May 2017

Evaluation of UNICEF Supply Division's Supply Community Strategy

Executive Summary

Executive summary

Since 2008, UNICEF Supply Division (SD) has been implementing its Supply Community Strategy to address the findings from the 2007 Evaluation of the Global Supply Function (SFE), which concluded that Supply staff felt isolated and had limited possibilities for professional development or sharing experience. SD commissioned this evaluation to reflect on the progress made by the Supply Community Strategy since its inception, to assess the results achieved, and to identify areas for improvement.

This external evaluation used a mixed method approach, including desk research, a global survey, interviews with staff from different functions/field offices, interviews with comparable international organizations, and participatory workshops with Supply staff.

The Supply Community Strategy has developed incrementally, beginning as an initial idea about the strategic importance of forming a Supply Community, without clear objectives, targets or activities. It was initiated by the SD Director's Office, then grew into an organizational strategy with three focus areas: learning and development; knowledge sharing and community building; and career progression and mobility.

The main objective of the strategy is to develop a community of Supply staff, comprised of personnel across HQ, SD and the Regional and Country Offices. This community should form the basis for learning and development, knowledge sharing, and career development, and, through these activities, encourage a sense of professional belonging among Supply staff.

The evaluation finds evidence that the strategy has improved the availability of required skills in the organization, contributed to cooperation and knowledge sharing, and improved the system of career progression. This has contributed to the creation of a community and to increased self-awareness and engagement of Supply staff with staff in Programme and Operations. The findings are presented in more detail below.

Learning and development

Activities in this area seek to develop a corporate Supply curriculum to ensure that the skills of Supply staff align with the skills that will be needed in the future. This objective and its ensuring actions are a relevant response to the challenges identified in the 2007 evaluation of the UNICEF Supply function.

The Supply Community Strategy created a standard corporate curriculum and put in place measures to identify skills that will be needed in the future. This changed the approach to learning, enacting an annual consultation of the learning governance group, an annual analysis of staff statistics, and the 2014 skills gap analysis. Moreover, the strategy has promoted additional investments in professional development, helped grow the commitment to training among staff, and incorporated principles of effective adult learning in Supply training. The evaluation, however, noted the following challenges:

- Not all Supply staff participate in trainings, and certain groups participate less than others. Particularly, G staff and French-speaking staff participated less in training opportunities. Operational concerns and the lack of support by line managers are found as the main barriers to full participation.
- The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will have an impact on the future role and activities of the Supply function and the knowledge and skills needed. While Supply staff in the field appreciate SD's current expertise, a clear knowledge strategy towards future areas of expertise has not been defined.
- Learning activities are not formally linked to professional and career development, and it is not made explicit how the accumulated learning outcomes help staff to qualify for their next career step. Clear learning paths are not defined at organizational level, which is particularly problematic for newcomers to Supply.

The change in skills demanded by shifting priorities requires UNICEF and Supply staff to integrate learning into their daily work. However, the concept of learning within SD remains considerably related to formal training (e.g., provision of training courses). More attention should be focused on

implementing the goals defined by the Professional Learning Strategy 2015-2017 to further stimulate non-formal/informal learning activities, such as teamwork, knowledge sharing, and mentoring in the workplace.

Knowledge sharing and community building

In this area of focus, the Supply Community aims to reduce the isolation of staff and increase the use of organizational knowledge. The evaluation finds that the knowledge sharing activities enacted under the strategy are relevant and appropriate to addressing the challenges identified in the 2007 evaluation.

To better share knowledge online, SD introduced Hotspots/Supply Faces as user-driven online platforms and used the Intranet as a centralized information hub. Both platforms have made relevant contributions to a knowledge sharing culture, and both have enabled staff to use channels of communication that overcome the largely hierarchical methods described by the 2007 SFE. The evaluation made the following key findings:

- The online knowledge sharing platforms (Hotspots and Supply Faces) were introduced without an explicit plan for communication and change management, and without specific targets to be met. Instead, their adoption depended on the voluntary adoption by community members. While the number of profiles is growing, user contribution to the platforms is declining, with lower unique contributors and fewer active user profiles. The absence of a clear communication plan eroded the effectiveness of Hotspots and Supply Faces over the years.
- Survey respondents (almost one out of five) feel that there is no open and frank knowledge sharing between different hierarchical levels, and staff fear to be seen posting "silly questions" or "wrong answers" in public forums. Currently, Supply staff do not feel sufficiently empowered to take full advantage of the capabilities of the various platforms to act as connectors.
- The Country Support Unit is a key interface for staff and is highly valued in resolving work-related problems. Supply staff in the field can email the Country Support Unit, and generally receive rapid and adequate response.

