Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) – Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI)

Building Alliances for Local Advancement Development and Investment (BALADI CAP)
Lebanon

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) is a conceptual framework and set of practices that aim to improve the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) effectiveness through the application of an iterative process of learning and evidence-based program adaptations.

The central function of CLA is to ensure that progress toward development objectives is guided by continuous learning through analysis of a wide variety of information sources and knowledge that bring to light new best practices. This emphasis on a learning approach to development seeks out ways to improve the process of generating, capturing, sharing and using knowledge to support and improve development outcomes.

Aligning its programming with USAID, Management Systems International (MSI) integrated CLA activities into the Building Alliance for Local Advancement, Development and Investment – Capacity Building (BALADI CAP) program cycle. In January 2018, BALADI CAP implemented the first set of its ‘pause and reflect’ sessions with program staff and beneficiary/partner organizations, based on which adaptations were introduced. BALADI CAP is now in its eighth and final year of program implementation and during its sixth year, it conducted a second series of CLA activities to extract the program’s best practices and lessons learned. This report covers the CLA assessment findings and learning results under BALADI CAP’s Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI) component.

CEI OVERVIEW

CEI is one of three components of the USAID funded BALADI CAP’s seven and a half years, civil society support and municipal capacity-building project implemented by MSI in Lebanon under the Global Civic Society Strengthening Leader with Associates (GCSS LWA), under which MSI is the technical implementing sub-partner to Counterpart International (CPI).

BALADI CAP’s CEI component aims to increase citizen engagement and participation in the advocacy of priority issues in Lebanon through the support of three advocacy networks. Primarily, CEI implementation entails three consecutive phases: The first phase identified three priority areas that reflect the following advocacy issues of major concerns to Lebanese citizens: (a) Environment Protection and Solid Waste Management, (b) Human Rights, and (c) Good Governance and Accountability.

The second phase was managed through the competitive bidding of a selection of three Intermediary Service Organizations (ISOs) on the premise that these ISOs would act as service providers to build the capacity of advocacy Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and to function later on as leaders and coordinators for the networks that would be created for each of the identified priority areas. In tandem with the selection of the three ISOs, CEI opened opportunities for CSOs to apply and benefit from grants to implement advocacy initiatives of relevance to the three priority areas.
The third and last phase entailed the provision of capacity building training by ISOs to the selected CSOs (CEI grantees) and the concurrent implementation by the CSOs of their advocacy grants. CEI’s central advocacy model was based on the assumption that grants to advocacy organizations and capacity building by ISOs would manage the creation of three networks, with ISOs as network leaders and CSOs as members, actively advocating for citizens’ concerns.

CEI implementation of its first CLA exercise resulted in program ‘adaptations’ primarily through redirecting and increasing support for the establishment of the three networks, designing the networks’ charters and by-laws, developing their respective advocacy strategies and plans, and implementing for the first time, a network-led advocacy initiative.

CLA IMPLEMENTATION

The objective of this second series of CLA activities was to review the revised CEI capacity-building model for advocacy and assess if the recently introduced adaptations resulted in improved advocacy effectiveness and enhanced sustainability of the three advocacy networks.

This CLA review was implemented from February to April 2019, starting with BALADI CAP’s “CSO Governance, Capacity and Innovation” Conference. The CLA assessment entailed a desk review of CEI progress reports, background documents and conference proceedings from BALADI CAP’s “CSO Governance, Capacity and Innovation” Conference, and report summary notes. The CLA exercise also included interviews with BALADI CAP’s project leadership, CEI staff, the three ISO organizations, and nine CSO representatives who attended a CLA workshop.

CLA FINDINGS – LESSONS LEARNED

The CLA assessment attempted, to the extent possible, to provide answers to the questions proposed in the design report.

These questions focused primarily on the impact of the recently introduced CEI adaptations with reference to network sustainability and buy-in from CSOs, and a review of the CEI advocacy capacity-building model to extract lessons learned. Analysis of the desk review of the documents, workshops, and interview notes revealed the following summary findings which are presented through a series of CEI CLA questions.

➢ **ISO trainings: Did they better respond to CSOs’ needs/network requirements post the first CLA adaptations?**

The second phase of CEI activities (post-CLA and ensuing adaptations) focused on building the capacity of networks. Trainings, capacity building, and facilitation sessions, provided directly by BALADI CAP or through its ISOs, aimed to establish a foundation for sustainable networks. Training activities covered sessions for strategic planning and intensive consultations with network members to build consensus on network objectives, drafting of the network’s charter and by-laws, designing an advocacy strategy, and
planning for a joint network advocacy initiative. Feedback from CEI stakeholders – CSOs and ISOs – on the adaptations introduced during the second phase with respect to trainings are captured in the following summary points:

Adaptations addressed the CSOs’ concerns raised during the first CLA. Participants in the CLA workshop confirmed that the adaptations introduced by BALADI CAP during the second CEI phase have addressed their concerns with regard to ‘training activities’, specifically in reference to two main issues:

- Consensual Approach: Facilitated by an external consultant, workshop discussions and network related decisions followed a consensual decision-making process. Previous training topics were decided without input from the CSO members or taking their capacity-building needs into account.

