2019 CLA CASE COMPETITION
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Case Title:

Employing Futures: CLA to Strengthen Youth Workforce Development in Honduras

Name: Olvan Lopez, Tanya Hurst and Ana Rubi

Organization: Banyan Global and USAID/Honduras

Photo Caption: Following the completion of the Empleando Futuros training program, four youth celebrate their recent accomplishment following their graduation ceremony and are ready for employment!
Photo Credit: Empleando Futuros

Summary:

In Honduras, youth unemployment reaches almost 30 percent, more than double the global rate. It is exacerbated by the lack of citizen security and effective gang deterrence strategies in the country, where youth are often stigmatized for the neighborhoods in which they live and rebuffed by potential employers for their communities' geographical affiliations with gangs. The staggering rate of youth unemployment, compounded by the security challenges, is a key driver of illegal migration out of the country. In order to increase youth employment, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched Empleando Futuros (Employing Futures) in 2016 to target at-risk youth in Honduras. During the first year, the project applied a training module in which youth completed two phases of training prior to job insertion. While this approach initially appeared effective, a pause and reflect event illuminated a significant number of dropouts and the need to strengthen the response to better meet the needs of youth and the labor market. The project had to make a decision, and revisited the underlying assumptions on which the initial model was built.

Empleando Futuros recognized from the onset the importance of ongoing conversations with key stakeholders, most notably youth; of utilizing data to test assumptions underpinning the theory of change; and of periodic reflections to identify failures and successes. The inclusion of collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) from the start allowed the project to recognize the limitations of the initial training model early on and utilize the CLA tools and systems to adapt quickly. While it is too early to measure the success of the newly-integrated training model that in part was a result of the application of CLA, preliminary findings suggest that CLA supported the development of new strategies to reduce dropouts and improve basic job skills based on labor market requirements, building the capacity of local systems and partners and reducing risks factors for youth.

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can reference them in your submission:

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management

- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

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

In Honduras, youth unemployment reaches almost 30 percent, more than double the global rate of 13 percent. The youth unemployment crisis is further exacerbated by lack of citizen security and effective gang deterrence strategies as youth are often stigmatized by potential employers for the neighborhoods in which they live and branded by their communities' geographical affiliations with gangs. The staggering rate of youth unemployment in Honduras, compounded by the security challenges reducing employment opportunities, is a key driver of illegal migration. In efforts to increase youth employment and reduce risk factors for youth living in high-risk communities, USAID launched the Empleando Futuros project in 2016 to target at-risk youth living in the municipalities in Honduras that are most affected by violence and crime.

At the onset, Banyan Global recognized the complexity of factors influencing youth livelihoods — from education to employment, insecurity to corruption, and poverty to migration. If efforts to increase youth employment and reduce illegal migration were to be successful and sustainable, supporting Honduras' journey to self-reliance, then Empleando Futuros would need to strategically collaborate with the public and private sectors, USAID, other implementing partners and the youth themselves; intentionally and routinely draw on performance data and observations to promote learning and adaptive management; and allocate financial and human resources, including leveraging local resources, to support these efforts. During the first year, the project applied a training model in which youth completed two phases of training prior to job insertion. The first phased focused on basic skills development and risk reduction through mentoring, CBT, life skills training, and basic labor competencies training. The second phase allowed youth to choose from several market-driven technical courses to prepare for specific job opportunities. This approach appeared to be effective, as youth were trained in different occupations based on the tailored technical and vocational skills training. However, during a routine pause and reflect, the project noticed a significant number of dropouts: only 50 percent of youth who enrolled in phase 1 completed phase 2. At that point, the project had to make a decision by revisiting the underlying assumptions on which the project built the initial training model.

2. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Banyan Global believes that the integration of a CLA framework is essential to transformative programming, sustainable impact and the journey to self-reliance. As an organization, Banyan Global strives to generate a culture in which CLA is part of our DNA. Across the organization and our global portfolio of activities, Banyan Global's leadership supports and provides resources to our teams to promote strategic collaboration, continuous learning and adaptive management, working with donors, local partners, key stakeholders and beneficiaries to improve ongoing and future programming. Our office, team and activities in Honduras are no exception — Empleando Futuros' leadership, as an extension of Banyan Global, strives to emulate this culture.

