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Lessons From COVID-19: Using CLA to Position Frontier County Governments for Future Pandemics, Natural Disasters, and Human-made Crises – Isiolo County Case, Kenya

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Summary

This case explores the CLA approach of the Resilience Learning Activity (RLA), in partnership with local stakeholders, in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and positioning counties in Northern Kenya for better disaster preparedness and management in the future. RLA is a five-year, USAID/Kenya and East Africa-funded Activity led by ACDI/VOCA. To strengthen resilience capacities and evidence-based programming, RLA supports regional, national, and local organizations and institutions in Northern Kenya, Somalia, and the Horn of Africa to build their capacities in analytics, facilitate learning for adaptive management, and improve knowledge management and communications.

At the onset of the pandemic, stakeholders were striving to provide local communities with real-time information. However, Kenya's mainstream media faced an upsurge of fake news which resulted in confusion and panic and threatened public trust. The lack of coordination between County government and development partners resulted in the duplication of efforts. In response, RLA applied the CLA approach to support resilience capacities for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic through three significant interventions:

- Promoting collaboration for rapid disaster risk response communications
- Development of a county government disaster risk and crisis communications plan
- Building the capacity of local county leaders and media outlets for crisis response

Consequently, the interventions led to increased stakeholders' buy-in and engagement with RLA, fostered USAID's reputation among other donors in the county as a leader in collaboration and learning, promoted relationships between USAID/KEA Mission staff, County leaders, and thought leaders in the resilience space, and increased the demand for RLA's CLA interventions.

What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to Collaborate, Learn, and Adapt?

Northern Kenya (frontier) counties have experienced an increase in the frequency of disasters over the past two decades, such as droughts, floods, landslides, and more demonstrating a critical need to build local stakeholders' capacities for disaster response; factors that inspired the design of the RLA Activity. Kenya reported its first COVID-19 case on March 13, 2020, and on March 15, 2020, a presidential announcement gave directives aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. Following these nationwide directives, County Governments developed their preparedness and response measures. The County Government of Isiolo constituted a multi-agency and multi-stakeholder COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee to coordinate the COVID-19 preparedness and response in the County. The County experienced several challenges in its quest to enhance collaboration and learning for adaptive management in COVID-19 preparedness and response. Among them were irregularity of engagement, the politicization of the COVID-19 response by a section of leaders, and difficulties in changing behavior and adherence to home-based care guidelines.

The most pressing challenge for the County was how to dispel the conspiracies and misleading stories that were being peddled through various local media outlets, including radio, social media, and newspapers. These misleading stories discouraged people who might get infected with the virus from seeking medical care in hospitals. Unfortunately, the County did not have a strategy to communicate effectively in response and to counter the misinformation. As its mission is to build stakeholder resilience capacities through enhanced CLA implementation, RLA stepped in to (a) enhance collaboration between county government leaders and external partners and (b) improve knowledge management and communications across systems levels supporting the COVID-19 response while also building resilience for dealing with future disasters.

Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

RLA considers CLA as critical for building local organizations' capacities to respond better to shocks and crises. COVID-19 presented a new challenge to the County governments, given it was, and still is, an emergency crisis with minimal information around it, while happening in real-time and claiming lives. This called for multi-sectoral coordination among stakeholders; thus, RLA applied the CLA approach to catalyze learning among the actors involved, build capacity, facilitate county-led containment measures, and communicate effectively with communities.

Moreover, governments depended on real-time data collection and analysis for decision-making. CLA made the local leaders adaptive to new learning and changing contexts while grounding their decisions in evidence. RLA, through the Isiolo County Steering Group, leveraged both human resources and expertise to facilitate interventions such as continuous research and data collection, public awareness, law enforcement of the containment orders, and management of health risks.

CLA provided a perfect model for extending RLA's influence through sharing of knowledge and collaborating with other development actors to learn from their collective experiences.

Tell us the story of how you used a Collaborating, Learning, and/or Adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge

Communicating collaboratively for rapid response

At the onset of the pandemic, all stakeholders were striving to provide the most immediate real-time solutions by adjusting their existing interventions to meet the new challenges. There was no active or deliberate effort to share information, especially among implementing partners in Northern Kenya, who were targeting the same communities and County Governments. This lack of coordination resulted in duplication of efforts in the initial stages.

