2019 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Increasing Advocacy Impact through Networks in Lebanon – A Collaborative and Adaptive Learning Process

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Photo Caption & Credit: Environmental Protection Advocacy Network member presenting its project to USAID during a launch event. Credit: BALADI CAP/Lebanon.

Summary:

Developing effective advocacy networks in a country like Lebanon with strong sectarian and confessional divides is difficult, but when challenged with an approach to network building that relied too heavily upon initial assumptions and methodologies that were later determined to be flawed, the ability to re-evaluate and adapt that approach through a series of structured CLA exercises enabled the project to more effectively meets its goals and objectives.

By facilitating a series of highly collaborative "pause & reflect" sessions, participatory workshops, and individual interviews with project partners and stakeholders at key points during and at the end of project component implementation, the project was able to foster a continuous cycle of joint learning and adaptation that enabled stakeholders to identify challenges, openly share views, emphasize learning, and provide adaptations and course adjustments from originally planned interventions that were not delivering the expected results.

As a result of the adapted approach, BALADI CAP is able to effectively deliver three functioning advocacy networks that are addressing priority concerns of its citizens and obtaining increased impact as a result of the strengthened commitment to the networks and improved advocacy initiatives being implemented by the network members.

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?

Building Alliances for Local Advancement and Development Initiatives – Capacity Building (BALADI CAP) is a USAID-funded five-year $14.9 million civil society strengthening Activity implemented by Management Systems International (MSI) in Lebanon.

BALADI CAP's Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI) component was awarded to increase citizen engagement and participation in the advocacy of priority issues in Lebanon through the support of three advocacy networks involving three consecutive phases: (1) identification of the three priority areas of major concern to Lebanese citizens, namely, Environmental Protection and Solid Waste Management, Human Rights, and Good Governance and Accountability; (2) competitive selection of three Intermediary Service Organizations (ISOs) to act as capacity-building service providers to member CSOs and function as leaders and coordinators in the development of each of the networks; and (3) grants awarded to CSOs to implement advocacy initiatives of relevance to the three priority areas.

In support of these three phases, BALADI CAP provided capacity-building support to the ISOs in the development of the networks, which then provided reciprocal capacity-building and support to the selected CSOs (grantees) in the concurrent implementation of their advocacy grants. The initial CEI network model was based on the premise that advocacy grants and capacity-building by these ISOs would support the creation and development of the three advocacy networks, with ISOs taking the lead in developing the networks and member CSOs actively advocating for citizen's concerns. During the first year of implementation it became apparent that this model would not result in sustainable networks or continued commitment and buy-in from the networks members.

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

Developing effective advocacy networks from the ground up is not a straightforward proposition and can be notoriously difficult, particularly in a country like Lebanon divided by sectarian and confessional lines. We did not feel that a traditional M&E approach would allow us to learn and adapt in the way we needed. We determined that CLA was the most appropriate approach to understand the issues at play in the creation, implementation and long-term sustainability of the three advocacy networks.

When compared to an internal project evaluation, our CLA approach fostered joint learning and adaptation through internal collaboration within the BALADI CAP team as part of continuous program learning and adaptation, and external collaboration with ISO and CSO stakeholders to identify challenges, openly share views without judgement and blame, emphasize learning, and provide the possibility for project adaptations or course adjustment when originally planned interventions were not delivering the expected results.

Moreover, using CLA to adaptively manage project implementation aligned with USAID/Lebanon's emphasis on CLA in its Country Development and Cooperation Strategy and corresponding 2014-2018 Performance Management Plan. This case study documents how MSI integrated CLA activities into its existing Activity Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (AMEP) and Work Plans after the CEI component was awarded under BALADI CAP, then specifically applied CLA activities during implementation of the CEI component to modify and adapt its model and approach to advocacy network development.

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.

MSI's CLA approach included two major exercises - the first aimed to obtain necessary feedback to address challenges encountered following the first year of implementation of the advocacy network model through open dialogue and collaboration with network ISO and CSO stakeholders, which resulted in significant modifications and adaptations to the network model. This first phase was followed by a second CLA exercise to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of these adaptations of the model in addressing the challenges initially identified in the further development of sustainable advocacy networks towards meeting overall project goals and objectives.

The first CLA exercise consisted primarily of 'pause and reflect' sessions with CEI staff, ISO organizations and CSO member grantees during which the candid feedback obtained uncovered issues, concerns and incorrect assumptions about the activity design that if left unaddressed would have undermined the sustainability and effectiveness of the networks and negatively impacted CEI outcomes. The findings of this first CLA exercise led to some significant CEI adaptations and mid-course corrections, including increased support by hiring an external consultant to assist in designing each networks' charters and by-laws, as well as respective advocacy strategies and implementation plans as part of the first network-led versus ISO-led advocacy initiative.

As BALADI CAP's CEI component implementation was coming to an end, it was critical to assess the effectiveness of the adaptations introduced as a result of the previous CLA, i.e. Did the additional support improve the member CSOs' buy-in to the networks? Did it improve the network effectiveness and ensure future sustainability?
MSI's implementation of the second (and final) major CLA exercise adopted the following structured approach:

1- Plan and Resource for CLA: CEI planned for a second CLA exercise in its final annual work plan and budgeted for an external consultant to design the CLA approach, to define its scope and to facilitate the CLA process. This step was essential in dedicating appropriate resources, in designing a focused exercise with clear objectives, and in proposing a higher-level perspective of the advocacy network model that does not duplicate the earlier CLA but rather builds on it and moves the process a step further.

