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Market systems in practice: field notes from Bangladesh AVC

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Three steps for teams to create an internal dynamic that supports the collaboration, innovation, and flexibility required to roll out systemic interventions.

Kat Cooley and Sarah Wall manage USAID's Agricultural Value Chains (AVC) Project, which aims to enhance long term food security in the southern delta in Bangladesh. The project is in its third year and has a new management team, which includes us providing home-base support from the U.S. We have recently begun a process of fine-tuning our market systems approach to the project. Virtually every aspect of the project will be touched by this transition; from our internal management structure to the underlying systemic problems our interventions attempt to address. This series of blog posts will follow our learning process, presenting how we have applied the principles of a market systems approach to our programme design and day-to-day implementation.

We are excited to contribute and learn with the growing community of market systems practitioners, and hope these reflections will provide ideas and practical advice to support our peers. We welcome any questions, comments below, and sharing from the development community, and look forward to an active discussion.

Disorganisation chart: From siloed teams to matrixed collaboration

Anyone who has worked in development has seen a standard organisation chart, grouping people in top-down teams, separating operations and administration from

technical scopes, and feeding information from field office staff into the main capital-based office. While org charts can be helpful to specify individual roles and to create a clear delineation of duties, they can also inadvertently create stovepipes and bottlenecks that may inhibit free-flowing communication and collaboration within teams.

In the context of our project in Bangladesh, there is also a strong workplace culture of reverence for elders and deferring to the highest level person in the room, who is also typically the oldest person. In a workplace setting, this culture tends to cause communication to start at the highest level of the organisation and flow down the hierarchy, leading to deference to conventionality and status-quo.

To be effective, a market systems approach requires a collaborative workspace with free-flowing human resources. In the majority of cases, a market systems intervention strives to address a new set of root-causes, many of which have not been considered previously by standard development models. As such, market systems programmes should be guided by a working hypothesis of the change process, and staff should have smart/adaptive capacity to identify and implement any needed adjustments. This challenge is compounded by the inherent complexity of the emergent systemic development challenges that a market systems programme strives to impact. These challenges are matrixed and multidisciplinary, requiring teams who are spearheading solutions to seek out new resources in an ad-hoc way, tapping internal resources across teams and sourcing new perspectives and expertise through consultancies.

The foundation for the project's shift to a market systems approach is to create a team dynamic that supports the collaboration, innovation, and flexibility required to roll out systemic interventions. A lot of market systems interventions are designed to trigger behaviour change in partner firms or stakeholders – helping them become dynamic, innovative market players. To catalyse this cultural shift in the marketplace, market systems implementation teams should create an internal dynamic that mirrors the cultural and functional shifts that they are putting forward through interventions. Additionally, matrixed communication and flexibility will be essential as the team navigates through the uncertainty of uncharted technical areas and challenges.

Breaking down the cube walls

Step one is a physical change. In our case this was quite literal, and required us grabbing a hammer and screwdriver to break down and muscle apart the staff's cubicles. For two years, our technical teams had been working in a grid of small, shoulder-high cubicles. The office was quiet, with no whiteboards, limited meeting space, and no flexibility to accommodate different styles of working or tasks. At first, some of the staff were hesitant about the proposed changes and voiced concerns

about privacy. But once one floor had been remodeled, staff began jostling for a seat at the new collaborative working tables.

In our new layout, we prioritised open small group working tables, meeting rooms on every floor to promote brainstorming sessions and meetings with outside partners, and multi-purposed workspaces with whiteboards and easels throughout. Cultural sensitivities were considered when developing the new layout, including gender specific prayer rooms.

To demonstrate a commitment to a working space, you have to make sure that the leadership is leading the charge. One of the first things we did was turn the Chief of Party Mike Field's office into a lounge – putting up white boards, bringing in a couch, and converting Mike into the office vagabond, switching up his working space daily depending on what was going on. This was pretty radical, and although initially people may have been intimidated with the boss squeezed in for the day, quickly the conventional formality associated with speaking to the boss dissolved away which enabled more collaborative problem solving and learning.

This physical change is a manifestation of the cultural shift we want to see in staff dynamics. Once the physical change was made, it was time to take a new look at our team structure, keeping in mind the interdisciplinary realities of the problems we are trying to address and the need for constant adaptive learning.

Mix and mingle, people!

Step two was where the real work of team integration began. Our technical team was organised in to three core teams: food value chains, non-food value chains, and a group of cross-cutting specialists. Each team had a separate work space and a disconnected, internally-housed work stream. We also had a separate monitoring and evaluation team, operating on an entirely different floor from the technical teams, and focusing largely on reporting out to the client on indicators.

Without adjusting the lines of reporting structure, we integrated the cross cutting specialists and M&E team in to the two value chain teams, and created more opportunity for ongoing engagement and a level of active involvement. We found ourselves sitting at a coffee shop, scribbling names on the back of our placemats talking through the strengths of different team members and how we could unlock everyone's inner creative genius. Creating collaborative learning groups sets the stage for exciting new ideas to emerge.

Empowering talent

Step three involved adjustments and additions to the organisational structure based on the need for new knowledge and corresponding capacity within the team.

A huge component of this has been getting to know the staff on an individual level and learning about their professional skill sets, interests, and ambitions. This enables us to cherry-pick some high-potential individuals and enable them to grow by building out broader and challenging scopes of work. Whenever possible we are tapping in to our internal staff and empowering them to expand their roles: following up on new ideas, encouraging them to take on stretch assignments, and investing in capacity development through coaching and mentorship. In areas where it is needed, we are bringing in new talent to tackle challenges that our team has not yet been exposed to, such as dispute resolution and designing for behaviour change.

Evolving process – stay tuned!

Evolving our internal organisational structure and culture is an ongoing process. The initial changes described above: changing the physical working environment, shaking up the teams, and creating a new team dynamic and culture is only the start.

Read blog #2: From principles to technical strategy

Read blog #3: Integrating adaptive management

> View the Agricultural Value Chain (AVC) Activity entry on BEAM's Programme index