Currently, knowledge sharing depends largely on the goodwill of individuals. Implementation could be strengthened to achieve its potential as a community builder – for instance, by focusing on critical Supply function knowledge domains. This also implies stronger governance, guidance on how knowledge is shared within the organization, and requires that knowledge sharing be more strongly embedded in institutional procedures, rules and norms.

Career development and mobility

The Supply Community also undertook initiatives to increase opportunities for career development. This objective and its activities are relevant in view of the challenges identified in the SFE, and the approaches taken by the wider UNICEF organization. The evaluation made the following key findings:

- Deployments and stretch assignments are effective ways to broaden the perspectives of staff members about their regular work. The increasing participation of G staff in deployments has measurably contributed to a higher sense of belonging in this staff category. For IP staff, this work offers valuable experience that can help them in applying for future field positions, thus improving the overall mobility within the organization. Deployments, stretch assignments and staff rotation are unique opportunities for professional development that could also contribute to increasing the mobility of staff. In the future, these should be combined into a more structured approach to on-the-job learning.
- Participants in the Planned Mobility Exercises are satisfied and have been placed successfully in other posts. However, due to their small scale, the exercises did not succeed in reducing the overall number of staff that overstayed their tours of duty – particularly at SD. While considerable improvements can still be made, the exercises have contributed to better awareness of barriers to mobility. This has improved SD's potential to respond more effectively to the newly introduced mobility policies by DHR.
- Staff are well aware of career opportunities and are relatively satisfied with the opportunities for growth. However, a minority points to limits to career progression, mainly due to the limited

number of higher positions available in SD or Supply functions in the field. Moreover, the types of work performed by Supply staff of similar levels at SD (specialized technical work) and in the field (management) are considerably different and cannot be easily swapped.

Effective career development policies reduce the need to recruit staff from outside the organization. Encouraging participation in deployments, stretch assignments, and stimulating staff rotation all facilitate the sharing of experiences and the diffusion of knowledge from one location to another. Ultimately, well-designed career development policies have the potential to contribute to a greater sense of professional belonging in the Supply Community and to better performance.

Towards a future Supply Community Strategy

This evaluation concludes that SD has shown leadership and vision by establishing a Supply Community Strategy and the evidence collected shows that the strategy has delivered results. Based on an analysis of the evaluation results, and a case study approach in community development in other international development organizations, a number of recommendations are defined that contribute to improving the future community strategy in addition to the activities already implemented.

Recommendation 1: Create sub-communities for specific strategic knowledge domains. To better ensure the relevance of the community as it develops, SD is recommended to:

a) Create subject-specific communities (e.g., Capacity Development, Logistics, Vaccines, Nutrition, WASH, Emergency, and Market development) to mobilize SD knowledge and expertise. Begin on a small scale, by selecting one large and one small innovative community. The existing structure of Working Groups within SD may serve as the first suggestions for knowledge domains/subject-specific communities. Staff should not be discouraged from setting up a community in other areas, but communities should be overseen and coordinated to avoid redundancy. Encourage participation by issuing guidelines that promote staff involvement, trust and recognition.

b) Expand the community by inviting external stakeholders (e.g., development partners, experts/academics, country administrations) to join a co-creation process in external strategic knowledge domains (e.g., vaccines, nutrition).

c) Develop a "work plan" for each "formal" community that includes specific objectives, a first year agenda, and indicators for success at the end of the year.

d) Appoint a community manager for each community to guide it through its growth from stage 1 to 2 (SCOM index). Successful communities have nominated staff to welcome and invite members to join, call for discussions, validate contents, guard community values and engage members in defining what the community is about. Without such a moderator, community members could easily feel a lack of recognition for their contributions. Moreover, without moderation the exchanges within the community could appear positive but would insufficiently contribute to organizational objectives, and would do little extend the knowhow of global Supply staff.

e) The CSU is well-positioned to play a role in community management and therefore should convey meetings, contribute to capacity building efforts and actively seek ambassadors to promote knowledge and learning approaches.

f) However, be prudent with upfront allocation of resources to communities. In considering allocating financial support, the evaluation of a work plan and its strategic goal should be the first relevant criterion, followed by assessing the interest and demand for such a community. A Community Readiness tool (see Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) could support the decision whether to start up a community.