- Training activities/network institutionalization sessions were devoted to building the institutional framework of the respective networks. These activities and sessions were developed to address the general networking needs of the CSO members. These sessions have improved the CSOs’ buy-in to the networks as it brought them together with their respective ISO to discuss and find common ground.

The impending end of BALADI CAP led to increased pressure and focus on ‘deliverables’ rather than process. A common observation among CSOs and ISOs was that they felt pressured during these sessions to come to an agreement on network-related issues, arguing that consensus is a process that requires time, specifically when looking for common ground between organizations working in different areas. Admittedly, this time pressure was imposed by the impending closeout of BALADI CAP.

Participation in both CBC (Capacity Building Component) and CEI ISO trainings posed a challenge for some CSOs and ultimately, their level of involvement. For CSOs with a small number of staff, attending the increased number of training and workshop sessions was challenging as the staff was not able to attend multiple BALADI CAP activities simultaneously. As a result, some CSO staff were forced to miss CEI trainings or had to send representatives who did not have decision-making authority for the CSO, which led to additional time delays in reaching consensus and agreement on network-related matters.

**CLA LEARNING**

Network formation discussion sessions need to (1) be planned as part of the original project design and, (2) be implemented mid-way through the project lifetime to provide time for consultations and application of a consensual process in network-building. The benefits of CSOs’ involvement in both organizational capacity building under CBC and advocacy networking under CEI are evident, though this training intensity seems to be a bit challenging for smaller CSOs.
Advocacy Grant: What were the benefits of the advocacy grant(s) in building/enhancing organizational capacity for advocacy? Which elements of the advocacy grants proved to be most effective in realizing the planned change? What did you learn as a result?

Discussions with CSOs in reference to the advocacy grants is summarized under the following points:

Overall agreement on the benefits of CEI grants in increasing effectiveness of CSO advocacy. In addition to the financial support that that CEI grants provided, CSOs pointed out the following direct and indirect benefits from the grants which led to enhancing the overall effectiveness of CSO advocacy activities:

• The grants provided the financial means to hire technical experts in the fields targeted by the advocacy initiatives. According to the CSOs, CEI's financial support was instrumental in enabling them to hire short-term experts for research, to draft and review laws, decrees and policies, and to make use of social media and other communication platforms for advocacy. This technical know-how, which was often missing with the in-house staff, enabled CSOs to build their advocacy on solid technical and professional grounds, and has thus, greatly enhanced their effectiveness.

• Capacity building on the grant negotiation process and support to the CSOs in their proposal design and grant implementation improved CSOs’ ability to manage their grants and increased the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. To substantiate this finding, a CSO representative explained that with “BALADI CAP’s guidance, they were compelled to come up with ‘an achievable’ advocacy result … and something that [they] could measure and report on at the end of the grant. Previously, their advocacy goals lacked focus and were not attainable. With support from BALADI CAP, [they] could now see an improvement within their organization’s staff capabilities and were able to apply to other funding sources because of the lessons learned from the successes during this grant.” This CSO also noted that reporting on milestones for this grant required the CSO to plan their projects in a structured manner which, in spite of its difficulties, enabled CSOs to incorporate an approach based on tangible measures and steps to achieving advocacy objectives.

• Knowledge of USAID’s branding policy is generally viewed positively as it supports the effectiveness of the CSOs’ outreach to and meetings with high-level government and non-government stakeholders to campaign for their objectives. Though overall a positive topic, some CSOs believe that USAID branding can also impede a CSO’s advocacy efforts. One ISO representative stated that USAID branding impeded their efforts because “USAID funding is said to have a political objective.”

Some issues challenged and/or limited CSO advocacy effectiveness. Though CSOs had an overall positive assessment of the benefits of CEI advocacy grants, some challenges were also noted.
• Limitation of time was looked upon as a challenge when implementing advocacy initiatives. Unlike other projects, advocacy campaigns deal with many external challenges that are beyond the organization’s control. Such challenges include political stalemates (which can be quite frequent in Lebanon) or a change of government. These external impediments could compel advocacy CSOs to delay related activities, to cancel them altogether, or at other times, to devise alternative strategies.

• Fixed Amount Award (FAA) agreements, which is based on the disbursement of grant funding according to an agreed payment schedule upon completion of milestones, can be challenging to CSOs when applied to an advocacy project. For the reasons stated above in terms of the uncertainties in external factors, strict conformity to original plans and/or document requirements posed challenges. Often times, award agreements required changes in implementation plans and award modifications, to which BALADI CAP was open and has greatly facilitated.

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**CLA LEARNING**

Grants seems to have direct and indirect benefits in improving CSO advocacy capacities and also in enhancing advocacy effectiveness and thus, should always be maintained as a base element in future advocacy/capacity-building models.

Operating under mostly uncertain contexts, advocacy initiatives required longer-term timeframes to achieve their advocacy objectives, and increased flexibility and adaptability of the grant contractual requirements. As CSO advocacy grants were extended prior to the formation of the network, they did not directly align nor contribute to the network objectives. Future advocacy networking models should consider a different sequence with the grants to be extended after the network formation, and not before.

