



Effectiveness

Are we achieving what we had planned? What success are we seeing and why? What challenges are we seeing and why?



Efficiency

Were project resources used in the best possible way to achieve the objectives? Why or why not?



Impact

Most Significant Change stories



Sustainability

Will outcomes from the capacity strengthening interventions be sustained even after the project is over? If yes, how? if not, why not?



Learning Agenda Questions

What accompaniment approaches worked best to further strengthen institutional and staff capacities and ensure sustained performance improvement in emergency response?³ (EMPOWER Asia and EMPOWER Global)

What are the specific Knowledge Skills and Attitudes (KSAs) required for supporting improvements in emergency response capacity (NGO, Church, and Government partner)?

Key findings:

This section summarizes key findings and observations from detailed country level and partner level KIIs and collected MSC stories collected.

- **Other donor agencies interested in replicating the approach of EMPOWER Asia:**

In Philippines, through EMPOWER Asia, Caritas is working with two sub-regional diocesan clusters, who are already responding to emergencies. Similarly, in India, Caritas is working with diocesan partners who traditionally have been responding to emergency responses. The approach in both locations is to strengthen their capacities and enhance their leadership in emergency responses. Other donors working with Caritas Philippines and India have signified interest in supporting the expansion of the EMPOWER capacity strengthening work to other dioceses.

- **Signs of improvements in responding to emergencies visible as partners pilot their standard operating practices in preparedness and emergencies:**

Two EMPOWER partners went ahead and piloted the SOP for emergencies for actual preparedness and an emergency response. The SOP was not finalized, but staff who had undergone training used, different components of the SOP. Staff used procurement guidelines for non-food items, followed the surge capacity plan that was put in place as well as the newly-updated protocols for informing and evacuating the community.

²These are OECD Evaluation Criteria

³This question is both in the EMPOWER Asia and EMPOWER Global learning agenda.

Having received training, and having the draft SOP for reference guided the whole team, there was clarity in roles and responsibilities across the different department, those in the field knew who should be doing what and those in the office knew, who had to do what, this also ensured there was smooth exchange of communication and coordination – Partner staff.

- **Varying Understanding of Local Leadership and the unspoken power dynamics between CRS and its partners:**

CRS continues to be seen by partners as a donor, so there needs to be more clarity on what local leadership means for CRS and what the term local leadership means for our partners (Church, NGO, and Government), as there are nuanced power dynamics involved. Additionally, varying understanding of local leadership among CRS staff and partner staff can impact local leadership vision and objectives. CRS needs to understand the partner perspective (i.e., their needs, limitations, structures, and operational context), more fully, beyond just focusing on project deliverables.

- **Limited experience or understanding around what goes into execution of policy development/procedure development and its implementation:**

During the planning phase or when the improvement plans are developed, the key outputs most of the time include development of policies or development of procedures. Based on this plan, teams directly go into training key staff, reviewing existing policies and developing policies/procedures. Less time is spent understanding the enabling environment required for a policy or procedure to be approved and rolled out. There is a need to have more discussions and reflections at the planning phase to understand what kind of approvals are required from senior leadership for execution of a policy or procedure, how much time will go into getting these approvals, whether partner staff have capacity for execution of the policy or procedure, what systems need to be in place for piloting and roll out, what is the scope for modifications and what kind of follow up support is required from CRS. These discussions are critical because executing policies necessarily impacts the communities that partners serve, both directly and indirectly.

With government organizations and big partner organizations (NGO and Church), the process of approvals and finalization takes a lot of time, because it must go through various levels of review. For example, with governments, multiple ministries are engaged in the finalization of even of a strategic action plan, so the process requires continuous follow up and discussion with respective ministries. “Changes in senior management not only means re-establishing the work relationship but also delays the review and approval processes of newly developed policies.” -CP staff

- **Need to strengthen Interpersonal skills and partnership relationships for CRS Staff:**

CRS staff need the following.

