Strengthening organizational capacity in Kenya, Malawi, and South Sudan

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Abstract

This reports on a US-AID-funded project which engages faith-based organizations to strengthen their organizational capacity as they implement reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health grant activities. Implementing partners in Kenya, Malawi, and South Sudan completed the self-administered Organization Capacity Assessment and created corresponding action plans based on the assessment results. Each organization completed the priority activities that they identified in their action plans; strengthening staff capacity, sharpening monitoring and evaluation systems; and improving information systems. We conclude that grantmakers' investment in strengthening the organizational capacity of their implementing partners results in the grantees having improved internal systems and being better positioned to obtain and execute future grant opportunities.

Keywords: FBO, capacity assessment, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, CCIH, CHAK, CHAM, Organization for People's Empowerment and Needs

The Strengthening Community Health Outcomes through Positive Engagement (SCOPE) Project, funded by The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is a five-year project aimed at reducing preventable maternal and child morbidity and mortality in Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, and South Sudan. World Relief (WR) is the prime grantee for the SCOPE Project from 2019-2024. WR selected Christian Connections for International Health (CCIH) as a subgrantee to identify and monitor local partners in three SCOPE countries to work with private, faith-based organizations to promote SCOPE's vision and goals during the first three years of the

project. CCIH sub-partnered with the Christian Health Association of Kenya (CHAK), the Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM), and the Organization for Peoples' Empowerment and Needs (OPEN) to implement this work in Kenya, Malawi, and South Sudan, respectively. This article highlights CCIH's role in mobilizing and supporting the partners to conduct project activities and strengthen internal organizational capacity.

The SCOPE project is part of USAID's New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) to engage new and non-traditional partners. Through NPI, USAID is working to lower the barriers to engagement

with nontraditional partners, such as faith-based and civil society organizations, so that underrepresented groups can partner with the Agency in pursuing shared development goals. Through the SCOPE project, CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN advanced global development goals by greatly increasing the skills and professional competence of community health workers from faith-based and public healthcare facilities to provide reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) services. A critical point in NPI's mission is strengthening the capacity of local organizations. As such, the SCOPE project did not solely focus on the implementation of RMNCH education and services in the community; it carved out space and funds for activities focused on supporting the specific organizational goals of local implementing partners. CCIH worked with CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN to ensure compliance with USAID rules and regulations, track and monitor partners' project activities against grant goals, and ensure overall implementation of grant activities in maternal, newborn, and child health and family planning.

The SCOPE project prioritized supporting CCIH and grant partners to strengthen their internal systems, further develop their human resources and partnerships, and advance their strategic objectives. CCIH led all three organizations through organizational capacity self-assessments developed by CCIH so that the partners could identify strengths and opportunities for growth. CCIH created the Organization Capacity Assessment (OCA), a self-assessment for organizations that included an OCA action plan template (English and French versions available). The OCA guided each partner through conducting an internal evaluation of their current stage of growth and development within ten domains: organizational leadership and governance, organizational leadership and management, operational and administrative policies and procedures, human resources, finance, fundraising, communications, advocacy, network effectiveness, and program management. Based on their OCA results, each organization

created a unique action plan, prioritizing activities on a scale of 1-3, with 1 being most important and realistic to achieve during the course of the project timeline. SCOPE funded the organizational strengthening activities that CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN prioritized within their action plans for the given time frame.

CHAK focused on improving human resources, communications, advocacy, and program management improvement. CHAK provided gender and disability trainings to their staff. They also added gender and disability mainstreaming objectives to their organization's 2023-2028 strategic plan. CHAK revised its communications strategy through a staff workshop. To improve adaptive learning and knowledge management, CHAK supported 16 staff to attend a capacity-building workshop and develop five organizational learning questions as part of their monitoring and evaluation framework.

CHAM selected to hone their quality assurance and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems within their healthcare facility networks. CHAM trained 20 facility data personnel on M&E/data management processes and the District Health Information System (DHIS2) web-based platform. CHAM trained 62 facility managers on data demand and use for decision-making. The participants were able to apply data management concepts, explain the domains of data management standards, and explain the steps of data management with an understanding of the difference between intuition and evidence-based decision-making processes. Lastly, CHAM established Quality Improvement Support Teams (QIST) in 49 facilities across the CHAM network to champion implementation of quality improvement activities to improve service delivery. These QISTs are now able to be sustained and included in the Ministry of Health's QIST program.

