

MANAGING CHANGE AT SAVE THE CHILDREN

SAVE THE CHILDREN IS the world's leading independent organization for children, working in almost 120 countries. Established in 1919 to feed children facing starvation after World War I, the nonprofit organization has improved the lives of hundreds of millions of children around the world. Save the Children continues to work to save children's lives, to fight for their rights, and to help them fulfill their potential. Through its network of partners, the organization can scale up assistance as needed—from 100 specialized staff members to thousands of volunteers—in a matter of days. When the massive earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, for instance, Save the Children already had 400 staff members in the country—and they initiated response activities within hours. Over the next few days, Save the Children brought in about 75 members of its rapid-deployment team from around the world, and within weeks it had more than 1,000 people working with the earthquake victims.

Despite successes such as these, however, leaders at Save the Children believed that the organization could have an even greater impact if it restructured to better meet the needs of a changing world. The organization had long operated as a loose alliance of member countries that operated independently and didn't always have the same objectives or strategic priorities. In Ethiopia alone, Save the Children had seven separate

offices, each run by a different member country. This weakened the organization's ability to speak with one voice and to work effectively with governments, nongovernmental organizations, and other partners. Most important, the lack of alignment was diluting Save the Children's vital work for children. All the member countries agreed about this sobering reality—and the need to correct it.

Driven by the overarching goal of having a greater impact on the lives of children around the world, Save the Children embarked on a major transformation, drawing on proven change-management techniques from the private sector.

A Vision for the Future

Committed to the need for change, the member countries worked together to develop a shared vision of a unified organization that would speak with one voice and deliver greater impact. This vision became the driving force for change, guiding Save the Children through the inevitable negotiations, compromises, and difficult decisions.

At the heart of the transformation was a new entity—Save the Children International—that would bring all the international programs together within a single line-management structure. In the past, the international programs of the independently oper-

ating member countries were managed by more than 20 regional offices. These were consolidated into just seven regional offices. (See the exhibit, “The New Model Has a Single Global Center and Seven Regions.”) The new model would also allow staff members to respond more quickly to program needs by giving them greater freedom to make decisions at the frontline.

The shared vision, new organization, and coordinated leadership allowed Save the Children to achieve four key benefits: greater alignment through a shared vision, values, and objectives; a globally coordinated voice; better mobilization of resources and expertise; and more effective and efficient operations.