- Understanding of Church Government and NGO structures (organizational dynamics, approval processes, inter-department relationships) is critical to strengthening existing or new relationships. CRS staff need to understand past and current relationship dynamics between CRS and its partners (NGO, Church, Government). Staff need to know the mandate of the partner in the country and their working relationships with other stakeholders and the socio-political context in which the partner is operating, including power dynamics.
- Knowledge of the Partner Capacity Strengthening approach and how to apply it is important. Staff who are appointed for projects like EMPOWER come from different technical backgrounds, so they need to understand the PCS approach, how it is applied based on the type of partner and context, and the additional demands of PCS compared to other short-term projects.
- Communication skills are critical for projects like EMPOWER. This includes how to navigate disagreements and communicate respectfully, how to negotiate, how to engage with senior leadership, how to deal with sensitive issues and how to build interpersonal relationships.
- Coaching and mentoring skills are important, including the ability to support partners to own and lead the capacity strengthening process.
- Attitudes of mutual respect and patience, and a shared understanding of how to navigate power dynamics and relationships, are critical for projects like EMPOWER, especially when organizational change management processes are involved.

- **Trainings need to be organized along with follow up:**

It is necessary to consider how training can be organized systematically in terms of participant selection, timing, content, and follow up sessions, keeping in mind absorption capacity. There is a need for in-depth training with practical examples for application and second level training for junior staff, instead of covering many topics. There needs to be a plan in place to provide follow-up support to participants in understanding and applying what has been learned through the different training courses.

- **Staff LOE and budgets are not sufficient both at CRS and partner level:**

Currently most of the CPs and partner staff have allocated 20% of their time to EMPOWER activities, which is not sufficient, because project activities require a lot of follow up and coordination which was not foreseen at the time of budgeting. CRS and partner staff assigned to EMPOWER are already working on other projects or have other responsibilities. So, in case of emergencies or other priorities, EMPOWER project activities take a back seat. In most cases, there are very few staff at partner level, which leads to over burdening staff with a lot of projects. A minimum of 50% LOE would be ideal to ensure assigned staff are able to focus on the implementation as well as in the rigorous incorporation of the PCS approach.

“Follow up does happen, but sometimes the follow up, coordination and support is more than anticipated which is not sufficiently budgeted.” - CP staff

- **More clarity on what accompaniment is, why is it necessary and how it is done among CRS and partner staff:**

CRS and partner staff need to have a common understanding of accompaniment, with more emphasis on quality accompaniment and why it is needed, where it fits into the different project activities and the overall PCS approach. There is also a need to know the different types of accompaniment (mentoring, coaching, etc.) and how it is practiced in different scenarios. It is important for CRS to spend quality time with partners on integrating accompaniment plans in the DIPs (Detailed Implementation Plan) and to have regular feedback on the quality of accompaniment being provided. There is an expressed need for consistent support from partners when they go into implementation of policies/procedures/tools.

“Accompaniment is required at different levels, technical level, program level, leadership level and management level It’s important for CRS to spend quality time with partners on integrating accompaniment plans in the DIPs and have regular reflection on accompaniment being received and collect feedback on the quality of accompaniment being provided”- CP staff

- **Sustaining benefits/impact from the project activities, need to be discussed at the design phase:**

Continued benefit from new policies or procedures depend on continuation of staff, senior leadership’s commitment to implement the revised policies, staff having the required capacities to execute the policies, financial resources/funding to implement the policies/procedure/ tools, as well as ensuring staff commitment to implement what they have learnt in case there is new leadership. It is vital to discuss how benefits will be sustained in case of staff turnover or change in senior leadership and how resources will be managed for implementation/execution of policies or procedures during the design phase.

“Regardless of how robust our system is or how powerful our tools are, without an adequate number of human resources, the results cannot be sustained”.-Partner staff

Most Significant Change

In total 11 stories were shared by 3 partners. From the stories shared, it can be said that MSC is personal, different within a partner organization and across different partners. This exercise highlighted how shift in attitude or increase in knowledge can lead to significant changes at an organizational and individual levels. Common themes that emerged through the stories are the following:



- **Changes might be small, but they are still significant for individuals and organizations:**

A few organizations have started implementing/testing components of the revised policies – A few illustrative examples include a partner appointing a female board member based on the revised policy; and structural changes in MEAL, leading to hiring more MEAL staff, which is a significant change because from a single staff it is now a 7-member team. These might seem small to an external eye, but at an organizational level, these are big milestones towards becoming a reliable organization at the national level.

- **Getting the policies/procedures out from the shelves:**

Staff at all levels including directors learned about what policies exist in the organization. There are examples of staff who have worked in a partner organization for years but were not aware of what policies existed. The process of going through review, revisions, and dissemination of the policy documents among staff was a learning process for the organization. These changes might seem small and slow but are significant because they will lead the organizations to becoming more professional, structured, and accountable.