OPEN chose to focus on the following subsections from their OCA: network information technology and data systems strengthening, network financial management and strengthening for reporting, and network staff/human resources. They acquired software

and tools for strengthening data systems. They procured computer antivirus, external drives, and premium Microsoft Office. OPEN also implemented a digital human resources information system. They procured updated QuickBooks software and provided a three-month training to their finance officer on how to use this software. A consultant continues to provide technical assistance and mentorship support. The training included report reconciliations, which has resulted in OPEN improving in timeliness and completeness on reporting to donors. OPEN also implemented a digital check in and out electronic system. They updated their human resources policy to reflect that this system will be used to track staff work hours and generate staff timesheets.

Partners are typically very focused on project implementation and service delivery. However, CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN needed support building advocacy skills to reach multiple audiences with messages about the work they are doing and their capabilities to partner with local and national governments, churches, local communities, and other partners. CCIH conducted three-day advocacy trainings for each partner and provided certificates of completion for participants. CCIH also encouraged CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN in their efforts to create and maintain relationships with the Ministry of Health offices and other local stakeholders. Each time a partner was in the field, they met with appropriate government offices to communicate proper greetings and transparency and have local MoH staff accompany them on their monitoring and support supervision visits. The partners met with local government offices, in coordination with WR country office staff, to discuss the SCOPE project and promote their work and needs regarding RMNCH issues.

CCIH hosted a communications training session for SCOPE partners to provide techniques and tips for communicators. CCIH provided in-person refresher trainings on communications activities during monitoring visits. These knowledge management trainings focused on social media, website content and management, central cloud-based file storage,

and sharing knowledge among staff. Improving knowledge management and sharing is vital so lessons learned from projects are shared publicly and not just for project staff. Also, expanding their communications experience helps CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN to highlight their technical expertise and accomplishments to attract potential funders and partners.

CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN created three organizational fact sheets. CCIH provided guidance on fact sheet creation that groups then shared on their websites and in advocacy efforts. CCIH has encouraged and monitored partners' activities to add information to their organizations' websites and social media platforms about the SCOPE project. CCIH demonstrated how to post effective messages on the SCOPE project and has shared examples with the partners to guide them in their website and social media posts.

CCIH hosted South-to-South learning sessions with CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN to share learnings from their OCA experiences and an additional session on supportive supervision and mentorship of community health workers with CHAK, CHAM, OPEN, and country-level World Relief staff so that the groups could learn from each other, ask questions, provide answers, and problem-solve together.

CCIH supported overall project knowledge management and distribution of SCOPE-created materials via various communication channels and conference presentations and supported WR staff via a presentation skills training.

CCIH's own capacity was strengthened through two staff members participating in a subaward management course and two staff participating in a financial management course through Humentum. Providing program and financial monitoring to the three partners grew CCIH's experience in subaward and financial management. CCIH also conducted an internal OCA process to prioritize its own capacity-building activities for 2023 and beyond.

In November 2022, WR hosted a SCOPE Global Learning Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. The meeting was a culminating capacity development opportunity for CHAK, CHAM,

OPEN, and CCIH. During the meeting, WR shared their experience and learnings from their community engagement activities. CCIH worked with CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN on conducting a group presentation on lessons learned from their three years of involvement. The presentation included reflections from each organization on their project activities, results, challenges, successes, and lessons learned.

CCIH, CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN learned important lessons through the SCOPE project that have led to recommendations for similar projects in the future. One of the most notable recommendations that emerged is to always support the organizational capacity of the implementing partners. CHAK, CHAM, and OPEN each used the NPI funds set aside within the grant to be used for implementing partners' development, but *how* each partner chose to use these funds to strengthen their operations was very unique to their situation and was tailored to their organization's goals and strategic plans. The SCOPE project was able to have an impact beyond the RMNCH grant activities by funding subawardees' capacity-building priorities. A small carve-out of project funds for capacity strengthening can create long-lasting improvements in partners' internal operations so that they are in a stronger position to obtain and execute future opportunities.

All five authors, plus another staff member from CHAK at the Global Learning Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya.

From left to right: Gift Werekhwe, Deirdre Church, Evelyn Gathuru, Mona Bormet, Anne Kanyi from CHAK, and Richard Gumad.

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