Recommendation 2: Develop an approach to foster a culture of knowledge sharing and learning. More guidance must be provided by SD leadership to engage members in building a Supply Community. Therefore, SD is recommended to:

a) Encourage SD staff to engage directly and without hierarchical restrictions with peers and external colleagues to share ideas, solve problems and realize challenges by connecting,

communicating and/or collaborating with each other. Such efforts should be coordinated within the wider organization to avoid the creation of new "artificial technology silos."

b) Promote that knowledge creation, sharing and learning with Supply colleagues is the responsibility of all staff.

c) Review job descriptions for Supply functions and ensure that the principles for knowledge sharing and learning are embedded in them. Encourage knowledge sharing behaviour by appealing to NYHQ to adjust Performance/Appraisal Reviews to take into account specific knowledge and learning objectives.

Recommendation 3: Identify and remove barriers to participation in Supply Community learning activities. The evaluation shows that not all Supply staff participate in trainings and certain groups participate less than others (such as recently recruited staff, G staff, and French speaking staff). Therefore, SD is recommended to:

a) Better define and communicate the concept of learning in the organization, based on the principles that learning includes formal training (i.e., training courses) as well as informal and non-formal learning (such as participating in events, working groups, and knowledge sharing). Build consensus within the organization on what is considered learning and empower staff, managers and offices to define their learning needs.

b) Regularly monitor the inclusiveness of learning, career development and knowledge sharing activities for Supply staff (at least once every two years). While learning requires a personal commitment, low participation needs better monitoring. This can be done by better monitoring performance on the UNICEF rule to invest at least 5 per cent of time in learning and development.

c) Assess the barriers (psychological and situational), that staff experience when participating in learning, knowledge sharing and mobility actions, and undertake systematic and individualized actions to reduce the factors that limit participation.

Recommendation 4: Create enabling environments for practice-based and informal learning. For this, SD could consider rolling out the Work-Based Learning components of the L&D plan in following steps:

a) Create an enabling learning environment where formal, non-formal and informal learning at work is defined as strategic investment, by providing dedicated time and resources for learning and recognizing investments made in learning in annual performance reviews. Furthermore, it is important to embed learning in the daily delivery process of projects, programs and work streams and better capture learning that takes place on the job (through learning reports, reviews, blogs, handovers, etc.).

b) Further facilitate practice-based learning, by setting up mentoring programs or supporting job shadowing/rotation activities. Link experienced Supply staff to less experienced staff (within communities, and even between offices, or between Programme and Supply functions) to ensure informal transfer of knowledge, social capital, and the psychosocial support relevant to work, career, and/or professional development. Increasing mobility requires experiences to be documented, shared and transferred to improve the process of "getting up to speed" to fulfil assignments.

c) Track progress on formal, non-formal and informal learning by, for example, using learning biographies (on AGORA) that can be attached to the Learning Development Plans, feeding career discussions among staff and managers.

Recommendation 5: Define learning pathways that support professional development of Supply staff. Currently, there are no clear learning pathways available to guide staff in their selection and prioritizing courses. Learning pathways are specifically helpful for new recruits. Therefore, SD should consider:

a) Defining a number of learning pathways that enable staff to make clearer choices about the formal (Learning Calendar) and informal (team work, knowledge sharing, deployments,

stretch assignments, staff rotation, mentoring) learning activities to follow and for what purpose. These could be linked to career steps as well as new roles and activities of Supply staff in communities (being a leader, expert, coordinator, etc.).

b) Improving the introduction and induction period for new recruits. It could at least provide a "menu" of learning pathways that new staff could follow when entering a new Supply post. A mentor/coach (see recommendation 4b) could guide the recruit and ensure informal transfer of knowledge.

Recommendation 6: Improve monitoring of the implementation of the Supply Community Strategy. The monitoring and evaluation framework of the Supply Community Strategy has been defined too narrowly in terms of immediate outputs, and did not define measurable baselines to assess effectiveness. Therefore, SD should consider:

a) Taking the proposed indicators as presented in the "Theory of Change" as a starting point for the further refinement of the monitoring framework (see annex I) and the improved monitoring of costs of activities.

b) Improving benchmarking with comparable international development organizations that implemented community strategies (such as those in chapter 6). A valuable entry for this can be to become a member of "The State of Community Management Research" (SCOM).