



NAMIBIA

MCC Learning from

“FINAL REPORT OF THE REGIONAL STUDY AND RESOURCE CENTER (RSRC) ACTIVITY EVALUATION”

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE GROUP (TASCHA), UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON INFORMATION SCHOOL, AUGUST 2020

MCC has identified the following programmatic and evaluation lessons based on the Namibia Regional Study and Resource Center Final Evaluation Report.

PROGRAMMATIC LESSONS

- *Sustainability planning should begin during program development, and continue through implementation, and closeout.* The independent evaluation found the RSRCs lacked comprehensive sustainability plans, which left them ill-prepared to staff, supply, operate, and maintain the facilities. Partner country capacity for sustainability should be assessed during development. In cases where it seems an adequate foundation for sustainability of an investment with clear roles and responsibilities is unlikely to be established during a five-year period, those investments may not be suitable for MCC engagement; where it seems feasible to build requisite capacity, those strategies should be incorporated into the implementation plan. As learned in this case, the very intensive efforts to ensure sustainability undertaken in the last year of the compact were insufficient. Lessons along several specific dimensions of sustainability planning are described further below.
 - *Infrastructure design selection should balance function, aesthetics, and lifecycle costs.* The interim evaluation report noted that the RSRC buildings were impressive and beautiful, and the design attracted patrons to visit. However, it also noted concerns that design choices resulted in excess noise and dust, and complicated maintenance of the facilities. For example, the Ohangwena RSRC’s heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system was in disrepair at the time of interim data collection because the Ministry of Works (MOW), which is tasked with maintaining it, was unfamiliar with its “advanced design.” Similarly, MOW pointed to “the way it was built” as the reason they could not fix a roof leak at one of the facilities, despite having repaired leaks at the other facilities. The final evaluation report reaffirms that maintenance challenges are attributed to design choices

and systems that are too sophisticated for MOW staff to maintain. Underscoring the importance of sustainability, one person interviewed for the evaluation noted how nice a facility looked and also asked “if things that were used are not locally available and this is maybe [the] third or fourth year, what about after ten years?”

While the physical appearance of the RSRCs is important, it is also important to ensure infrastructure meets partner country needs and can be maintained at a reasonable cost post-compact. One solution is to consider Design-Build contracts, when appropriate, as they allow partner countries to select contractors using performance criteria rather than just technical and cost criteria. This approach can give bidders the incentive to balance function, aesthetics, the upfront cost, and lifecycle costs. However, because the contractors would control some of these aspects instead of the owner, Design-Build contracts are best used with owners that are already familiar with them. Also, not all countries allow Design-Build contracts, so they are not necessarily an appropriate solution everywhere.

If MCC and partner countries are aware of the lifecycle costs upfront, they can select options that minimize these costs and also plan for them during implementation, well-ahead of closeout. This approach is being used in the procurement of road construction contractors in the Abidjan Transportation Project. A related solution might be to hire commissioning agents who would be responsible for balancing the user experience with ongoing operational costs, and ensuring the overall intervention comes together as expected—this would be another approach to help balance function, aesthetics, and lifecycle costs as infrastructure intended for a social purpose is often designed and built with little coordination with the sectors that will ultimately use it.

- *Be clear about must-have vs. nice-to-have features.* As MCC assesses partner country capacity to sustain compact investments, it must consider the impact of aspirational project designs on sustainability of the investment. Building on the lesson above, compacts will sometimes experiment with novel solutions that either are not the most cost-effective option or raise questions about the technical merits. Solar panels were an example of this at the RSRCs—some stakeholders wanted to use this opportunity to prove the potential of solar power and other stakeholders objected because the panels were considered unsustainable and unable to supply enough power to run the facilities. Teams can lose considerable time and goodwill debating such issues. At the time of interim data collection, solar panels only worked well at the Oshana RSRC. According to the final report, at least one RSRC’s solar system still is not working. Selecting the more proven and cost-effective solution might have been a more sustainable solution in the long run.

Similarly, the RSRCs arguably did not need mobile library units. The mobile units were delivered at the very end of the compact and according to the final evaluation, were not tested in real-world conditions before handover. Library staff later learned the units were ill-suited to local terrain and weather and are costly to maintain. Like the solar panels, these units were debated extensively during the compact term, with less costly ways of increasing rural access to books and other materials proposed. However, in both cases, the lure of something new or fancy outweighed more practical and economic considerations, such as the capacity of the government to sustain the aspirational features. Future programs should seek to balance the practicality of design solutions with the actual (not assumed) capacity of partner countries to sustain compact investments. Furthermore, given known sustainability challenges in partner countries, MCC should assume a conservative stance when considering actual capacity rather than a more optimistic outlook as was the case here. External, independent reviews could support MCC in assessing the conditions for sustainability and selecting appropriate, conservative designs, particularly in cases where partner countries prefer more ambitious designs that are unlikely to be sustainable.

