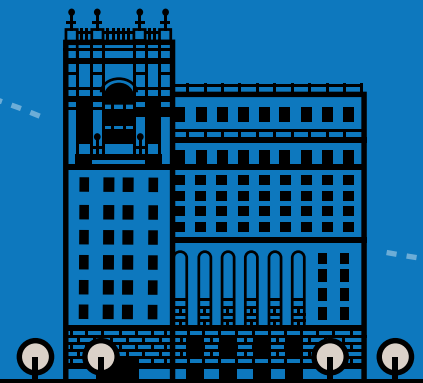




ANNOTATED EVIDENCE SUMMARY

How Learning and Adapting
Enabled Civil Society
Innovations in Cambodia





NOTE: This summary was created based on a submission from [DAI Global LLC](#) to the 2017 CLA Case Competition Analysis as well as [an evaluation](#) that was conducted on the Development Innovations program. [Read more about this case here.](#)

Young people in Cambodia, who represent 65% of the population, are at the forefront of using and promoting new technologies (e.g., mobile applications, sensors, and artificial intelligence) through a range of outlets, including social media, to advocate for positive change.

However, as of 2013, despite increasingly widespread mobile usage and digital activity in Cambodia, many civil society organizations (CSOs) did not have the skills or resources to effectively utilize technology in their work. At the same time, the tech community was not fully aware of CSO needs for their services.

For observers, it was clear that bringing these two groups together would expand market opportunities for tech service providers and help CSOs use information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) to improve results. In response, in 2013, USAID launched Development Innovations (DI) to help Cambodian CSOs and local tech companies leverage technology to address social needs.

DI helped local partners improve their tools, outputs, and reach in various ways. For example, DI has:

- Helped build generational capacity in Cambodia's tech ecosystem by engaging more than 800 girls in the global [Technovation](#) competition. As of 2020, the program is now being run by a Cambodian volunteer community in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.
- Strengthened the capacity of female entrepreneurs numbering in the thousands by working with [SHE Investments](#) to launch and refine a web portal that gives entrepreneurs information to help register and grow their businesses. As of 2020, SHE Investments has added e-learning options on the portal to help reach more women entrepreneurs with their proven Khmer language training courses.
- Supported nongovernmental organizations such as Children in Families and technical partner Rotati Consulting to serve children in need and keep them in safe family care by funding [case management databases](#).

DI came to an end in December 2019. The annotated evidence story on the following pages outlines the ways in which DI's use of collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) mindsets and practices contributed to its development achievements.

1

DI CASE STUDY

So, what role did DI play in facilitating mutually beneficial connections between civil society groups and the local tech community in Cambodia? How did DI use learning and adapting mindsets and practices to achieve their goal?

When DI began, CSOs were committed to making ICT4D work for themselves and their constituents, but had little practical experience with applying new technologies. Various CSOs focused on the novelty of using new technologies, especially mobile apps, rather than focusing on how to use these new technologies strategically to address development challenges. This is in part because many CSOs perceived a shrinking donor interest in Cambodia, so they felt they needed to propose technology solutions to stay relevant. This focus on technology versus focusing on the end users' needs sometimes resulted in projects that were not sufficiently responsive to their constituents' needs, and wasted time and resources on poorly designed tech solutions.

USAID/Cambodia knew that to adapt approaches and match the needs of CSOs with the services of the tech sector in a rapidly changing social, political and economic environment, DI needed to be equally dynamic and adaptive. USAID and DI also knew that there were obvious entry points wherein the project could immediately add value by helping the two sectors communicate in the same language, while focusing on problem-driven approaches to address priority community needs. DI acted as a translator and intermediary, and **brought leaders together in collaborative forums** to learn from each other and adapt approaches to achieve common goals.

DI brought actors together from various sectors in several forums (free co-working space, organizing and hosting events at their free meeting space, quarterly partner meet-ups, etc.) to jointly identify pressing challenges and to share information about recent technology solutions being used in Cambodia. Various technology firms said that without these meet-ups, they would not have had a chance to liaise with as many civil society organizations and explore potential partnerships. In feedback forms, participants regularly ranked the networking portion of the event, the pitches about new technology solutions, and the presentations about other USAID funding opportunities as the most useful parts of DI's meet-ups.

