RESILAC is listening
CAPITALIZATION & LEARNING

Feedback on the implementation of an agile evaluation system to strengthen "adaptive" project management in changing intervention contexts

Contents

Read more

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I. Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin region is currently facing a deep socio-economic, political, security and environmental crisis. In contrast to emergency solidarity actions, RESILAC proposes a pro-resilience logic that contributes to the economic recovery and the strengthening of the resilience of the territories of the Lake Chad Basin most affected by the security crisis and climate change. To do so, the project implements activities to promote economic development, preserve social cohesion, and strengthen the institutional capacity of authorities in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad[1]. The project embodies in a single large-scale initiative the multi-country, multi-sector, and multi-stakeholder approach to strengthening the triple nexus of "humanitarian assistance, development, and peace. In a changing regional context marked by high levels of insecurity, this approach requires a particular capacity for adaptation that "classic" project implementation and management methods struggle to meet. More specifically, traditional complaint management mechanisms do not facilitate iterative learning or the effective consideration of feedback.

The low level of influence of communities in the interventions that concern them represents one of the main obstacles to the relevance and quality of solidarity actions in the region. Today, 88% of people in Chad believe that their opinions are not taken into account in humanitarian decisions. As for NGOs and local partners, 71% consider that NGOs and international partners are not listening to them[2].

In view of the limitations of "classic" methods and systems, the RESILAC project has developed an agile process that places the populations at the heart of the intervention to provide an adapted and appropriate response, the Feedback Day. Halfway between impact assessment[3] and real-time evaluation[4], this is an iterative evaluation exercise carried out internally by the project teams to take into account feedback from the population on the quality and impact of the action and to make adjustments "in real time. One year after its launch, the Feedback Day is welcomed not only by the project's stakeholders, but also by the teams, who discover a "new" way of working together with the beneficiary populations to achieve collective results.

Through this capitalization report[5], the MEAL (*Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning*)[6] team of the RESILAC project reports on its experience, through opportunities and lessons learned, and proposes recommendations to aid sector actors wishing to learn from it.

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[1] Co-funded by the European Union (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa) and the French Development Agency (AFD) for an initial period of 4 years (2018-2021), RESILAC is implemented by an international consortium (Action Against Hunger - lead partner, CARE and Groupe URD) in partnership with the CCFD - Terre Solidaire network, Search For Common Ground and local organizations in the four intervention countries.

[2] Chad Humanitarian Accountability Survey (Ground Truth Solution, June 2019).

[3] Outcome Harvesting is a qualitative evaluation method that aims to trace effects (intended and unintended) in the field and then analyze the causal link with the action being evaluated.

[4] Real-time evaluation provides very quick feedback to the actors involved so that they can find useful lessons for their practice in the short term.

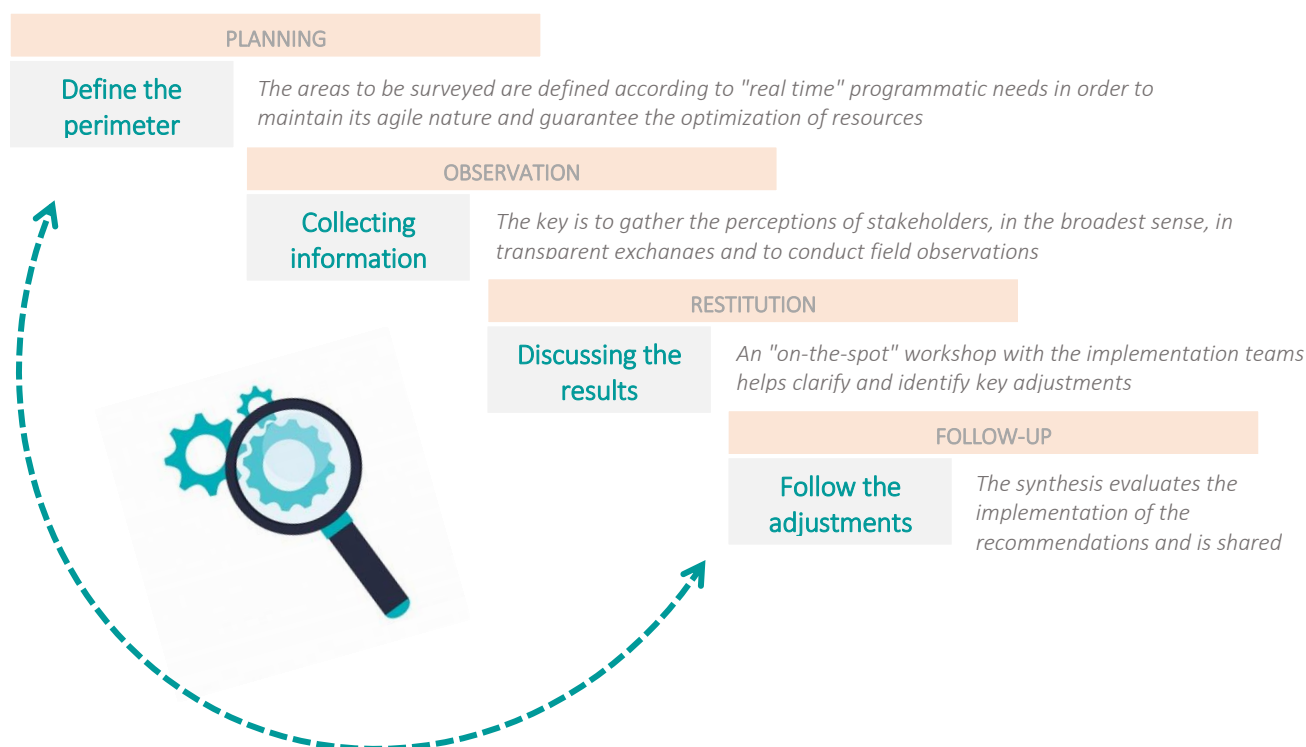[5] As an exception, this report uses the traditional accountability and learning graphic.