From the beginning, Empleando Futuros recognized the importance of ongoing conversations with key stakeholders, most notably youth; periodic reflections to identify failures and successes; and the utilization of data to test the various assumptions underpinning the theory of change. Incorporating CLA from the start of the project allowed Empleando Futuros to recognize the limitations of the initial training model that resulted in high dropout rates early in the life of the project and to utilize the CLA tools and systems that were already embedded into the project's design to adapt quickly.

3. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

The Empleando Futuros project strives to make evidence-based decisions to steer programming at the micro and macro levels by utilizing performance data, incorporating stakeholder and beneficiary feedback, and applying lessons learned from other projects. One of the first steps the project made to employ CLA to make evidence-based decisions and use monitoring and evaluation for learning was to establish a robust performance monitoring system to track youth beneficiaries throughout the training program, including phase 1 (basic skills training: mentoring, CBT, life skills, basic labor competencies, and soft skills) and phase 2 (technical and vocational skills training). Empleando Futuros built a customized online platform, the Empleando Futuros Information System (EFIS), to track an individual youth's progress through the program and to tabulate performance data. Through EFIS, the project has been able to monitor the training-to-job insertion journey of over 4,000 youth to date.

The project, in collaboration with USAID, also established a framework for strategic pause and reflect events throughout the year to facilitate routine conversations focused on performance data, examining the project's theory of change and providing a platform to highlight the project's continuous learning. In February 2018, project staff collaborated with USAID/Honduras to facilitate a pause and reflect event after the first cohort of youth completed the training program. During this event, the large dropout rate from phase 1 to completion of the program, as well as the need to be more responsive to the labor market, was discussed. The group started to speculate on potential factors contributing to such high dropout rates and brainstormed solutions to reverse the low completion rates. Through this dialogue, the project recognized the extent to which high dropout rates could impede the project's desired results. In the process, the project also recognized that many Honduran businesses need shorter-term solutions to address their human resources needs. The project believed that an enhanced phase 1 and more intense integrated training programs (combining phases 1 and 2) could address both of these challenges.

As an action item following the pause and reflect event, the project invested additional resources into building a more in-depth analysis of the data gathered from the first cohort of youth to expand the technical evidence base to inform future implementation. The project discovered that while dropout rates were comparable between male and female participants, younger participants were more likely to leave prior to completion than their older counterparts. Additionally, the project observed higher dropout rates among youth who were classified as more at-risk during the technical and vocational training phase. While this data allowed the project to understand the "who", it wasn't yet clear "why". In efforts to uncover the reasons why these youth were dropping out, the project met with a series of the project's mentors, trainers and, most importantly, youth beneficiaries. As a result, the project learned that the required time commitment to complete the program, the lag between trainings and job insertion, and high transportation costs were contributing factors in youth's decisions to drop out of the project.

The project team then reconvened to review the expanded evidence base, revisit the underlying assumptions of the initial training model, and identify the existing design limitations. Based on the technical evidence, several decisions were made in relation to other important aspects of the project, such as the budget, number of implementing organizations and project goals. Additionally, the project conducted several meetings with implementing partners and private sector actors to hear about their challenges, explore possible solutions and identify synergies and possible points of collaboration to address challenges together.

Throughout this process, the project recognized the need to alter the program's training model to better meet the needs of the youth participants as well as better orient training to the needs and timelines of the private sector actors and employers. In Year 2, employing an adaptive management approach, Empleando Futuros made a structural shift, moving the program's training model from a two-part sequential training program to an integrated training approach that allows youth to expand their soft skills and technical skills concurrently, while completing the program at an accelerated rate.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