CLA CONTRIBUTION¹



Collaboration leverages resources for collective benefit.

DI facilitated collaboration between development actors to help them identify their respective comparative advantages and jointly achieve a mutual, targeted outcome. This approach aligns with evidence from the private sector and philanthropic organizations that highlights the **collective benefits** that collaboration and **strategic partnerships** can have both for participating organizations and the community issues they address (*Kania & Kramer, 2011; Gemmel, 2014; Todeva & Knoke, 2005*).

¹ This column presents evidence of CLA's contribution from the Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA). This helps connect CLA to the case so readers can see how CLA supports a real-world development activity achieve better outcomes.

1

DI CASE STUDY

In early 2015, at the project's mid-term, DI consulted with USAID and embraced an adaptive management approach to test the relevance of DI's activities and approach. DI made changes to the management structure and **entered a learning period**.

2

3

4

5

6

7



CLA CONTRIBUTION



Taking time to pause and reflect on our work is critical to learning and improved performance.

By entering into a learning period, DI intentionally set aside time to pause and reflect, which helped the development actors involved in this work to better understand the challenges and opportunities in their work, and co-create adaptations to facilitate improvement. Research shows that individuals learn the most from experience when they reflect on that experience and reflecting as a group builds mutual understanding that fosters collaboration. According to the latest research on neuroscience, group reflection is more likely to catch flaws in thinking and biases than individual learning (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2015; Kahneman,

1

DI CASE STUDY

DI pursued evidence-based learning by conducting a rapid demand survey, using online forms, focus group discussions, and interviews. The survey collected inputs from key stakeholders in the NGO, donor, and tech community, including members of DI's co-working space, event attendees, and training participants.

The survey findings indicated that the CSO community was most interested in the services that weren't offered in the market, such as short-term practical, hands-on tech training on digital monitoring and evaluation, social media, and video production. They also wanted an option for one-on-one support to develop technology tools versus group meetings. Since many CSOs already had established office spaces, they didn't value co-working space the same way as the start-up community.

Stakeholder interviews also outlined concerns from the CSO community about accessing DI's services after the project closed out, which was originally in 2016. To **respond to stakeholder demand, DI worked collaboratively with USAID to design a year 2 strategic work plan that reflected a big shift** towards the services that were revealed to be in most demand (piloting practical tech training) and a transition from the services that were already sufficiently available on the local market (specifically co-working space and event production).

2

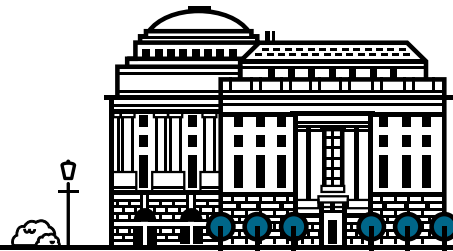
3

4

5

6

7



CLA CONTRIBUTION



Feedback loops increase the likelihood that evidence will inform decision-making.

DI used specific tools and processes to create feedback loops to provide continuous learning to inform decision-making. They analyzed the information they gathered from the rapid demand surveys, online forms, focus group discussions, and interviews and then made decisions based on that learning and followed through on decisions reached. The literature finds that adaptive management requires an agile and enabling culture that helps organizations use rapid feedback loops to continuously and efficiently process and build on new information to achieve their goals (Valters, Cummings, & Nixon, 2016; Allan & Curtis, 2011).

1

DI CASE STUDY

DI's agile and enabling culture helped to facilitate these strategic changes. DI has created a positive workplace where staff, visitors, and clients learn from each other and promote exchange, creativity, and outreach. As described by Setha Rath, a senior program manager: "We adapt, we are flexible, we test new things out—that's innovation to me." **Openly discussing mistakes and lessons learned is core to DI's work culture.**

"Promoting a culture of innovation in a team means acknowledging ideas that fail and being prepared to pivot,"

— *Vibol Theng, DI's former Deputy Chief of Party*

"At DI, we need to keep asking ourselves why things didn't work, and to make sure our end-users define our priorities, so our ideas succeed and our activities make positive and lasting impacts."

