2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Re-Scoping a Project While Maintaining its Core Objective

Name:

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Organization:

Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International

Summary:

After more than two years of negotiating for permission to initiate a civil society strengthening project in Laos, civil society being a highly sensitive space in which to work, the Lao government informed RTI that their project would not be approved. RTI faced a stark choice: terminate the Local Solutions Support (LSS) project before any technical activities began; or significantly re-scope the original partners, approach, activities, and indicators. USAID afforded RTI tremendous leeway in resolving this challenge. However, to continue the award we had to keep the original objective of strengthening local organizational- and human-capacity to identify and implement local solutions to priority socioeconomic challenges.

Rather than following the original project design of RTI directly providing capacity development services to independent Laotian non-profit associations (NPAs), and activity grants for socioeconomic projects; we drew upon USAID's localization emphasis, and adapted the project design to collaborate with Laotian universities as pillars of capacity development service-provision and local socioeconomic development though a service learning framework.

The four main Laotian universities with which we worked had almost no experience partnering on a USAID project; nor providing off-campus capacity development services, leading local development activities, or conducting research to influence public policy. RTI applied the CLA approaches of Adaptive Management and Internal and External Collaboration to first re-design the entire project and learn to work with a new ministry and university partners; and then to adapt and customize our technical tools, management approaches, and results framework to fit government, partner, and USAID requirements and expectations.

1. **WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) or opportunities prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?**

RTI has applied CLA approaches at every stage of LSS, including a complete redesign. Drawing on our knowledge of the Laotian context, new partner ideas, and existing staff relationships; our primary outcome was to secure project approval from the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), and successfully launch LSS. Continued use of CLA approaches has helped us achieve the following outcomes. 1) Collaboration and Networking: Our redesigned project prioritized changing systems in Laotian higher education institutions (HEI). To do this, we used an innovative service learning model, whereby universities would be hubs of social and economic development in their regions. This required networking with civic organizations, businesses, and government entities. The HEIs now offer advisory services and research to the private sector, management training to government employees, and capacity development services to businesses and NPAs. 2) Shared Learning and Continuous Improvement: RTI helped create a combined team of 40 Master Trainers and Advisors (MTAs) within our four university partners. This team generates revenue for the HEIs, and links to broader society. We started a twinning program where the top performing MTAs work with less experienced ones to improve the entire team's performance. We also created peer-to-peer monitoring forms for self-evaluation and continuous improvement, and a quality assurance certification standard for the MTA training and services. 3) Adaptive Management: Our team's weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual meetings include reflection and revision sessions on the macro project theory-of-change and tactical activities, curriculum content, and efforts toward localized sustainability. As a result, our HEI partners are on track to meet quality assurance standards of the ASEAN University Network, the government is hiring them for training and research, and they are generating new revenue.

2. **What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?**

Adaptive Management

External Collaboration

3. **HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?**

Our case details the CLA steps we applied in response to our greatest challenge (revising and securing government approval to implement LSS) and our greatest opportunity (building upon an opening within the Laotian HEI system for local and international engagement).

Project for Approval: After over two years of ongoing changes to our LSS work scope in response to requests from our Lao government partners, the Lao government sent RTI a final rejection notification. With three years remaining in a planned five-year program, we began immediate scenario planning with USAID, with the most likely outcome being the termination of LSS. We conducted rapid political economy, stakeholder, and institutional analyses to identify areas in which we would have political support, and partners capable of achieving the primary objective of strengthening organizational and human capital for local solutions in Laos. We looked at national associations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Women's Union, and teacher networks. We also assessed the feasibility of working through all private sector partners, but the government informed us that LSS would not be approved as an economic growth project. Ultimately, we developed the idea of working with the National University of Laos (NOUL) as a type of higher education project that would deliver capacity development services to local organizations. Working with a core group of influential allies including the Business School Dean and NUOL Vice President, we re-designed the program with a new ministry partner: MOES. In order to secure critical government and university stakeholder buy-in for the new project, RTI was presented with four requirements: (1) work with all four Laotian public universities; (2) support the advanced policy-research capabilities of university partners; (3) empower a multi-stakeholder implementation management committee (IMC) with advisory, consent, and decision-making authority; and (4) strictly follow the objectives and activities of the newly agreed-upon project scope. RTI used a relationship-building and compromise approach to ensure that all voices were heard, and key stakeholder interests were addressed. Our approach was effective, and RTI secured government approval for the project a few months after starting our scenario planning.