Greater Alignment

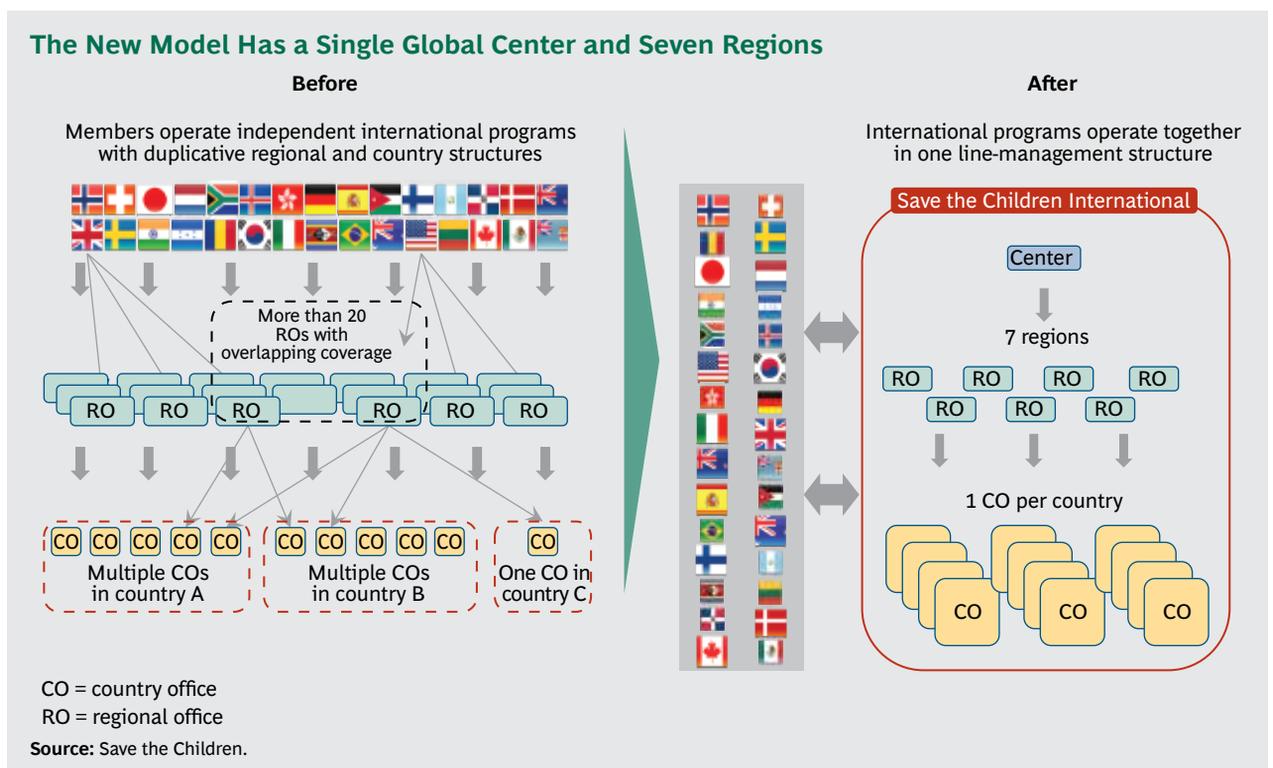
The shared vision, values, and objectives serve as a compass to help direct Save the Children’s efforts. Member countries now have an opportunity to come together to discuss and agree on priorities and to debate which activities to pursue and where to direct their resources. At the same time, they’re sharing their expertise and bringing more focus to their efforts. For instance, after the 2011 floods in Cambodia, Save the Children

members worked together to address the educational needs of children whose schools had been destroyed. One member had more expertise in humanitarian response, while another had a closer relationship with the country’s government. By pooling their strengths, members were able to quickly set up temporary schools in homes and public buildings, and even to drive change in government policy. Now Cambodia’s schools are required to plan for humanitarian crises by identifying temporary learning spaces in advance of disasters rather than responding after the fact.

Although still in its early days, Save the Children’s greater alignment is already delivering tangible results. In 2012, the organization responded to 77 humanitarian crises—up from 53 in 2011 and more than in any previous year.

A Globally Coordinated Voice

Advocacy on behalf of children is an important aspect of Save the Children’s heritage. Before the transformation, the member countries talked to governments, policymakers, and other NGOs at different times about different things. Members were also communicating different messages to the media. Now,



with communication efforts centrally coordinated, the results have been impressive. In 2012, Save the Children coordinated a global campaign against malnutrition and hunger, speaking to millions of people worldwide and influencing world leaders on the issue. More than 20,000 runners in 45 countries took part in a global Race for Survival—the biggest child-participation event Save the Children has ever set up. It was also the first public event in which girls and boys in Afghanistan ran side by side. A one-day global Tweet chat spanned 12 time zones and reached 5.2 million followers.

Without the coordinated global presence of Save the Children, the campaign and race wouldn't have achieved the same degree of scale and visibility. The transformation allowed Save the Children to speak more loudly and reach more people.

Better Mobilization of Resources and Expertise

Another priority of the transition was to increase sharing of expertise and knowledge so that teams don't reinvent the wheel for each project or duplicate efforts throughout the organization. Moreover, efforts in education, health, child rights, child protection, and other key areas are now centrally coordinated to ensure that strategies are consistent and resources are optimized.