— *Kate Heuisler, DI's Chief of Party*

In addition, a final results and learning assessment of the DI program found that adaptive management over DI's lifespan improved activity focus and quality. Learning from mistakes and applying learning to make real-time programmatic changes led the DI team to choose more targeted program objectives, which in turn led to higher-quality interventions and improved program outcomes.

Based on the MTE findings and the rapid demand survey, DI adapted its programmatic approach to focus on scaling its piloted tech training services and partnering with local implementing partners, who would take over key DI services at the end of, or before, the proposed term in 2018. Following the successful award of the extension, DI partnered with a) Cambodia's largest NGO consortium, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), to assess needs and pilot increased tech training and services for its member NGOs, and b) Impact Hub Phnom Penh, a local enterprise, to support the growing social enterprise community through a business incubator. Both partnerships continue to deliver results in 2020, and these partners will continue to deliver ICT and business incubator services after DI ended (5).

CLA CONTRIBUTION



Learning leaders are critical for establishing learning cultures on teams.

Based on the evidence, critical conditions to foster learning cultures include decentralized/non-hierarchical decision-making processes; availability of slack resources (including time); communities of practice; strong and enabling leadership; a risk-taking culture (experimentation); and knowledge management and sharing systems. The evidence indicates that a culture of building trust and psychological safety improves staff's ability to learn and adapt, and that this stems from the organization's leadership. The literature specifically highlights the role of "learning leaders" in establishing a learning culture on teams by enabling non-hierarchical relations, inspiring continuous improvement, and integrating a focus on learning in organizational processes.

2

3

4

5

6

7

1

DI CASE STUDY

Based on the MTE findings and the rapid demand survey, DI adapted its programmatic approach to focus on scaling its piloted tech training services and partnering with local implementing partners, who would take over key DI services at the end of, or before, the proposed term in 2018. Following the successful award of the extension, DI partnered with a) Cambodia's largest NGO consortium, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC), to assess needs and pilot increased tech training and services for its member NGOs, and b) Impact Hub Phnom Penh, a local enterprise, to support the growing social enterprise community through a business incubator. **Both partnerships continue to deliver results in 2020, and these partners will continue to deliver ICT and business incubator services after DI ended.**

2

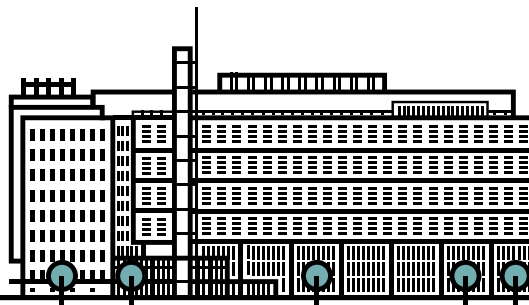
3

4

5

6

7



CLA CONTRIBUTION



Local engagement leads to local ownership and ultimately improved development outcomes.

Through partnering with local implementing partners who would take over key DI services at the end of the project, DI invited local stakeholders to actively participate in development processes. In doing so, local partners became agents of their own change process and even more motivated to achieve the desired development outcomes. This is consistent with the literature on thinking politically, politically smart, and locally driven development (Faustino & Booth, 2014; Booth, 2015; Drew, 2002).

DI CASE STUDY

DI embraced evidence-based learning to improve its programming based on a “customer satisfaction” tablet that collected feedback after tech training and services were administered, and used social media insights/data to inform the project’s social media strategy. In line with its adaptive management approach, **DI conducted quarterly internal programmatic assessments through “pause and reflect” sessions to assess its own progress**, and semi-annual sessions with local partners to check in on their progress. Findings from both activities help DI adapt programming and write responsive work plans. These approaches help ensure that DI is aligned with the needs of its target stakeholders and can meet the shifting demands of the local market.