[6] The MEAL team would like to thank all of the RESILAC Pillar 4 leaders who participated in the development of this initiative and acknowledge their strong commitment to improving practices in the sector, as well as the RESILAC project coordinators and Groupe URD experts, in particular Lisa Daoud, for her valuable technical advice and guidance.

II. Feedback Day: strengthening adaptive programming through agile inquiry

The RESILAC project is particularly committed to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) [7] and to ensuring the quality of an intervention that is adapted and appropriate to the different contexts (Commitment 1), based on communication, participation and feedback (Commitment 4) and that learns and improves continuously (Commitment 7). Traditional" feedback and complaint management mechanisms for communities were put in place at the outset of the project, with various feedback channels and confidentiality guarantees for those using them. However, the project identified limitations in the ability to adapt its implementation based on feedback: project managers were not well informed about beneficiaries' experiences with the action and did not draw operational lessons from them to improve the "ongoing" implementation.

Faced with this situation, the MEAL team drew inspiration from the key principles of CHS to develop its own recipe, the "Feedback Day". On a quarterly basis, the Feedback Day provides a framework for regular exchanges between the MEAL manager and the project actors on the quality of the intervention. The information is immediately presented to the operational team to jointly identify necessary adjustments. The main results are synthesized in a shareable report, and the consideration of recommendations is assessed in the next survey. This agile four-step process (Fig. 1) is part of a continuous learning process that complements traditional community feedback, complaint, and evaluation mechanisms.

Fig. 1: Diagram of the key steps related to the Feedback Day process

PLANNING

Define the perimeter — *The areas to be surveyed are defined according to "real time" programmatic needs in order to maintain its agile nature and guarantee the optimization of resources*

OBSERVATION

Collecting information — *The key is to gather the perceptions of stakeholders, in the broadest sense, in transparent exchanges and to conduct field observations*

RESTITUTION

Discussing the results — *An "on-the-spot" workshop with the implementation teams helps clarify and identify key adjustments*

FOLLOW-UP

Follow the adjustments — *The synthesis evaluates the implementation of the recommendations and is shared*

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7 The Core Humanitarian Standard is the result of a collaborative process between Groupe URD, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project. SEE https://www.urd.org/fr/projet/contribution-a-lelaboration-de-la-norme-humanitaire-fondamentale-chs/

Improvement of practices, but which ones?

During the first year of piloting, the Feedback Day allowed an average of 200 people to regularly contribute to adapting and improving RESILAC project practices. Between January and December 2020, three complete Feedback Day cycles were carried out in the four intervention countries, i.e. 12 surveys in total, identifying nearly 30 recommendations, of which more than 15 have already led to effective adjustments in implementation.

In all of the project's countries of intervention, most of the feedback concerned recurring problems related to international solidarity actions. As shown in the graph below (Fig. 2), the recommendations resulting from the Feedback Days have facilitated the operationalization of at least 1 out of 4 adjustments.

