

BHAKARI's Approach to Sequencing, Layering, and Integration

AUTHORS

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ACTIVITY/PROGRAM

Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin (BHAKARI)

ORGANIZATION

Mercy Corps

COUNTRY

Nepal

CONTEXT

What is the general context in which your example takes place? What problem were you trying to solve with your adaptive management approach?

BHAKARI, which stands for “Building Hope Along the Karnali River Basin,” is a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance program run by Mercy Corps in Nepal. The three-year program kicked off on October 1, 2020 and is part of a pilot approach to implemented longer-term (>12 months) emergency programs. BHAKARI's three purposes are to increase household-level food availability and access; improve access to sustainable water sources for productive purposes; and reduce the impact of natural disasters. It also has a cross-cutting intentional focus to address the root causes of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI).



ICAAP training in Kamalbazaar, Achham. Photo Credit: BHAKARI

One of the main challenges in managing complex, integrated programs like BHAKARI is that different components of the program can work in silos.

We observed this challenge in the midst of implementing three similar activities, operating in different regions in Nepal that proceeded BHAKARI:

- Promoting Agriculture, Health and Alternative Livelihoods (PAHAL) implemented by Mercy Corps from 2014–2019;
- Sustainable Action for Resilience and Food Security (SABAL) implemented by Save the Children from 2014–2019; and
- Managing Risks through Economic Development (MRED) implemented by Mercy Corps from 2016–2020.

When, for example, the agriculture component of an activity has its own target groups, separate from the target groups for the water, disaster risk reduction, and GESI components, this resulted in wasted time and resources, and a lack of coordination and cohesion among the team. GESI considerations, in particular, need to be integrated across all activities as GESI is so cross-cutting. While this sounds straightforward in theory, it is challenging to accomplish in practice as it requires a great deal of planning and coordination.

So, BHAKARI set out to avoid these same integration challenges by using a more systematic approach to identifying, assessing, and meeting the needs of vulnerable communities.

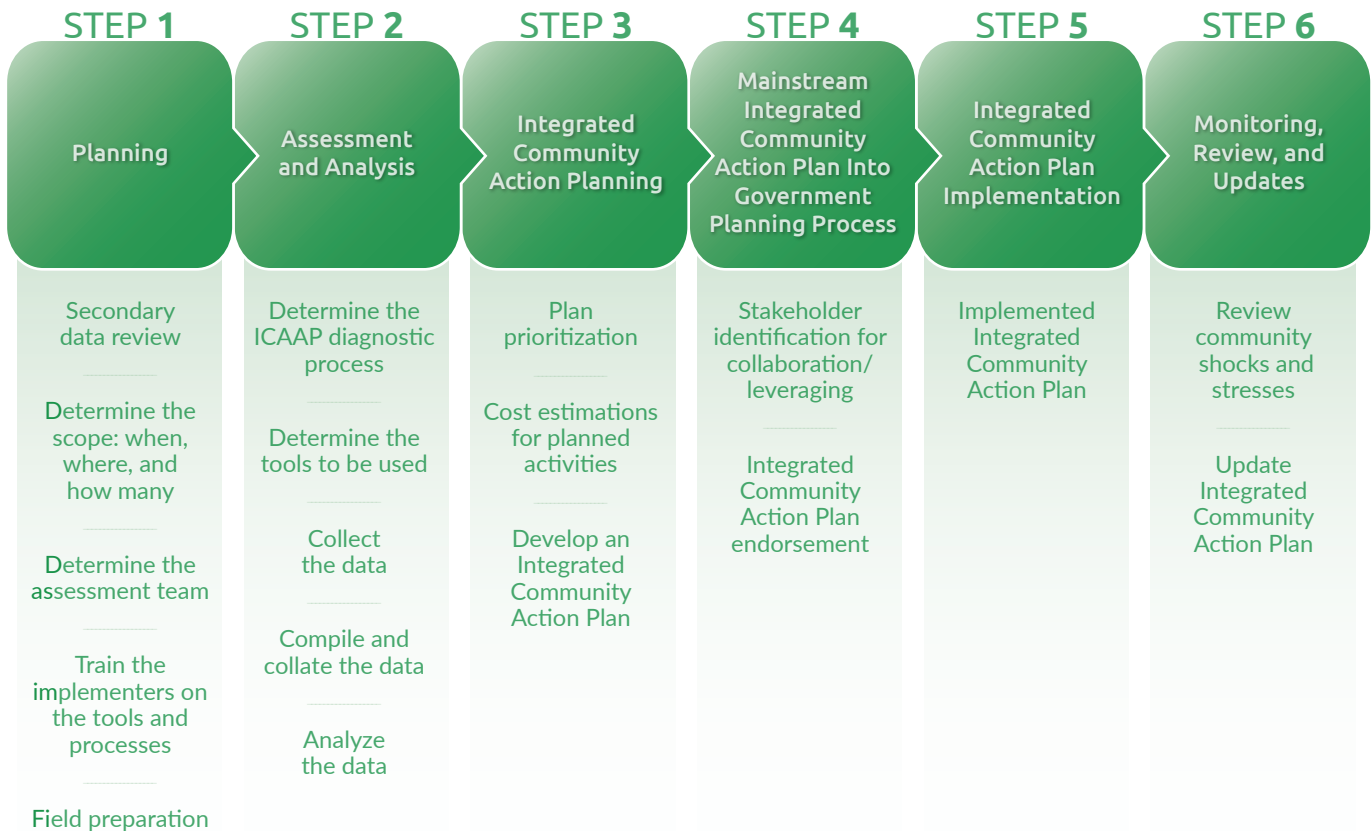
ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

Describe your adaptive management example. Why did you choose to implement it this way?