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➢ **Program Adaptation: ISOs - Issue Networks:** In what ways would the newly adopted measures improve CSO members buy-in to the network? How could we enhance the sustainability of the issue networks once program support ends?

**CEI CLA adaptations have set a solid framework for the networks.** Adaptations in the second phase involved (with the support of an external consultant) intensive consultation between network members to develop a shared vision for each network, design a network advocacy strategy and action plan, and implement a joint network advocacy initiative. Network-led issues were resolved through the network charter with agreement on a consensual decision-making model, as compared to the earlier approach of the ISO-led networks. Feedback from both ISO and CSO organizations confirmed that the CEI adaptations addressed the ‘network-led issues’ and network institution issues which were identified during the first CLA and have thus improved the CSOs’ buy-in to their respective networks.
Potential sustainability varies between the three networks with the Human Rights network sharing more sustainability pull factors than the others. ISO and CSO feedback on the question of network sustainability was unclear with many ISOs and CSOs stating that it was too early to tell as they had not yet finished the network launching event. These organizations also remarked that they were not able to work together as a network for very long due to the closure of CEI. When questioned about their short-term plans as a network post-CEI, both CSOs and ISOs were unable to provide definitive plans on next steps. Nevertheless, members of the Human Rights Network were the most adamant about the potential sustainability of their network and crediting their positive outlook to the following factors:

- Some CSO members have more in common as organizations that address issues affecting ‘similar’ vulnerable groups. Moreover, these organizations have already worked and cooperated in the past (before CEI) and would not have a problem working together again through their network.

- CLA interview conducted with the Lebanese American University Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (LAU IWSAW) as ‘network lead’ identified another ‘network pull factor’, namely, comparative advantage. IWSAW is an academic research institute capable of offering CSOs access to research skills and facilities that are otherwise not readily available to these CSOs. On the other hand, CSOs have ‘field’ access and experience which is not readily within reach of IWSAW. Thus, the Human Rights network members tend to ‘technically’ complement each other.

Some challenges to networks’ sustainability stem from CEI’s design model and cannot be addressed without additional intrinsic changes to the network. CEI’s project design brought together organizations with wide differences in terms of ‘advocacy focus areas’ and ‘advocacy approaches’. Though still within the same broad priority areas, organizations within the same network had different priorities or areas of concern. Such is the case with the Lebanon Reforestation Initiative (LRI) that works almost exclusively on reforestation and forest protection and Terre Liban whose organizational priority is solid waste management and waste reduction. Also, additional differences or ‘push factors’ stem from opposing ‘advocacy approaches’. Whereas some CSOs believe in challenging the government through advocacy, others believe in a positive advocacy approach of working with the government to promote the desired change. These differences can be further complicated with the different political allegiances of some CSOs’ leadership in addition to inherent CSO competitiveness for visibility and financial resources. All of these issues would have needed more time for consideration or possibly to introduce additional intrinsic changes to the networks.
➢ **Capacity Building/Network Model: Given the opportunity, what would you maintain and/or change in this advocacy programming model for capacity-building and networking, and why?**

The design of BALADI CAP’s programming in advocacy networks was based on the provision of advocacy grants to CSOs and concurrent grants to ISOs to build CSO grantees’ capacity for advocacy and subject matters related to their issue network; to lead, manage and sustain the advocacy network in the future; and, to implement network advocacy campaigns in support of the ‘identified issues’.

When asked about the CEI design/capacity-building for the advocacy and networking model, both ISO and CSO organizations found it difficult to suggest an alternative or better working model. Instead, their responses focused mostly on what should not happen in future projects, such as: pre-selecting the training topics and network lead, and compelling CSO grantees to join a network based on a generally identified priority area. Additionally, one ISO organization proposed that the advocacy grant should be provided to ISOs rather than to the CSOs. Another ISO argued that advocacy does not necessarily require ‘numbers’, i.e. numerous CSOs to be effective, giving the example of their own organization’s successful advocacy for Horsh Beirut. Still, considering the CSO conference background research on the Lebanese networks’ experience and the learning stemming from this CLA and the previous one, we can safely summarize the following **advocacy and networking model success factors:**

- A network should begin with a common advocacy cause/objective to plan for adequate time and institutional support in creating the network; should facilitate the election of a lead organization from within its members; and provide initial support for its common advocacy campaigning.

- CSO members should bring complementary objectives and offer diversity in value-added benefits to the network to enhance advocacy effectiveness and minimize challenges within the network.

- Advocacy grants and concurrent direct and indirect capacity-building for advocacy is a must in future advocacy/network project design.
Coalitions are an alternative to networks. A coalition is a temporary, short-term pool of organizations that works together toward a specific advocacy objective. Donor support can be provided through a grant to a lead entity provided that: 1) this organization has the willingness and ability to reach and form a coalition of CSOs around a common advocacy issue; 2) organizations that are involved in the coalition share a common purpose while also offering diversity in value-added or competitive advantage; and, 3) organizations involved in the coalition will participate with the lead entity (CSO or other) in the **planning and implementation** of the advocacy campaign each within their own respective fields/area of expertise.