A New Model—Service Learning: In securing approval for a new project in partnership with the four national universities and MOES, RTI had been given a unique opportunity. Laotian universities were largely isolated and poorly resourced. However, they had a mandate for greater financial and operational autonomy though the current Education and Sports Sector Development Plan. RTI and our university partners embraced this new mandate. The first thing we did was co-design and award capacity-development and action grants for each of the four university partners. Work scopes were broadly defined, and payment was milestone based. This gave RTI and our partners space to identify priorities, conduct activities, and then further customize and adapt future activities based on what we learned. Next, we conducted department and university-wide capacity assessments and action plans. The universities are measurably improving their managerial, instructional, and operational capacities, and look to improve their international rankings. As the final year of the project approaches, our team conducted a performance assessment and convened an annual IMC meeting to discuss lessons learned, progress made, and plans for the final year. During these sessions we identified training and research priorities including artificial intelligence, climate forecasting with trade models, meditative strategic planning, and labor market analysis. Regarding HEIs' sustainability, RTI is working with our MTA teams to create an Asset Mapping and Revenue Framework to assess priorities and inform market-responsive business planning, as identify realistic sources for university revenue-generation. Internally, LSS also uses an annual PULSE Survey with project staff and partner teams to anonymously gauge satisfaction and ideas for managerial improvement.

4. RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.

We know you may have answers in mind for both questions; However please choose one to highlight as part of this case story

A. DEVELOPM ENT RESULTS

Prior to using a CLA approach, we did not have a project. After conducting a deep contextual analysis, RTI employed several CLA sub-components such as scenario planning, revisiting the theory-of-change, network development, setting decision-making markers, and wielding comprehensive collaboration. Combined, these initiatives established a pathway in which the previously dormant LSS project secured enthusiastic university-partner and government buy-in, and was approved within months.

Following our successful outcome of securing project approval, we integrated CLA elements into all aspects of our project implementation. Notably we made sure to use M&E for learning, we methodically used after action reviews and pause and reflect sessions to adapt programming, we emphasized the importance of collaborating though networks, and we created a culture of continuous learning and improvement. These CLA techniques contributed to an array of development outcomes, including a newly strengthened network of Laotian universities that are outward looking; and making progress on operational capacity, educational quality assurance, advanced policy research, and financial sustainability. Our evidence of CLA contributing to these development outcomes comes from our ongoing M&E; an external project evaluation; and regular surveying of staff, stakeholders, and MTAs. At the point of LSS approval, USAID gave RTI a MEL system quality assessment. These early findings were used to build a rigorous performance indicator foundation for the project. Now, the project is on track to exceed each of its 13 indicator targets, many of which attribute capacity development to project inputs. Our external assessment of 40 stakeholders found that 93% received high levels of relevant technical and administrative support, 90% felt LSS was highly or moderately responsive to partner needs, and 80% felt they were significantly involved in project decision-making. RTI surveys staff, MTAs, and other stakeholders regularly to ask, discuss, and adapt activities and management approaches as deemed appropriate.

5. **ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?**

The initial restrictive enabling conditions, limited representation of civil society, and less likelihood for host government to approve LSS almost ended the project before it began. However, identifying a new government ministry and other stakeholders that would support LSS within Lao universities, and gaining USAID's trust and support all contributed to an effective project redesign. It also laid the foundation for the project's adaptive management approach that has resulted in significant success working with Lao HEIs. This would not have been possible without conducting an effective applied political economy analysis to identify individuals with authority, political incentives, potential impediments, and national strategies and plans that aligned with our project vision. After engaging our newly identified champions and co-designing a project scope they were certain would be approved by key decision-makers, our project approval came rather quickly. However, getting project approval was only half the battle. Because our partners had expended significant social capital, we needed to involve them in the IMC, respond to their identified technical priorities, and stay within the confines of the approved project scope. While project start-up had its challenges, a few key adaptive management tools helped us overcome contextual challenges, including offering flexible and milestone-based grants to partners, organizing ample opportunities for deliberation and discussion, using multiple tools to survey priorities and attitudes of key stakeholders, and planning early for sustainability. The combination of working with our partners as co-implementers and ceding decision-making authority on grants, activities, and curriculum priorities will lead to both success and sustainability of the project. Finally, instilling a culture of cooperation and coordination will lead to the larger systems change we seek as now our universities know how to access other USAID project resources, band together for collective action efforts, and to learn from each other.