As a direct result of applying CLA to improve the retention rates of youth participants, the project revised the existing training model to better meet the needs of youth beneficiaries and private sector actors, and managed the project adaptively to reflect performance data, project learning and feedback from key stakeholders. However, in addition to improving the training model, CLA has also improved the enabling conditions in which CLA thrives at the project level. While the CLA structures and tools accessible to the Empleando Futuros team have not changed, this application of the CLA structures and tools has provided an avenue for staff to experience the effects and impact that CLA can have. Now that staff have applied and experienced the effects of integrating CLA into their activities, the project has seen increased levels of dialogue and idea-sharing, both internally and externally, resulting in increased efficiencies. For example, previously, the various project staff across the five key technical areas liaised individually with the local partners, resulting in repetition and confusion between the project and local partner organizations as a whole. Due to the increased collaboration with local partners and integration of their feedback, the project identified one person to serve as a link or supervisor with each local partner — enabling a more adequate, continuous one-stop-shop approach and accurate communication with the local partners. The result has been impressive; Empleando Futuros has seen improvements in communication and collaboration, more effective engagement between local partners and project staff, and an increase in data quality.

5. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

While it is too early to measure the full effects of how CLA has contributed to the project's development outcomes as the program has only recently launched the integrated training model, preliminary findings suggest that CLA has strengthened Empleando Futuros programming by reducing dropouts, building the capacity of local systems and partners, reducing risk factors for youth and improving private sector engagement and job insertion. As confirmed by the project's recent midterm performance evaluation, the youth enrolled in the new integrated training model have demonstrated higher completion rates than under the previous sequential training model, thus far. More integrated training processes are now being developed in conjunction with large-scale employers so that youth can complete accelerated training and immediately transition into immediate employment opportunities, seasonal or otherwise. The project hopes to see these trends continue. Simultaneously, as the project has expanded its external collaboration efforts channeling stakeholder feedback into the project's adaptive management approach, the project has adjusted the training model to be more responsive to in-demand labor market needs. The project hopes that through the integrated training model, by increasing the number of graduates and responding to the needs of the business community, the project will see an increased number of graduates obtain employment upon completion of the training.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

Developing a CLA plan and integrating CLA into the project's monitoring, evaluation and learning plan and routine reporting is the easy part of applying USAID's CLA framework. Like many USAID activities, Empleando Futuros was able to capture the desired application of CLA in written deliverables and guiding documents. The challenge came in building our team's capacity and creating space for staff to actually apply CLA. In the early stages of the project, the team was so consumed with targets and goals that taking time to pause and reflect, capture moments of learning, and reflect on performance data in real time seemed nearly impossible. Additionally, it was not intuitive for our staff or our local partners to openly call a forum to discuss challenges, constraints and even failures. The project's leadership had to intentionally and strategically support the staff and local partners to overcome the obstacles preventing the effective application of CLA, including time constraints, fear of openness, and lack of understanding the relevance of CLA to their everyday work. However, due primarily to the leadership of Empleando Futuros and support from and partnership with USAID, CLA has become an integral part of the project.

7. Did your CLA approach contribute to self-reliance? If so, how?

The Empleando Futuros project recognized early on that, in order to ensure the success and sustainability of the project efforts, it was essential to co-design, collaborate and co-facilitate the project's activities with local partners and both the public and private sectors. Through the application of USAID's CLA framework, the project has been able to effectively integrate local public and private sector partners and collaborators into the project's activities, building upon existing local systems and solutions and being responsive to the needs on the ground. Recognizing local partners as crucial elements to a project's success and integrating them into the core functions of implementing project activities is one of the key elements in supporting a country's journey to self-reliance. The project has built the capacity of its leaders and teams to strengthen local partners' capabilities in areas such as management, grants, monitoring and evaluation and other technical areas. In addition, by placing an emphasis on local ownership and applying the project's CLA approach, the project was able to flag problems and identify relevant solutions quickly in collaboration with the public and private sectors.

Through adaptive management, local partners and public and private sector actors have seen how their feedback can be used to increase the number of youth completing the program, which will lead to an increase in the country's workforce entering the labor market, thereby increasing the productivity of the economy as well as helping to reduce violence. Ultimately, the project's CLA approach is helping to empower local partners and public and private sector actors to take ownership of their country's economic sustainability and journey to self-reliance.