

HOW CAN FORMATIVE RESEARCH SHAPE PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT?

AN EXPERIENCE FROM LIBERIA

Formative research is rarely used to develop robust and context-specific programme proposals. However during 2019 and 2020, the Action Against Hunger teams in Liberia, France and the UK and partners undertook formative research to support the development of a proposal for a consortium project to tackle stunting in three counties in Liberia.

The formative research included a Link NCA (led by ACF UK), a cost-of-diet analysis (led by Wateraid) and a barrier analysis (led by Concern). Grace Heymsfield, one of the Link NCA Analysts involved in the project, describes the three components of the research and the key findings in more detail here.

Tom Heath, Regional WASH Advisor with ACF France, provided technical

support during the design of the research protocols. He shared his thoughts and key lessons about the process of involving formative research in the development of a multiyear programme.

Action Against Hunger, Concern, Wateraid, Oxfam and Tearfund were the five partners of the Liberia Wash Consortium (LWC). Since 2009, with the support of Irish Aid, the LWC have set out to improve rural sanitation and WASH practices across Liberia. In 2019, Irish Aid reached out to the LWC to request partners to develop a proposal for the sixth phase that focused on the stunting. According to Tom, Irish Aid felt that, until that point, limited evidence had been generated of the impact of the consortium's work. As such, in the first year of the next five year programme cycle

(2019-2024), they agreed to include a formative research phase in order to develop programming based on a better understanding of the context-specific causes of stunting.

Action Against Hunger took the lead on coordinating the formative research and the Link NCA while Concern led the Barrier analysis and the Cost-of-Diet analysis. Tom worked closely with the consortium partners and the Link NCA team during this process. He felt that the three studies worked well together and that there was a good complementarity of findings between the studies. For example the qualitative work of the Link NCA fed into and informed the barrier analysis.

The Link NCA finding identified 19 risk factors which are likely to have an impact on stunting in the study zones, three of which were classified

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as major risk factors. Of the major risk factors, two related to WASH (including “low access to water” and “non-optimal sanitation practices”). For Tom and other WASH experts in Liberia, it was not so surprising to see that WASH-related factors were included in the list of risk factors. However it was surprising that two of the three major risk factors were linked to WASH.

As such the results of the Link NCA were instrumental in changing Irish Aid’s perception of the causes of stunting in the target provinces and they agreed to include WASH as one of the three core pillars of the programme for the next four years. Tom feels therefore that the formative research played a key role in justifying the interventions that had been implemented for a number of years and that would be continued to be implemented by partners in the years to come.

The Link NCA also demonstrated the statistical associations between different risk factors. For example, the findings illustrated the increased likelihood of stunting occurring when a child had poor access to water and lived in a context where open defecation is tolerated within a community. Detailed findings like these will therefore enable programme teams to target specific communities and to tailor the messages communicated to community members.

Tom also saw the community’s involvement during the qualitative data collection of the Link NCA as a major positive aspect of the methodology. Rather than being just a “token” involvement of communities, during Link NCA data collection a significant amount of time is spent in communities enabling the Link NCA analysts to build rapport and trust with community members.

The process was not without its challenges. Tom reflected on some of the challenges encountered. These included:

1. The length, complexity and cost of the process. Ideally the formative research should have been led from within Liberia. However the Link NCA analysts had to coordinate the process (largely remotely) and pull together all of the data and findings from the other research studies. As such it was a costly process and, in addition to funding from the donor, Action Against Hunger had to use internal funds to ensure that they had sufficient funds to complete the Link NCA.
2. Weak involvement of stakeholders. This is a common challenge during Link NCAs however it was particularly difficult in Liberia, especially during to the Covid pandemic.
3. Limited adjustment to programme activities. In spite of the additional

evidence and data that came from the findings of the studies, the actual proposed activities changed minimally compared to the previous programme cycle. However as mentioned above, Tom felt that the findings of the Link NCA in particular helped demonstrate that the programming that will be undertaken, and has been delivered until this point, is justified and is based on robust evidence.

Tom’s advice to others interested in including formative research in the development of programme proposals is to ensure that the donor is on board from the start and that all partners have a clear understanding of how the studies will interact.

He also highlighted how important it is to involve those implementing the studies (especially the Link NCA analysts) in the development of the programme proposal. Their rich interactions with the community will enable the programme team to develop a very strong proposal (Irish Aid have agreed to fund the remaining four years of LWC’s activities).

He also felt that Link NCA’s are most useful at developing the justification for interventions rather than actually defining the approach. Therefore it is important to combine a Link NCA with complementary studies or assessments such as a barrier analysis.