**SESSION Q&A: Bite-Sized Learning: Operationalizing Localization through CLA**

Nov 16, 2023

**How can I best ensure a project is community-owned, community-led and community-managed?**

Elizabeth Issac: It is key to engage local communities early on in program design, so that their voices are heard. What often happens is that, when a project is being designed, it tends to have all the pieces that make sense from a development perspective. However, it does not often have local voices or local context woven in, right from the outset. In the case of the Women and Water Alliance, we did identify after a year of implementation that there was this gap in our theory of change, and we wanted to incorporate local voices to be able to improve our activity. Ultimately, we had to pull our theory apart so that we could start fresh, incorporate local actors in these specific places, make the overall project theory of change solid and better able to meet the needs of stakeholders, and maximize impact in a more meaningful way. So, early engagement with local actors, I would say, is the key.

**How is organizational culture a success factor when it comes to CLA?**

Domini Coelho: It is important to engage the leaders of partner organizations, together with the members of local communities. This way, there is no hierarchy, and there is transparency. Everyone is on the same page. Everyone’s knowledge is valued.

Elizabeth Issac: I'd say in addition to that culture of openness, it is important to have a willingness to learn from the data. That really helps set the stage for the program to be able to make meaningful pivots and adaptively manage. It is also key to have a common goal that all partners and stakeholders can unite under. These two factors definitely serve as positive enablers for CLA practices.

**How is USAID structuring investments to allow implementing partners the flexibility in proposals to do things like listening tours, co-creation, participatory methods, etc., in order to inform their programming?**

Domini Coelho: Here in Timor Leste, to do the listening tour, we had to advertise through social media and local television, in the local language. We had to make this clear to USAID before the deadline of the proposal. This allowed us to work more effectively with local organizations, and understand what community needs were, before designing the activity. In other words, it was about USAID really doing their homework first, in terms of understanding needs, priorities, and stakeholders. This informed the activity design at the very beginning, and allowed the Agency to support an activity that would benefit communities in the future.

Relebohile Fatse: I would add, in addition to financial resources, that in our case, USAID provided leadership in the form of advocacy for our activity. This sent the message to everyone involved that the Agency was strongly invested in our community.

Elizabeth Issac: In our case, USAID/Washington was heavily involved in the overall program design, implementation, and even post-post program action planning. That involvement carved out a really good space for us to help with incorporating CLA practices into the program, so that each donor had visibility into how the program was progressing, and had the ability to to weigh in on what pivots they thought needed to happen, or what the priorities should be at a given time.

**How can I staff my team appropriately to do CLA? Is this a function that a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team takes on; or do I need to bring in Knowledge Management (KM) experts, or others? Are there specific skills CLA-dedicated staff need to have?**

Relebohile Fatse: It is important and necessary to have a staff member dedicated to CLA. However, from the perspective of M&E, programs, and other teams, our role is to really embrace the changing organizational culture that comes with effectively implemented CLA practices. Ultimately, where resources permit, we need to have staff members dedicated to CLA. However, where resources do not permit, what I've seen as a practice is that CLA is embedded under Monitoring and Evaluation.

Elizabeth Issac: I can speak to some of the skills that CLA staff would benefit from having. I think the key one is facilitation skills. To be able to connect with various stakeholders is so important, because collaboration is key in CLA. Thus, facilitation skills are required for a CLA staff member to be able to really distill what disparate voices are saying, and then put into practice all the actions that have been identified in order to learn and, subsequently, adapt.

**With regard to trust-building, and trust as precondition for localization and learning: What are best practices on how to build trust on the ground with project participants, who often see project staff as representatives of donor agencies? How can I create a trustful situation in which Pause and Reflect sessions with communities can happen?**

Domini Coelho: Using the local language is an important element of building trust. Additionally, it is useful when working with local stakeholders–and specifically with local youth–to make it clear that we see them as our guides; that they are the ones who know the community and the context, and can lead us along.

Elizabeth Issac: Additionally, when building trust, it is important to have constant touchpoints with local partners or local leaders–whoever your local counterpart is–and not just have communication be a one-off, “check the box” sort of activity. Rather, it should be something that really does help instill a good rapport, and a good relationship between the program team and your local counterparts.

**Have you used Human Centered Design (HCD) practices in your work with CLA?**

Elizabeth Issac: Human centered design approaches are embedded in how we work with our clients, partners, and stakeholders. So, even with the theory of change workshop and the early stakeholder engagement exercises, we identified what those key personas were that we needed to be able to address, and what their priorities were. Then, we mapped out what consensus-building looked like so that we could get to a point where CLA really could help address the needs identified. Lastly, we did this through constant collaboration with USAID, and all the other consortium members. In summary, yes, HCD is a key component when it comes to incorporating CLA into practice.

**What incentives drive project staff to implement projects differently through CLA? In other words, how can I inspire my team to put in the extra work? Additionally, what incentives can organizations develop for their staff? What incentives can donors create?**

Laurren Hinthorne: Before the panelists jump in, I want to say, we on the CLA Practice Area Team see this question a lot. In response, we always say that CLA shouldn't be an extra thing that you're piling on, but rather a lens through which you're examining the work that you're already doing, like meeting with partners and reviewing evaluation recommendations. How can we do this work in a way that is more collaborative, more focused on learning, and more geared towards reflecting? And then, how can we adapt to our new understanding?

Elizabeth Issac: For I4DI, we get really excited to see our partners see the value–and act on–the data and learning we present to them, whether it be in the form of a facilitated workshop, or a presentation of findings from a process evaluation. Our staff get excited to be able to build more interactive dashboards and reporting mechanisms, because we know the client wants to see these. We did this for the Women and Water Alliance. In addition to submitting an evaluation report, we built out an interactive dashboard that communicated the key findings, recommendations, and conclusions from the baseline study we conducted. This way, the client was able to slice and dice the data, and use it. The result was that we didn't see our work ending with the submission of the report. Now, we are more excited to see how our data and evidence can really inform organizations with their decision making. When clients have that appetite, and want things beyond a written report–when they want to see powerful infographics, or interactive dashboards–that's an incentive for us to be able to practice CLA..

Relebohile Fatse: I would really say, for me, from a Monitoring and Evaluation perspective, I don't see CLA as creating additional work. I see it bringing an additional perspective; a way to really tell the story behind our numbers.

**If I have a faulty theory of change or a gap in my logic, do you have insight into how to navigate a theory of change (TOC) conversation with a donor? What do you do when you realize the TOC has to be adjusted, or isn’t working out as planned?**

Elizabeth Issac: What we experienced is that, even though the Women and Water Alliance was reaching the intended communities after a year of implementation, it seemed like there was so much more that could be accomplished. That's what drove us to go back to the theory of change and ask: “Why are we not reaching our potential?” Ultimately, identifying this gap helped us realize we were missing out on reaching a larger community group, due to our theory of change. We saw that if we addressed the theory of change, we would be able to expand our reach. We did just this. A year after executing that adaptation, and changing the overall program logic, the number of people the Alliance was able to empower to improve their access to drinking water and sanitation increased from under 70,000 women, to more than 900,000 women. That kind of scale was accomplished because we intentionally went back to the theory of change, and we intentionally identified the changes that needed to happen. Of course, the conversation with the client was not particularly easy. However, giving them data and saying, “This is what you can do if you adjust your theory of change…” really helped frame the conversation.

Domini Coelho: I would like to add that we were able to adjust our theory of change as the results of our listening tour were coming in. We started by listening to local communities, and this influenced our theory of change.