2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Locally Led Developmental Evaluation Improves CLA Practices

Name:

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Organization:

Headlight Consulting Services, LLC

Participants from a USAID/Ethiopia Implementing Partner organization engage in a Headlight-facilitated Adaptive Action Planning Workshop. Credit: Esrael Woldeeyesus

Summary:

Ethiopia's resilience capacity and the adaptability of its development and humanitarian partners have been heavily tested by conflicts, mass displacement, disease outbreaks, pest infestation, flooding, and drought. In 2020, USAID/Ethiopia embarked on an ambitious, integrated effort to strengthen the capacity of communities and institutions to effectively manage disaster risks: the Strengthening Disaster Risk Management - Systems and Institutions (SDRM-SI) Project. Due to the complex and ever-shifting operating context in Ethiopia, as well as the challenges of cross-portfolio integration, the SDRM-SI team contracted Headlight Consulting Services, LLC (Headlight) to implement a Developmental Evaluation (DE) to support evidence-driven implementation and adaptation of the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) portfolio.

DE is a utilization-focused evaluation approach to continuously adapt interventions using evaluative thinking and rapid feedback loops. Previously, DE has helped answer USAID/Ethiopia's complex DRM learning questions, on topics ranging from the use of flexible funding via crisis modifiers, to how adding a task force affected coordination and mitigated negative results in the 2021 Afar Flood response. Answers to these learning questions have helped refine USAID/Ethiopia's DRM approach at the strategy, activity, and operational levels. At present, the DE team maintains a technical evidence base they created; generates learning and evidence products to answer the SDRM-SI Project team's prioritized learning questions; and facilitates adaptive action workshops, with both the SDRM-SI Project team and implementing partners (IPs) in the DRM and Resilience space. The aim of these efforts is to enable evidence uptake and data-driven adaptive management. As a result of the adaptive action planning workshops, and continued support by the DE team, IPs and the SDRM-SI Project team have made evidence-driven adaptations, such as improving outcome-level reporting in Activities and using evidence to inform new Activity design. This case study presents practical examples of how DE can effectively operationalize the learning and adapting components of CLA.

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?**

The development gains of USAID and other donors in Ethiopia have been hard fought over the last few decades and put at risk due to multiple, simultaneous shocks, especially after 2019. USAID/Ethiopia sought to improve its ability to address this complex operating environment through a more integrated Country Development Cooperation Strategy. In particular, the Mission designed more robust disaster risk management (DRM) and emergency response projects to protect development gains achieved in the resilience and health portfolios, among others. Simultaneously, Mission staff sought to strengthen adaptive management capacities for both Mission staff and implementing partners (IPs). For DRM, the Strengthening DRM - Systems and Institutions (SDRM-SI) Project was designed to strengthen the capacity of Ethiopia's communities and institutions to effectively manage disaster risks. The USAID SDRM-SI Project team determined that a Developmental Evaluation (DE) would best support evidence-driven implementation and adaptation. DE is a utilization-focused evaluation approach to continuously adapt interventions using critical and systems-oriented thinking driven by evidence. The approach establishes rapid feedback loops for agile implementation, and allows evaluators to deploy various methods and data collection activities throughout implementation. It also supports evidence uptake to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions and operational decision-making processes, by delivering contextualized and emergent findings. The SDRM-SI DE facilitates real-time, evidence-based reflection and decision-making for the project, the Mission, its DRM portfolio, and associated activities and IPs. Critically, the DE is helping answer the Mission's complex DRM learning questions by conducting Learning Reviews, evaluative efforts, and evidence syntheses; and applying these learnings to support the adaptation and refinement of USAID/Ethiopia's DRM approach at the strategy, activity, and operational levels.

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

Technical Evidence Base

Adaptive Management

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

The SDRM-SI DE has been applying CLA approaches to support the SDRM-SI Project team's strategy implementation in an ever-changing and complex operating environment. One of the initial DE activities was co-creating priority learning questions and then identifying, cataloging, and analyzing existing evidence on DRM. The DE team built a technical evidence base for DRM-related evidence generated by activities under the SDRM-SI Project, and by other relevant DRM stakeholders (e.g., other donors, the United Nations, etc.). The DRM Evidence Catalog is now a living database and tool to demonstrate to Mission colleagues the variety and range of evidence, the levels of rigor, and the intended audiences that can use the catalog for decision-making.

Evidence collected in the catalog was used in the initial 2021 Learning Review, an approach to analyze existing evidence to determine what works, identify enabling and inhibiting conditions, and inform future adaptations. The Learning Review identified evidence gaps, which informed the DE's design of three distinct evaluative efforts to answer the priority learning questions. In 2022, the SDRM-SI DE team implemented an evaluation looking into the cross-Mission Strategy Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) process and its use of flexible funding through Crisis Modifiers [methods: Outcome Harvesting and Qualitative Comparative Analysis]. The DE also conducted a case study on the 2021 Afar Flood Response to determine how adding a task force affected coordination and mitigated negative results [method: Positive Deviance]. Lastly, the DE implemented an assessment of DRM Policy in Ethiopia to understand if policy changes were sufficiently inclusive and reaching all levels of DRM actors for systems-level improvements [method: Institutional Architecture Assessment]. To assess the extent to which the learning questions were answered, the DE team synthesized findings from the Learning Review and the aforementioned evaluative efforts. This informed the Resilience office, SAGE, and DRM Project strategies and Activity adaptations. One example of how this learning and evidence influenced decision-making is that the DRM Project team applied evidence from evaluative efforts and the Learning Review to redesign the new DRM Activity and ensure it focuses on evidence-driven interventions for what works, instead of replicating approaches based on popular but unsubstantiated trends.