The new organization also makes it easier to work with corporate partners and to leverage their resources. For example, being part of a global organization helped Save the Children Canada secure a five-year \$39.8 million partnership with the MasterCard Foundation (MCF) to support education for young people in five African countries. This is the largest grant MCF has ever given to an international NGO for development work. MCF was interested in a partnership with Save the Children because of the organization's global network of education experts, the combined efforts of three members, and Save the Children International's capacity to deliver. This program was designed jointly by the MasterCard Foundation and Save the Children and aims to support 45,000 young people through education and into employment.

More Efficient, Effective Operations

One of Save the Children's critical problems was a lack of consistency and standardization across the member countries in key processes and systems such as financial reporting, IT, and human resources. Several members had different fiscal year-end dates, which added to the confusion. Translating, updating, and consolidating financial data was an onerous task and a heavy administrative burden—but essential to get right to ensure maximum focus on what really mattered: implementing quality programs for children.

Lack of standardization was another problem. Quality and effectiveness varied substantially from country to country. Countries that were pilot testing the new model feared that until these differences were addressed, real progress would be hampered. Besides adoption of the same fiscal year by all member countries, processes and systems were standardized in two critical areas: financial management and annual planning and budgeting.

Applying Change Management Principles

Implementing this degree of change in a relatively short period was an enormous achievement. To succeed, Save the Children looked to the private sector for insight and applied proven change-management principles. These included the following:

Create a shared vision. Many change efforts fail because of a lack of alignment among the organization's leaders on goals and how to achieve them. These problems typically stem from an absence of vision and a lack of clarity as to why change is necessary. Save the Children gained agreement on the need for ambitious change before moving forward. And by involving all the member countries in developing that vision, the organization ensured that all parties felt a sense of ownership—and a commitment to the program's success. Having a shared purpose that everyone believed in—increasing Save the Children's impact on behalf of children—was crucial through the ups and downs of the change process.



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Build momentum with early wins. Save the Children was flexible about how to roll out the changes to the country offices, moving quickly in countries that were ready—such as Nepal and Afghanistan—while allowing others to come later. The early, high-profile successes proved to the skeptics that the new model would work and that the lessons learned could be applied to other offices to keep the program from stalling.

Shorten time to results. Many change efforts ultimately fail because they take too long and energy flags, or leaders turn their attention to other priorities. Save the Children made the decision to make rapid implementation a priority, with the changes almost fully implemented between January 2011 and December 2012. This ambitious timeline drove a sense of urgency and ensured that there were always frequent and tangible successes to report. This energized the organization, boosted morale, and ensured that momentum continued to build.

Commit sufficient resources. Many organizations undermine their change efforts by failing to commit enough full-time people. By assigning a critical mass of dedicated staffers, leaders send a clear message throughout the organization that the transformation is a priority. That commitment greatly increases the odds of success. Save the Children committed 18 full-time change managers on the frontline, supported by a project management team of as many as 14 people at a time. With sufficient resources, change programs gain traction more quickly and show results sooner, which helps

build momentum and enthusiasm.

Communicate clearly—even when the news is bad. A strong and ongoing communications plan is important to maintain program visibility, deliver progress reports, and maintain enthusiasm. At Save the Children, some change leaders initially made the mistake of sharing only positive news and not communicating when schedules slipped or bureaucracy was slowing progress in

certain countries. It soon became apparent that selective reporting was building distrust and cynicism among staff. The organization realized that if people were to believe the good news, they also had to be told the bad news. This transparency helped build trust and support.

SAVE the Children's experience shows that the change management principles used in the private sector can also be applied in the nonprofit world. The organization has come a long way but is not resting on its laurels. Jasmine Whitbread, CEO of Save the Children International, explained, "We're just at the starting blocks. We've built a platform from which we can now deliver for children." Today the organization is speaking with a global voice, making better use of its strengths and resources, and having a greater impact than ever on the lives of the most marginalized children in the world.

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