

Emergency Capacity Building Project 'Case study of good practice'

Standard Case study

Mercy Corps – Digital Library

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1. Introduction

Operating in more than 40 countries around the world, Mercy Corps (MC) has a widely dispersed workforce of 3500 people, the majority of whom are national staff. In this context, sharing information efficiently across the organization was a significant challenge. Field staff often spent time seeking information and waiting for it to be supplied; materials were reinvented locally when they could have been provided by other offices; information about lessons learned which could have informed better decisions was not widely available. It was recognized that miscommunication, inefficiency and duplication of effort were reducing the potential impact of programs and causing frustration to staff.

MC therefore set up a two-year project to create a Digital Library (DL). Its aim is to support high quality programming by facilitating the sharing of information and knowledge and preserving the organization's institutional memory. Staff have immediate, 24-hour access from anywhere in the world, with the ability not only to access existing information but also to share ideas and lessons learned.

2. About the Digital Library (DL)

The DL brings together in one place a range of information and resources relating to programming, program and office management, MC projects and sector-specific knowledge. In addition to internal MC documents, materials from external sources and links to Internet resources are included. The main elements of the DL comprise:

- **Program development and management:** documents to support activities such as developing proposals, managing and evaluating projects; related training and workshop materials; tools for assessments, monitoring and evaluation, planning and tracking; lessons learned.

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- **Proposals, grants, reports:** documents relating to specific donor projects, including assessments, case studies, concept papers, DIPs, evaluations, log frames, proposals, reports, work plans.
- **Agency administration:** documents to support the running of a field office, such as finance manuals and forms, human resources materials.
- **Public information:** documents available to the public including the annual report, fact sheets and newsletters.
- **Reference/resources:** external resources and/or links to Internet resources, including donor guidelines and regulations; SPHERE; sector-specific information.

All MC staff have access to the DL, which is available on a secure web site and on DVD. It is updated daily on the web and quarterly on DVD. While the library has been designed to be easy to search and can be used quite effectively without prior training, a short briefing for users has proved helpful in maximizing its benefits.

As well as being as a reference point, staff can contribute materials which then go through an indexing and, where appropriate, vetting process before being added to the collections.

3. Background

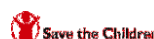
A full-time librarian and part-time technical support person led this project. The librarian carried out a survey of information requirements and implemented the resulting project plan, with the support of a broad-based focus group who provided feedback and assisted in decision-making as the project progressed. Managing the changes the DL would bring for staff was one of the major challenges of the project and the librarian addressed this by giving presentations and meeting with staff visiting from the field.

The DL uses open-source software which was customized by the technical support person to meet MC's needs. This included creating the facility for staff to submit new documents, addition of a digital photographs collection and the ability to search all collections at once. The team also gave the site a distinctive identity, using color and design which would be acceptable internationally and would load quickly in areas where Internet connection is more difficult or expensive.

The Library was rolled out nine months after commencement of the project, with a first release of 350 documents. Training sessions were held for all HQ staff and presentations made at MC's worldwide conferences.

The costs associated with this project were approximately 85,000 USD for development and implementation of the first release, with current annual expenditure around 125,000 – 150,000 USD.

The DL is maintained by the full-time librarian with ongoing part-time technical support.



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4. Evaluation of success

Introduction of the DL has enabled MC to disseminate information efficiently throughout the organization, reducing delays caused by searching and waiting for information, and eradicating duplication of effort in re-creating the same types of documents. Sharing the same information across the organization has helped to standardize procedures and supported office set-up.

The success of the DL is demonstrated by the fact that usage has steadily increased over time. One emergency team member reported, "I am able to share information easily with colleague agencies and donors and I don't have to depend on my computer or files for this information all the time. This resource also houses the most up-to-date information."

Immediate access to comprehensive, reliable information has enabled field staff to act more effectively. Another emergency team member states, "...having things all in one place, not only helps our institutional memory but it really helps us move quickly in the field. The less time we spend searching for files or e-mailing people to get old proposals, the more time we have to do the life saving work..."

Accessible worldwide, the DL connects people across the organization, making it easier for them to share ideas and to participate in learning with and from one another. In this way, organizational knowledge is strengthened and made available through contributions of lessons learned and examples of good local practice.

5. Conclusion

MC's innovative approach to utilizing available technology has produced a highly effective way of sharing information across the organization in order to enhance the quality of programming and operations. Offering immediate and easy access to a single, comprehensive body of resources, the DL has created a knowledge-sharing community better equipped to act responsively in the field.

This case study originated from [Mercy Corps](#), and has been prepared by People In Aid in partnership with the Emergency Capacity Building Project (www.ecbproject.org).