Following contributions to the evidence base for DRM, the DE team facilitated adaptive action planning workshops with four USAID/Ethiopia implementing partners and one workshop for the Project 1 team. These adaptive action workshops have been a key tool in facilitating evidence-to-action, and supporting IPs with adaptive management. To document the experience of conducting these workshops, and to share learnings with others, the DE team compiled a facilitators' guide. The guide contains key steps and best practices to support sustained adaptive management efforts.

During the workshops, the DE team presented the core findings and recommendations most relevant to each IP, and facilitated an exercise to prioritize the recommendations according to their importance and feasibility. For the prioritized recommendations, the DE team led a discussion on the details needed to take action, such as: who needs to be involved, what barriers or challenges might they face, what resources do IPs have available, etc. The DE team then created an adaptive action plan including next steps, and shared the plan with each IP for their review, comment, and implementation. The DE team continues to support IPs in implementing the identified adaptations; and has seen improvements from selected adaptations, including adopting the regular use of After Action Reviews (AARs), improving outcomes capture and reporting, and integrating Pause & Reflects and other learning practices throughout activity implementation.

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

B. ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

The presence of an Evidence Catalog has meant that USAID staff have a consolidated, use-focused knowledge management platform for DRM evidence, which they can use for activity design and learning about this technical sector. The SDRM-SI Project team and other staff in the Resilience & Relief Office (R2) have leveraged the DRM Evidence Catalog to improve data-informed decision making and implement recommended adaptive actions, including reconsidering CLA and MEL (monitoring, evaluating, and learning) reporting standards, revising the Development Objective 1 Learning Agenda, and informing the design of new activities. One USAID/Ethiopia staff member shared with the DE team that this tool enables equitable access, institutional memory capture, and knowledge management so that information is not lost in inevitable staff turnover. In addition to the technical evidence base itself, the specific learning and evidence products generated by the DE team have been used by Mission staff as well as IPs to implement adaptations and recommendations, guide and support ongoing work, and inform the design and modification of activities and the Mission's flexible funding in emergencies approach.

The SDRM-SI Project team and IPs have taken several actions to make programmatic changes to activity design and implementation, improve outcome-level reporting, and better integrate learning-focused activities (e.g., After Action Review tools and Pause & Reflect workshops) as a result of the adaptive action planning workshops and continued support of the DE team. The programmatic changes include using evidence to inform new Activity design, such as the SDRM-SI Project team using DE evaluative effort and Learning Review evidence to make evidence-driven intervention design choices for the new DRM Activity; and aligning DRM Activity MEL plans to ensure alignment with DRM Project indicators and reporting practices. The workshops also led IPs to have follow-up meetings with their stakeholders to further review their activities and capture learnings, such as participating in joint review meetings, conducting joint supportive supervision, and planning meetings with the Government of Ethiopia and other partners.

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?**

Strong buy-in for the DE from USAID has been an enabling factor for smooth implementation, technical evidence generation, and the facilitation of adaptive management. Buy-in refers to support for, agreement with, or enthusiasm for the process and/or results of the DE from DE stakeholders. USAID stakeholders demonstrated positive buy-in by believing in and committing to the DE approach, maintaining productive relationships with the DE team, and championing the deliverables produced by the DE. The SDRM-SI Project team's commitment to the DE; and its engagement in all phases of identifying learning questions, processing evaluative effort and Learning Review findings, and participating in adaptive action planning, have all enabled the DE approach. However, even with strong USAID buy-in, some inhibiting factors were encountered, and did limit the uptake of some DE recommendations. Inhibiting factors include limited bandwidth, staff turnover, and an over-saturation of evidence and information. The DE team continues to work on mitigating these inhibitors by assisting with knowledge management and handover support for Mission colleagues, and by ensuring all deliverables are use-focused and include executive summaries that facilitate initial engagement with the evidence. DE is a relatively new evaluation approach. As such, there was an initial lack of understanding among many IPs regarding expectations for engaging with the DE team at the Activity's start. This challenged the DE team's ability to be embedded within Project 1 activities and, in turn, limited the team's ability to capture timely learnings, facilitate adaptations on an ongoing basis, or track the nuances of how adaptations are or are not addressing identified gaps. Despite these challenges, the DE has been successful in shining a light on what is working well with DRM in Ethiopia, and in facilitating adaptations around challenges stemming from improved operationalization of CLA practices.