“It is significant for me because I too did not know about the policies in the organization. Before the project even I had not seen the policy. It was like a valuable object place in the cupboard.” – Partner staff

- **EMPOWER activities lead to increased coordination among the different departments:**

EMPOWER led to increased coordination among different departments within the organization. Before EMPOWER, different departments would meet or interact occasionally, but the activities under EMPOWER led to more exchanges and interactions among the different departments, bringing teams together. For example, the process of developing the communication policy led to staff discussions, question and answer sessions, and debates, all of which led to a shift towards understanding what it means to communicate with responsibility among all staff members and how this is linked to building credibility of the organization, thereby amplifying the organization’s presence in the community.

“EMPOWER project brought collaboration around different sectors within the organization This newfound synergy enabled us to work in a more unified and harmonious manner towards achieving its overarching mission and objectives, especially in emergency response.”- Partner staff.

- **EMPOWER helped partner staff gain a deeper understanding of their jobs:**

For many individuals, the most significant changes were learning new things in their current roles, like, use of appropriate terms , e.g. how the use of the term “victims” is not appropriate or why one should follow “do no harm policy” and strictly adhere to a beneficiary selection criteria - understanding how these small learnings are linked to providing quality emergency response. For many individuals, learning how emergency responses can be done effectively is a significant change, because they had been working in emergencies for such a long time but now have an in-depth understanding for the first time.

“It is significant for me because I too did not know about the policies in the organization. Before the project even I had not seen the policy. It was like a valuable object place in the cupboard.” – Partner staff

Challenges

- **Staffing challenges at CRS and partner level:**

There are high expectations that one staff member at the partner level will have the knowledge and skills to implement all areas identified in an improvement plan. This links to the challenge that some staff at the partner level are assigned to implement or execute the policy or procedure but do not have the required capacity/skill set to do so. When there is staff turnover, knowledge and skills gained are often lost. In most cases, there are very few staff at the partner level, which leads to overburdening staff with a lot of projects.

- **Lack of clarity among partner staff on project objectives:**

It takes time and constant coordination and discussion to develop a shared understanding and ownership of the objectives and desired outcomes at all levels for the team to achieve their goals.

- **Funding constraints within organizations to execute/implement the policy/ procedure/tool:**

When developing improvement plans, cost implications are not typically considered. It is only when a policy is developed, or a procedure is finalized that financial implications come into the picture. Sometimes there might be funds to pilot it, but there are limited or no funds when a policy needs to be rolled out at an organizational level.

- **Annual budget approvals are perceived as a limitation to achieving long-term organizational goals:**

There is a long-term commitment by CRS to support strategic partners so that they achieve their goals towards local leadership. But due to annual budget approvals, CP and partners are unable to come up with multi-year improvement plans, there is uncertainty and the sense that this will not help in achieving the overall objective or goal.

- **The policy approval process takes more time in large organizations:**

Within government structures and larger organizations the process of policy approval and finalization takes a lot of time, because it must go through various levels of review. If there is a change at senior leadership, the whole process of review starts all over again and causes unforeseen delays. It is also important to ensure that CP and partner staff understand how to navigate power dynamics to get things done.

- **Coordination takes more effort and time than planned:**

When CPs work with a national level partner who then works with multiple layers of sub-national partner organizations (diocesan partners), coordination among all the partner staff and partner directors for trainings or reflection is a challenge. Securing the time of key staff and ensuring all can join at the same time is challenging as each partner has other priorities and their staff are engaged in other projects. Also, with large organizations, getting staff of different departments together requires a lot of coordination.

- **Managing high expectations from senior management:**

Senior management has high expectations on what should be accomplished and what should be the outcome, without understanding organizational change management processes or field realities, for example, how much time it really takes to get a policy finalized or the capacity level of assigned staff. A single visit or one training is not sufficient to build staff capacity.

- **Sustainability not considered during design phase:**

There is often insufficient planning at the design phase on elements that will impact sustainability of outcomes experienced through EMPOWER initiatives. Some examples include planning how staff who received the training and inputs will be retained, or determining how to ensure that senior leadership is committed to implement the revised policies or guarantee there are resources available with partner organizations to execute these policies.