- *Sustainability requires more than facility maintenance.* Sufficient staffing and material supplies are also critical to maintain the operations of the RSRC facilities. Staffing has been a long-running challenge for the RSRCs—in some locations more than others. The final evaluation attributes the problem to (i) the limited talent pool in Namibia; (ii) a low government pay scale; and (iii) library location. The staffing shortage was exacerbated by Namibia’s hiring moratorium in 2017-18. As noted in the first interim (i.e., “Component 1”) evaluation report, the number of people in Namibia with the experience needed to lead an RSRC was limited such that candidates had to be recruited from other countries. Some stakeholders hoped the University of Namibia (UNAM) would expand its library science program to accept more candidates or extend their program by a year in order to increase the competency level of graduates, but UNAM did not have the personnel to make these changes. MCA-N lobbied for higher salaries during compact implementation, but the evaluation noted an apparent lack of plans to continue trying to make RSRC positions more competitive post-compact. Supply chains were also a known concern before the compact ended, though RSRC staff were not supported in developing plans to address these weaknesses. It might still be possible for the Government of Namibia to resolve the staffing and supply challenges facing the RSRCs but such challenges need to be recognized as the real threats to success and sustainability that they are and addressed accordingly while MCC is still able to provide support.

- *Consider whether the implementation timeline will enable a foundation for success.* The RSRCs were facilities built for a social purpose but because construction started late and continued until the end of the compact, it was not possible to test that social purpose, identify where challenges existed, and help the RSRCs remedy them and prepare for overall sustainability. Also, hiring delays meant that not all RSRC staff received the compact-funded training. MCC was aware the implementation timelines posed risks to the investment, but the decision was made to proceed anyway. The expectation was that qualified staff would work in the facilities and the issues would work themselves out. The final evaluation report indicates that training opportunities have continued to be uneven post-compact and were officially stopped due to Namibia's economic downturn. The evaluation also noted an unrelated failure resulting from the compressed implementation schedule, whereby a generator was delivered to Ohangwena but unconnected until sometime post-compact. The ironic part of this failure is that Ohangwena has failing solar panels and for a long time could not use the generator that was onsite and designated as a backup power source. One solution to challenges resulting from compressed implementation timelines is to bring more resources to bear early in the compact period when MCAs are managing numerous contract actions so delays like this do not occur. Another solution is to be more realistic about what can be accomplished within a given implementation period. It is very difficult to get partner countries to agree to reduce the scope of a program. However, racing toward the finish line does not generally position MCC investments for success, so MCC and partner country governments need to consider carefully whether to proceed if the implementation timeline will be tight.
- *Sustainability plans need to outline funding requirements and proposed funding sources.* MCC has historically tried to encourage partner countries to plan for post-compact operations and maintenance (O&M) by conditioning funding requests on some kind of O&M plan. However, MCC has little control over what happens post-compact and cannot predict things like the economic downturn experienced by Namibia. The RSRCs have some means for revenue generation though it is not enough to cover all of their costs or offset the reduction in budget resulting from Namibia's economic downturn. Currently, RSRC revenue is managed by the Namibia Library and Information Council but it takes time to gain access to those funds, and sometimes requests are denied. The process of sustainability planning may have helped clarify protocols for managing the revenue generated by the RSRCs and ensuring RSRCs did not have resources just beyond their reach while their staff are making purchases using their own personal money for things like soap. MCC programs should support the government in developing a model to fund expected costs

sustainably, including possibly conditioning compact funding on the establishment of a fund that will cover maintenance costs post-compact. However, while this planning is necessary, as mentioned above, building robust infrastructure that minimizes the lifecycle costs will reduce the financial demands of sustainability planning overall and may be one of the most promising solutions available.

- *New systems or service offerings should include well-designed data systems.* The evaluation reported inconsistencies in the administrative data collected within and across the RSRCs. For example, the final report describes the visitor counter at the Oshana RSRC, where patrons who use the restroom or retrieve items from a locker must exit and be counted again upon reentry, resulting in systematically overcounting library visits at that location. The weak data systems at the RSRCs limited the evaluation but more importantly, they also undermine performance management efforts taking place at the individual RSRC and central levels. Future investments in entirely new systems or service offerings like the RSRCs should develop systemwide data systems that are both appropriate given the infrastructure itself (e.g., layouts that position visit counters between the restrooms and the rest of the facility are going to skew the visit counts) and facilitate the types of planning and decision-making that needs to happen at various levels within the system. MCC recognizes the importance of data systems to performance management and nearly all of the agency’s ongoing education interventions include investments in data systems.

EVALUATION LESSONS

- *Independent evaluations should consider the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of investments as development solutions.* MCC’s mission is to reduce poverty through economic growth and it aims to use U.S. taxpayer resources in the most efficient way possible. The agency’s robust M&E system culminates in independent evaluations that intend to assess whether MCC investments were implemented according to plan, achieved their objectives, and did so cost-effectively—ideally evaluations assess the benefit streams and economic logic captured in the cost-benefit analysis (CBA) that supported the investment decision ex ante. No CBA was developed for the Namibia RSRC investment during compact development, so the overall M&E framework, and evaluation design, were not guided by that model. Rather, the evaluation assessed whether the investment was implemented according to plan, and MCC’s Evaluation Management Committee and other stakeholders developed a set of evaluation questions to describe RSRC operations, who the patrons are, and what value they perceive from the facilities. The interim and final evaluation reports offer a rich exploration of these issues. However, in reflecting on agency learning and future application, MCC now recognizes a missed opportunity to explore the cost-effectiveness of the investment and generally assess whether the RSRC “solution” was appropriate given the development problems



being targeted. Today, it would be unusual for investments of this size to be approved without an accompanying CBA; however, with or without an ex ante CBA, future evaluations should assess cost-effectiveness and the extent to which investments addressed the underlying development problem as key parts of MCC's effort to be accountable for and learn from each MCC investment.