On March 16, 2020, the County established a 30-member multi-agency/multi-stakeholder Covid-19 Emergency Response Committee, comprising national and County government members, religious community members, Civil Society Organizations, and the private sector. The committee's core function was to coordinate Covid-19 emergency preparedness and response between the national, County, and development partners. With a secretariat role of coordinating activities among all USAID implementing partners, RLA strengthened its networks with the County's COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee as the central coordinating authority at the local level, collected the information, and disseminated it to all partners through the PREG network via weekly updates.

Development and Launch of the County's Disaster Risk and Crisis Communications Plan



Isiolo County Governor, H.E. Dr. Mohammed Abdi Kuti, EGH (Centre) and his team during the launch of the County Disaster Risk and Crisis Communications Plan. This was during the RLA supported CLA learning event held on 3rd March in Isiolo, to enable the County Government to pause and reflect on its COVID-19 Crisis Communications Management and based on the lessons learned, prepare for future disasters. Credit: USAID/RLA.

Local communities did not know they had rights to information from their local government on its County-specific COVID-19 management progress, over and above the national level updates. They were also unaware of the health services available to them and where to get help at the local level. Additionally, the county government was facing media backlash to justify its spending on the COVID-19 funds. The County government communications department wanted to explore why their leaders had continued to receive negative publicity in the local media outlets that had sparked public distrust.

Subsequently, RLA supported the team in pausing and reflecting on how different the COVID-19 crisis was from previous challenges the county had handled, including its communications management. Utilizing learning from these discussions, RLA supported the County in developing and launching one of the first Disaster Risk and Crisis Communications plan in Kenya. The crisis plan outlined the approaches, key messages, and channels of communicating to all stakeholders.

RLA collaborated with the County Government to host a CLA learning event to pause and reflect on the County's COVID-19 crisis communications management and launch by the county leaders.

Building the capacity of County leaders and local media outlets

RLA collaborated with the Media Council of Kenya to train and build the capacity of both the County leaders and the local media journalists in Isiolo. At the onset of the pandemic, Kenya's mainstream media faced an upsurge of fake news, rumors, and controversies, which created confusion and panic among the locals and threatened public trust. Government communications to the people through local media outlets was critical to dispel the virus's rumors and myths and enhance dialogue between communities and the leaders for improved service delivery. Local media outlets served as the best communication channels given the national directives that had imposed a lockdown across the country.

RLA recognized the need for a CLA approach that would bring the County leaders and local journalists together under one roof to address their working relationships for the community's benefit. RLA's training focused on empowering local journalists with critical skills on working with the government, data journalism –using numbers and analytics to write pandemic stories and predict the trends-combating fake news and rumors on-air, fact-checking, critical interviewing skills, and capturing knowledge and information.

For County leaders, RLA provided training on leadership in times of crisis that included modules on working with the media to reach local communities. To facilitate the process of engagement, RLA held a half-day CLA session that brought together the county leaders and local media journalists. As both parties had more exchange opportunities, they became more open about their successes and challenges, built trust, and shared constructive feedback.

“I have been notified by my colleagues and listeners that my interviewing skills have greatly improved following my on-air feature stories. It means they have noted the difference and I know it is as a result of the RLA training. This is because previously, I would regrettably reflect on the missed opportunity of posing critical questions to a news source, long after leaving a press briefing. But I learned the best interviewing skills from my role model, Hussein Mohamed and am improving.”
Sylvester Kituku a local radio station journalist.

Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning, and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

This crisis provided an opportunity for RLA to promote CLA principles and build capacities for local governments to be more effective in disaster response. RLA used this as an avenue to develop and solidify its networks with the County Government of Isiolo and other national government agencies that operate at the county level. It increased stakeholders' buy-in and engagement with RLA. It also fostered USAID's reputation among other donors in the county as a leader in collaboration and learning.

These CLA support activities promoted relationships between USAID/KEA Mission staff, County leaders, and thought leaders in the resilience space. It also increased RLA's familiarity and effectiveness in working within existing county government processes and protocols.

The success of the Isiolo County's CLA process and COVID-19 support activities culminated in RLA's facilitation of a learning event with high-level delegates that forged new partnerships and increased the demand for RLA's data analytics, learning, and adaptive management, knowledge management, and strategic communications interventions across eight other county governments. Other county leaders, having learned from Isiolo, are now determined to work with RLA in applying similar approaches to improve their decision-making processes for disaster risk preparedness.