Recommendations

- **A long-term commitment is needed from leadership at CRS and partner organization with partner staff:**

It is necessary to ensure high-level engagement of senior leadership at CRS and partner organizations. This includes regular engagement of senior leadership through formal communications, identifying the process for review, approval of senior leadership for things to move forward, etc. Both CRS and partner organizations need to ensure that even if there is change in senior leadership positions, the focus for projects like EMPOWER would continue to be a priority. For example, with Church partners engage the Bishops or with NGOs engage with Board members for their continued support.

- **CRS to review the current process of annual budget approvals to see if these can be moved to a two to three-year approvals:**

EMPOWER Asia's steering committee to review and take a decision on whether the annual budget approval process can be built around overall project approval for a 2 to 3-year timeframe. with annual budget approvals based on performance, building confidence among partner organizations on long-term commitments.

- **CRS to strengthen its staffs PCS capability so that a complete package of support is provided to EMPOWER partners:**

As part of CRS's workforce planning, capacity strengthening will be systematically included to strengthen staff capability on the CRS Partner Capacity Strengthening approach, how it is different from other projects/programs with emphasis on whys and how's of accompaniment,

- **Resource allocation/Level of Engagement increased at CRS:**

Country programs can look at options of increasing LOE of CP EMPOWER project manager by at least 50% to ensure dedicated time and required accompaniment for partner staff is available. This will be complemented by sufficient LOE from different staff with the required expertise based on the partner improvement plan. CPs may also explore opportunities of mobilizing expertise from within the CP for technical areas or from other CPs implementing EMPOWER in the region, which can lead to cross learning and capacity sharing.

- **Incorporate a visioning exercise at the design phase:**

Include a visioning exercise with partner team with senior leadership participation to enable them to articulate their institutional strengthening vision and performance improvement goal to guide the activities that will be included in their improvement plans. Partners will need to take the lead in defining the higher goals and improved performance indicators. This would also include an analysis of the enabling environment needed to apply new knowledge and skills or to roll out and sustain implementation of the identified policy or procedure. This analysis of the enabling environment could consider what resources are available with the organization to implement the policy or procedure, who needs to be influenced for timely approvals, who needs to be involved at each stage of decision making, the responsible staff and additional capacity needs, and what kind of follow up or accompaniment support is required from CRS.

- **CRS and partners to Include accompaniment plan in the Detailed Implementation Plan:**

For each of the key policies/procedures/tools that are developed, plan for piloting, provide a detailed description of support that will be required from CRS team members. For training, include accompaniment to partner staff to apply and sustain the newly learned knowledge or skills. It would be important to identify if the accompaniment support is falling with the project/program timeline, if not, plan for post-project follow-up and resource allocation. Both CRS and partners would also have to review the quality of accompaniment at regular intervals, quarterly or bi-annual.

- **CRS and National⁴ partners to systematically plan training and follow-up for partners and sub-national partners:**

Phase the training to cover each topic in depth with required follow-up for partner staff. Consider options of doing a training of trainers' model incorporated with accompaniment, partner staff then go back to the organization and train other staff on the same topic, with any required accompaniment from CRS. It is important for CRS needs to plan for follow-up and accompaniment support post training, as new approaches are put into implementation.

- **CRS to use Quarterly meetings as an opportunity to incorporate an Adaptive Management Approach to making decisions and adjustments to changing context of partners for EMPOWER:**

Organize quarterly reflection meetings and use them as an opportunity to discuss if the project is going in the desired direction. These considerations might include whether required accompaniment is received from CRS, or whether there is a need to revisit the improvement plan considering the changing local context. Review based on evidence if direction needs to change and how this change needs to happen. Engage CRS and partner leadership to ensure there is a common understanding of what is happening in the project, what challenges are being faced and how these challenges can be addressed.



For more information please contact:

Mary Thanikal (Keerthana),
EMPOWER Asia MEAL Manager/TA-MEAL PCS
Mail id: keerthana.thanikal@crs.org

For additional resources and information:

- 1) Institute for Capacity Strengthening: <https://ics.crs.org/>
- 2) EMPOWER Page on the ICS: <https://ics.crs.org/project/empower>

<https://www.crs.org/>

⁴National partners – National level Caritas who work with Dioceses and Government partners who work with different structures of governance till the community level.