Fig. 2: Distribution of recommendations by theme and status of implementation of the operational adjustment
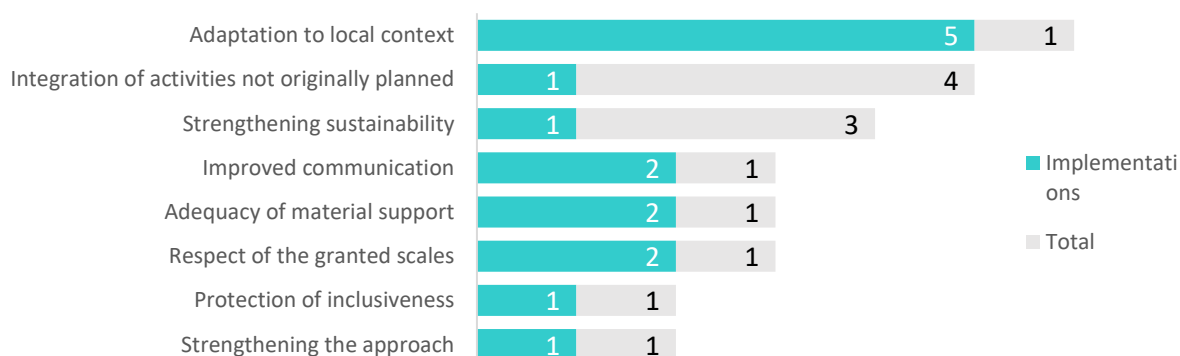
For example, communication between the project team and stakeholders has improved through regular exchanges on programming in Cameroon, or the organization of awareness-raising missions on the project's approach and objectives in Nigeria. Adjustments to sustainability include the establishment of village committees to ensure the maintenance of the developed land in Niger. In Chad, the definition of inclusive criteria has made it possible to guarantee better representativeness of the community consultation/cooperation frameworks. Finally, adaptation to the local context has led to the inclusion of endogenous practices in agro-ecological training in Chad, or the adaptation of training to the specific needs of learners in Cameroon.

Since the beginning, we have been solicited. And today with the Feedback Day, we see that concrete measures are taken afterwards.

Community Development Director

Opportunities

➔ *Optimization of resources. The Feedback Day requires few resources (time, budget, human) while ensuring the representation of stakeholders and the relevance of the information sought for the analysis.*

➔ *In real time. The agile and iterative nature of the survey makes it possible to adjust the schedule to that of the programmatic challenges and to have the results almost immediately to make implementation adjustments "in real time".*

➔ *Consideration of feedback. Open, two-way dialogue builds trust between the project teams and the communities. The latter feel listened to and better informed about the decisions that concern them.*

➔ *Learning and collective emulation. The investigation process encourages the "desacralization" of errors and promotes a collective learning and continuous improvement posture.*

III. A four-step process

After a year of piloting the process, this section describes the key steps and practical choices made by the RESILAC project in light of the specific challenges in the different intervention zones. It also presents the lessons learned and experiences of the teams in Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger.

1. Define the scope of the exercise

Unlike traditional methods, Feedback Day is planned based on "real-time" programmatic needs identified by the implementation teams. In order to maintain its agile nature, Feedback Day does not aim to include all areas of intervention in a systematic way, but to respond to the information and learning needs of the teams. Its iterative nature allows managers to adjust the balance between mobilizing the resources needed to conduct a comprehensive evaluation and the needs of program teams to learn lessons and adapt implementation as they go. In the RESILAC project, the scope and duration of the intervention led to the choice of a quarterly exercise. Coinciding with the implementation reporting period, this timing allows decision-makers and donors to be informed on a regular basis while guaranteeing the time necessary for the implementation of the necessary adjustments by the teams in the field.

Lesson(s) learned

☑ *Clear and transparent communication with project teams and stakeholders about the survey process is crucial so as not to raise expectations or create frustrations.*

☑ *Geographic sampling based on programmatic issues is key to ensuring survey agility and resource optimization.*

Field Experiences

In Chad, the intervention zones are relatively close and homogeneous, but the diversity of partners makes it difficult to implement an integrated approach. The Feedback Day is more in line with an evaluative approach similar to the On Site Quality Spot Check and is based on a random selection covering a limited number of communities in order to provide a general overview. This same strategy is used in Nigeria, where access to the intervention zones is otherwise hazardous due to the high level of security instability. In Cameroon, the fluidity of the strategy contrasts with an uneven level of progress between intervention zones, which are otherwise heterogeneous. The survey places particular emphasis on the observation of operational issues and covers the zones according to the program calendar to better identify transposable adjustments. In Niger, the survey covers all localities in turn, due to the distance between zones. In this sense, the approach has a particularly reflective character, constituting an excellent source of information on the effects of the intervention and contributing to a more detailed understanding of the issues.