For USAID implementing partners, the process laid the foundation for developing local structures networks and partnerships to enable successful sequencing, layering, and integration of activities and facilitate and document effective implementation. The disaster risk and crisis communications plan serve as a tool for collective action and coordination, which is important to maintain alignment across partners in working towards a common agenda, addressing specific communications problem sets, sharing learning, and engaging in continuous communication.

Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

RLA's key development outcome is to enhance the CLA capacities of local stakeholders for improved resilience to multiple shocks and stresses. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic shone light on the state of the county government's healthcare systems and disaster risk communications preparedness. While it is still early to extensively determine the impact of RLA's interventions at the County level, initial outcomes include;

- *Increased morale across internal staff at the County Communications Department:* RLA formed a Community of Practice with the County team through a WhatsApp group and facilitated communications experts as the group leaders to provide continuous mentorship and learning. This has increased the county staff morale. They are more efficient and effective in their work.
- *Enhanced Collaboration between County Government leaders and external partners:* A notable change has been in the county Government's effectiveness to relate with the local media outlets, not as foes but friends and partners working for the communities' benefit.
- *Improved Communication & Knowledge Management:* County leaders are more frequently sharing information and knowledge with development partners. The Isiolo County government is working to revive the community meetings (*Barazas*) to keep the people informed on the development agenda even when there is no crisis. Following the RLA training of 58 journalists in Isiolo County, content generation of radio programs and newspaper stories has improved as journalists can now apply in-depth interviewing and analytical skills that enhance the technical media content.
- *Increased Learning:* Operating through multi-agency and multi-sector committees has enhanced learnings and increased knowledge at individual levels. This is evidenced by the County Steering Group members' sector-wide understanding of some basic public health policies and practices by stakeholders due to the consistent interaction with the Ministry of health teams in the group.

What factors enabled your CLA approach, and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

Recognizing that the County Government had to put together a disaster risk and crisis communications plan to avert the challenges presented by COVID-19 and other potential crises in the future, the RLA program team had limited time to mobilize some critical stakeholders on board to join the design process from the beginning. To navigate this challenge, the plan was designed as a living document poised for annual reviews and amendments for adaptive management; thus, there is still room for collaboration. RLA reconfigured internal program resources to undertake additional fieldwork as the plan's development had to be done through face-face meetings with county government technical teams.

The county leadership team was open to admitting that the communications department could be better staffed and was committed to budgetary allocations and collaboration with external development partners for continued learning and improvement. RLA found that the use of a County-led, County-driven approach was invaluable in developing the crisis plan. Building upon pre-established structures also aided in moving along processes. For example, an existing County Government's Contingency Plan helped develop the Disaster Risk and Crisis communications plan.

Leveraging other pre-existing resources and protocols such as the county's Standard Operating Procedures also enabled the development process as it provided clear leadership, command, control, and coordinated approaches to disaster mitigation, prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

RLA engaged the County technical teams as crucial resource persons who provided learnings on the local dynamics to be captured and adapted the crisis plan to their context accordingly. Collaboration with the local media outlets and County interdepartmental technical teams helped advance the process and strengthen the sustainability and roll-out plans.

Did your CLA approach contribute to sustainability? If so, how?

Although RLA's approach support COVID-19 response, the projects core objectives were already focused around building local stakeholders' CLA capacities for enhanced response to disasters/shocks. While it is still early to establish the impact of our interventions, RLA believes that its CLA approach has laid a foundation towards sustainable future disaster risk and crisis communications by the County government of Isiolo. This is because the coordination structures like the committees and associations formed are operational and executing their mandates. The County government has initiated the process of embedding these structures within their special program unit to continue managing all other disasters as part of the institutionalization process that indicates sustainability.

From the County disaster risk and communications plan, the government is working on setting up an information center to enhance its communications with the public and increase sustainability. The training of local media journalists led to increased knowledge and skills of reporting in crisis. The immediate changes in local media content generation and community engagement approaches are pathways to sustainability and self-reliance.

It is possible to achieve more if interventions are structured through a multi-agency, multi-stakeholder coordination committee that can achieve more success than individual departments or sectors. This approach facilitated the pooling of resources, building partnerships, and benefiting from the different actors and stakeholders' expertise and experience.