2- Provide a range of forums for learning, collaboration and openness: The CEI CLA design provided the means to involve all of CEI's direct stakeholders, including BALADI CAP staff, external consultants, beneficiary CSOs and ISOs. Each group was consulted separately using various collaborative means such as open discussion workshops and individual consultations with the aim to provide the space for an open collaboration, while simultaneously stressing the learning objective of the exercise "to support future USAID engagement with CSOs" rather than to evaluate the performance of one party or another. This approach prompted a critical but also positive attitude, implying that all views were valued and thus taken into consideration.

3- Continuous learning: A continuous learning strategy enabled MSI to continually assess results, adapt approaches, and increase engagement with stakeholders as part of its adaptive management approach to project implementation, which correspondingly built improved ownership and trust among and between the networks' members that their efforts could be sustainable even though the CEI component may be ending. Further, this learning experience enabled both BALADI CAP staff and CSO beneficiaries to participate in a collaborative process that will help inform future USAID advocacy programming and improve engagement with Lebanese CSOs.

4- A broader perspective and way forward: The CLA design also allowed for a broader perspective by appraising CEI's advocacy networking approach in light of the contextual and cultural challenges occurring in the country and CSO environment, challenges which became apparent during CEI implementation and provided a forum for discussion of how these challenges could be addressed in future advocacy networking initiatives and the way forward.

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?

Implementing CLA was a project management requisite, planned as an integral part of BALADI CAP's performance monitoring plan. CEI stakeholders - staff, CSOs and ISOs - went through the process and shared their candid feedback in the 'pause and reflect sessions' of the first CLA without much trust in what it can actually change, specifically at this late stage of the CEI implementation period. Having been granted a time extension, CEI was able to propose and implement adaptations to the networks and also, most importantly, to implement this second CLA. In addition to the direct outcomes of the CEI adaptations (described in section 5), using CLA revealed indirect benefits of the CLA process itself:

1- Staff, CSOs and ISOs felt valued, their comments were heard and acted upon. Stakeholders learned that CEI can adapt and amend plans when these plans have not been delivering on the expected outcomes i.e. the project was not static but rather evolving as issues become apparent during implementation.

2- The CLA analysis of 'issues of dispute' from multiple perspectives brought to light the underlying reasons of some of the project shortcomings, whereas previously each stakeholder attributed the failings to other parties.

3- CEI management and staff believe in the CLA process now. Having worked through the challenges of the CLA findings and arrived at consensus and agreement on new priorities and approaches for the next phase, the BALADI CAP team now has a much greater appreciation for the benefits and practical application of CLA, as well as a commitment to its continued implementation.

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?

CEI interventions were proposed to deliver three functioning advocacy networks to effectively address priority citizen's concerns (in addition to other outcomes). The first CLA exercise uncovered concerns that questioned the probability that this outcome could be reached and thus led to significant changes to CEI's approach to implementation. The findings of the second CLA confirmed that the CEI adaptations have undoubtedly strengthened the three networks and resulted in some high-level results through the joint network advocacy campaigns, which would not have been foreseen during the first phase of CEI implementation.

Intensive consultations between network members with the support of an external consultant managed to develop a shared vision for each network, to design a network advocacy strategy and action plan, and to implement a joint network advocacy initiative (as compared to the advocacy grants implemented separately by each member organization). Network lead issues were resolved in the network charter with agreement on consensual decision-making, as compared to the earlier approach of the ISO-led networks. As such, the CEI CLA adaptations grounded the networks in a more solid foundation and delivered on planned outcomes.

Still, the findings of the second CLA are unclear about the long-term sustainability of the three networks without further funding support from CEI given the short period of time that was available for implementation. Views varied with the Human Rights Network the most likely to be sustained as some of its members had already worked together in the past and shared more common ground between its members.

Alternately, CEI grants and capacity-building to CSOs had a good impact in more effective advocacy. According to the CSOs, CEI's financial support was instrumental in enabling them to hire experts to undertake research, draft and review laws and policies, and increase their use of traditional and social media and other communication platforms in their advocacy, which should contribute to improved sustainability of the network members, and further strengthen their contributions to the networks.

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

Perhaps the most difficult challenge that the CEI CLA exercises revealed was to first understand 'the why' underlying the limited results, and, secondly, to accept these reasons when they point to a project design flaw rather than beneficiary limitations. This was also certainly the case when CEI pre-determined the training courses before the CSOs were selected and their specific needs were known, and also when the ISOs selected to lead the networks did not manage to create the necessary CSO commitment and buy-in to the networks. These realizations and findings were further enabled by USAID in supporting the proposed modifications and adaptations in the initial methodology and approving the revised approach with reallocation of funding for additional resources needed to correct the approach.

Another challenge of the CLA process was overcoming the "blame game" between the various ISOs and CSO networks members towards setting a more positive learning approach where stakeholders could provide an objective analysis of what proved to be effective and what did not work well without becoming competitive or obstructive.

In the end, MSI's commitment to fostering continued learning and creating cycles for feedback towards continuous improvement and adaptation proved to be most effective in supporting BALADI CAP in the implementation of an effective CLA process, which facilitated the strong participation of the stakeholders and provided a forum for the candid sharing of often conflicting perspectives.