> *Today, all communities are covered in turn, as we have found that difficulties sometimes come up from communities where there is no apparent problem or where the teams are less present!*
> MEAL Manager

2. Collecting information in the field

The objective is to create a space for discussion in which people feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perceptions of the intervention, while paying particular attention to involving individuals who may have difficulty being heard. The key is to gather the perceptions and opinions of stakeholders, in the broadest sense, including beneficiaries, traditional, religious and community leaders, representatives of local authorities and decentralized technical services, local implementing partners, civil society or community organizations and members of all social strata of the community. In this sense, the Feedback Day favors purposive sampling to ensure the relevance and representativeness of the exchanges rather than the number of respondents and to reduce the cumbersome nature of the exercise. In the field, the collection methods are adapted to the type of stakeholder and combine focus groups, informal exchanges, individual interviews and direct observations. It is particularly useful to involve external interpreters in the action, as well as to involve community members in facilitating the discussions to ensure transparent two-way exchanges.

Within the framework of the project, the conditions of the exchanges and the areas to be covered condition the duration of the survey, on average not exceeding 4 days. The survey therefore varies from time to time and from country to country, and can sometimes be carried out in an interrupted manner in order to guarantee the flexibility of the process.

Lesson(s) learned

☑ *A sample that is too small can hinder feedback and call into question the reliability of the information collected. An uneven balance between open-ended discussions and overly closed or standardized questions can hinder the collection of reliable and relevant information.*

☑ *Combining methods depending on the context and type of interviewee makes it easier to gather relevant information. For example, focus groups create more dialogue but may lack diversity, while individual interviews allow access to a wider range of people but are time consuming.*

Field Experiences

In Chad and Nigeria, the choice of respondents combines random targeting of beneficiaries in the field with the selection of certain key informants such as local authorities, civil society or community-based organizations and local partners. In these areas, where inter-community tensions are still latent, focus groups address less sensitive common issues, while specific difficulties are addressed in individual interviews to ensure transparency and confidentiality of responses. In Cameroon, data collection is carried out directly at the activity sites, targeting local beneficiaries as a priority and contacting institutional actors afterwards. In Niger, the process is initiated by a village assembly and the public constitution of single-sex discussion groups. Non-beneficiaries are also invited to participate in order to bring a critical viewpoint and encourage a position of hindsight on the effects of the intervention in their territory. Finally, the most dynamic people are encouraged to participate in the facilitation of exchanges and/or in note-taking; those who have difficulty expressing themselves are seen in individual interviews afterwards.

> *Each time I go down, I update the interview guide. However, these are open-ended questions and most of the questions are asked based on the initial answers collected. I broaden the spectrum of possible questions depending on the interviewer.*
> MEAL Manager

3. Discuss the results collectively

Holding an internal "hot" workshop is one of the most useful elements of the method and the key to its success. Immediately following the data collection, the information gathered is presented to the implementation teams during a time of reflective exchange. Through concrete examples, the program team can question, confront and clarify the context. The objective is to facilitate a common understanding of the beneficiaries' experience and to collectively identify the improvements to be made and the means necessary for their implementation.

Lesson(s) learned

☑ *Including as many program departments as possible (from decision makers to field agents) as well as support departments is crucial to promote collective reflection and learning.*

☑ *Identifying the means necessary to implement adjustments during the workshop makes it easier to implement.*

Field Experiences

In Chad and Nigeria, the particularly evaluative scope of Feedback Day would seem to be an obstacle to ownership of results[8]. Field teams are often absent, and implementers are reluctant to discuss the negative opinions expressed by stakeholders. In both countries, the workshop is facilitated by the MEAL managers, who present the information collected and simultaneously propose recommendations and possible solutions. This top-down approach could partly explain the rather vague and/or general nature of the proposed adjustments, as well as their long implementation time. On the contrary, the strong involvement of the project managers in Cameroon and Niger proved to be essential in getting the teams involved in continuous improvement. The Feedback Day is considered a collective learning tool and has served not only to adjust the intervention but also to consolidate a climate of trust and internal emulation. In Cameroon, the MEAL manager proposes individual exchanges before organizing the presentation to the whole team. This avoids the "surprise" effect and clarifies the information beforehand, allowing more time for collective reflection on possible solutions and necessary adjustments. This dynamic is more developed in Niger, where the Feedback Day seems to have favored the "desacralization of errors" and strengthened the cohesion of the team around a common strategy of continuous improvement. The strong ownership of the method by the project manager leads to a greater participation of the team in the feedback, which brings together the different people involved in the implementation (field agents, managers, partners and supports). The diversity of the participants' responsibilities and levels of access to the field favors the richness of the exchanges, which aim to understand the specific difficulties that have been raised in order to develop possible solutions in the form of recommendations.