Both PAHAL and SABAL learned over the first two years of implementation that their existing mechanisms were not sufficient for adaptive management (e.g., work planning in silos with an insufficient resilience lens). Both activities initially struggled to show collective action in achieving resilience outcomes that would lead to household food security. Utilizing collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) sessions, both activities developed simple tools to capture and move toward integration and sustainability. For example, as Mercy Corps' flagship resilience program, PAHAL used a sequencing, layering, and integration approach and integrated monitoring Tools to ensure integration among the activities as well as to ensure layering and sequencing during activity implementation.

As a result, BHAKARI planned from the outset to build on this approach and kicked off the Integrated Community Assessment and Action Planning (ICAAP) method of monitoring during the pre-award phase, rolling it out immediately after USAID finalized the award. ICAAP, which is a participatory process designed to enable practitioners of integrated programs to develop a comprehensive understanding of differential vulnerabilities, system dynamics, shocks, and stresses of target geographies and communities in a program area, was an integral part of the BHAKARI program's start-up and inception design. From the ICAAP process, BHAKARI was able to identify the most vulnerable communities and households for targeting and use a systematic approach to working with them.

Figure 1: ICAAP Action Cycle



IMPACT

Describe the impact your adaptive management approach has had on your activity/program and its objectives. If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The primary outcome of our adaptive management approach was using the ICAAP method to avoid previous pitfalls with program integration.

The following principles of the ICAAP method helped to address previous integration challenges:

- **Macro to Micro** – The BHAKARI program followed a macro to micro approach in its ICAAP process. It first undertook a wide context analysis of vulnerability, food insecurity, and markets, followed by a Palika (district)-level desk review, and then participatory community action planning to examine the detailed local context.
- **GESI First** – The BHAKARI program's GESI First approach considers existing gender and social marginalization and engages directly with excluded individuals, empowering them with targeted information, tools, and skills. The intention is to support the community's engagement with local disaster risk reduction strategies through Community User Groups (including Water Users and Local Farmers Groups) and prioritizing marginalized individuals, especially women, elderly, ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities.

We began the approach with intentional household selection. Then, we created an integrated design for community and household-based activities, targeted interventions directly for the most excluded and vulnerable populations, bought local government along as critical champions of this approach, and embraced continued CLA from evidence.

Through the ICAAP method, we designed the BHAKARI program to be:

- **Integrated** – The BHAKARI program was designed to ensure all sectors—including disaster risk reduction, water access, agriculture, and natural resource management—are closely aligned, complementary, and mutually reinforcing.
- **Participatory** – The BHAKARI program recognizes that all program participants are key drivers to community resilience and development, including women, men, girls, and boys, and the most vulnerable. Inclusion is critical to sustained engagement in community plans beyond the life of BHAKARI. Full inclusion will also ensure they meaningfully participate in the design and implementation of program interventions.
- **Coordinated & Collaborative** – The program focuses on coordination and collaboration with stakeholders—including government bodies, private sector, peer agencies, and communities—to enhance local capacity, link programs with local government programs and processes, leverage resources, and support collaborative approaches in program implementation. These approaches/strategies aim to build local ownership, confidence, and sustainability within the community members and stakeholders.
- **Community-Led** – The ICAAP process aimed to empower the community in assessing and determining its priorities. Hence, we designed the process to be led by the community through the program and local implementing staff support.
- **Local-Context Specific** – Each community is unique. To meet each community's needs, we will use the local context to determine the assessment process—including the steps we should take, the areas we should visit, and the tool we should use.



ICAAP training in Gamgadi, Mugu.
Photo Credit: BHAKARI

REFLECTION

What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?

Several factors enabled our adaptive management approach. First, it helped that we built the BHAKARI proposal on learnings from PAHAL, SABAL, and MRED, and that staff from these previous activities became the core team for BHAKARI from the beginning. This institutional memory was key for buy-in to our approach. Additionally, documentation, experimentation, and learning around PAHAL's challenges with integration led to the use of the ICAAP method from the very beginning. Using the ICAAP method helped us avoid previous challenges. We recommend it to other emergency or longer-term resilience food security programs that also grapple with integration, sequencing, and targeting challenges.

TOOLS

What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach? Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.

The PAHAL knowledge management website, which captured lessons learned from that activity, was an essential resource. In addition, we used Zoom to host the pre-implementation learning session and [Padlet](#) as a virtual whiteboard for collaboration during the sessions.