> *Implementation teams quickly feel challenged and are often reluctant to talk about what is wrong or what could be improved. Feedback Day workshops have changed that. Now everyone wants to publicly share their ideas and learn from others.*
> MEAL Manager

> *The "hot" workshop is the key to success. The information gathered allows me to have a better understanding of the intervention and to involve all the stakeholders in the decision making and the search for solutions.*
> National Coordinator

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[8] In view of the key role of the project managers, the vacancies for the Coordinator of the project in Chad and Nigeria, which are particularly long, could explain this.

4. Follow the recommendations

The key results of the workshop are summarized in a clear and transparent manner in a report that is distributed to the various stakeholders and partners, with a particular focus on the selected recommendations. The implementation of the adjustments is then evaluated in subsequent surveys, ensuring that the feedback is taken into account. Ongoing accountability is carried out by the MEAL manager or the implementation teams, who inform people of the status of the implementation of adjustments, as well as any blockages and ongoing reflections. This particular monitoring has served not only to ensure the follow-up of changes made "in real time" but also to establish a climate of trust between the communities and the project teams, a necessary condition for a transparent and bilateral dialogue. In the field, MEAL managers or implementation teams provide oral feedback to communities "as they go along" during monitoring missions. A regional compilation of key information and follow-up of recommendations is provided quarterly to technical and financial partners.

Lesson(s) learned

☑ *The joint formulation of recommendations (program-MEAL-support) promotes more relevant and realistic adjustments.*

☑ *Transparent reporting of results and monitoring of adjustments builds trust with stakeholders, engaging them in a two-way communication process.*

Field Experiences

In Chad and Nigeria, the lesser involvement of the implementation team and the rather general nature of the recommendations make it more difficult to operationalize and therefore follow up on them. Summary tables are prepared as a reminder and are used for monthly monitoring. However, the mobilization of the various departments necessary for implementation is not fluid and requires additional investment by the MEAL manager. In this sense, the main difficulty is the lack of commitment and collective agreement on operational priorities. As for the results, they are shared with the focal points in the field and verified "as we go along" by the MEAL manager.

In Cameroon, reporting is also done by the MEAL manager, in addition to the systematic sharing of formal reports with authorities and partners. In a growing concern for transparency, the reports allow for the exchange and reinforcement of stakeholders' understanding of the project's challenges and potential bottlenecks. Close monitoring of the implementation of adjustments is facilitated by the project manager during joint coordination meetings. In Niger, the wider and more diverse participation in the workshop instills a collective responsibility for the quality of the intervention. This is illustrated by the integration of more precise adjustments and the identification of the means necessary for their implementation during the workshop.

> *Now I feel more comfortable and confident during field visits, because not only do we meet with the communities, but we report back to them on what is being done with the feedback.*
> National Coordinator

> *within the team. The MEAL manager is no longer seen as a "policeman" but as a "companion" to whom the teams can turn.*
> National Coordinator

IV. Lessons learned and recommendations

Lessons Learned *of the RESILAC experience*	Recommendations *for the actors of the aid*
Clear and transparent communication about the investigation process is crucial so as not to raise expectations or create frustrations.	Presenting processes to teams and stakeholders helps to clarify objectives, mitigate potential misgivings, and reinforce buy-in to results.
Purposeful geographic sampling is key to ensuring agility and investigation and value for money.	Reduce the geographic coverage in favor of the frequency of the exercise and the magnitude of the adjustments to be implemented.
A sample that is too small can compromise the reliability of the survey. Unequal balance between questions can also hinder the relevance of the information collected.	Combine the collection methods according to the actors, and give priority to the representativeness of the exchanges over the dedicated time (while ensuring the participation of vulnerable individuals).
Jointly formulating recommendations promotes more relevant and realistic adjustments. The role of the project manager influences the teams' adherence.	Include as many program departments as possible (those responsible for the field teams) as well as support departments under the leadership of the project manager.
Transparent publication of results and follow-up of adjustments builds trust with stakeholders, engaging them in a two-way communication process.	Ensure sharing of results to close the feedback loop through workshops, availability of reports, community meetings, etc.
Identifying the means necessary to implement the adjustments during the workshop makes its implementation more fluid and promotes collective commitment.	Hold joint meetings to review previous recommendations and identify priority and/or sensitive issues.