CLA CONTRIBUTION



Taking time to pause and reflect on our work is critical to learning and improved performance.

The literature emphasizes the important role that reflection plays in having an effective adaptive practice. Researchers at Harvard Business School have found that reflection on past experience is what teaches individuals the most. Recent discoveries in the health sector, specifically in the field of neuroscience, further support the need for group reflection within organizations. Research shows that reflecting as a group builds mutual understanding that aids collaboration and evidence-informed decision-making.



1

DI CASE STUDY

A final results and learning assessment evaluation of the DI program found that DI catalyzed behavior change among partners, beneficiaries and the private sector. Over the lifespan of the program, DI facilitated mindset shifts for its partners, who then began modeling and institutionalizing DI processes and practices in their own work (7), such as adaptive management, applying a user-focused, and managing with empathy. For example, partner SHE Investments, an enterprise that supports women entrepreneurs, modeled their communications infrastructure on DI's model after working closely with the team in 2018 and 2019, and now uses data to help define and execute their strategy.

ICT training partners CCC and Capacity Development Bank Cambodia (VBNK) also adopted a simple trainee satisfaction survey modeled on DI's survey, helping them move from counting the number of people trained to focusing on the trainees' satisfaction with their services, and now report that they adapt their training courses regularly based on trainee feedback.

CLA CONTRIBUTION

CLA begets CLA and sometimes leads to scale up.

By involving local partners in the initial feedback loop activity, DI spurred a "demonstration effect" where local partners learned about the benefits of a successful CLA approach implemented by another actor, and they then adapted this approach and scaled it up in their own context. An analysis of CLA case studies reveals this pattern.

2

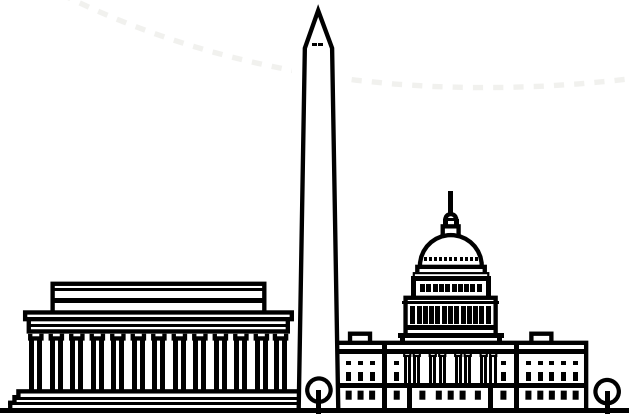
3

4

5

6

7





CITATIONS

- Allan, C., and Curtis, A., Jones, I., "Towards a Holistic Conceptualization of Adaptive Capacity at the Local Level: Insights from the Local Adaptive Capacity Framework," ODI, March 2011.
- Booth, D., "Thinking and Working Politically," GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack No. 13. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham (2015)
- Di Stefano, G., F. Gino, G. Pisano, and B. Staats. 2015. "Learning by Thinking: Overcoming the Bias for Action through Reflection." Working Paper No. 14-093, Harvard Business School, Boston.
- Drew, R., "Learning in Partnership: What constitutes learning in the context of south-north partnerships?" BOND Discussion Paper. London: British Overseas NGOs for Development (2002).
- Faustino, J. and Booth, D., "Development entrepreneurship: How donors and leaders can foster institutional change," Working Politically in Practice Series, Case Study No. 2. London: The Asia Foundation and ODI (2014)
- Gemmel, L. (Ed.) (2014); "Collective Impact Edition". Philanthropist 26(1). <http://www.collaborationforimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/The-Philanthropist-Vol-26-No-1-2014.pdf>
- Kahneman, D. 2011. Thinking, Fast and Slow. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011). "Collective impact". Stanford Social Innovation Review. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact
- Managing Complexity: Adaptive management at Mercy Corps https://d2zyf8ayvg1369.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/Adaptive%20management%20paper_external.pdf
- ODI Research reports and Studies, "Politically smart support to economic development," March 2016
- Todeva, E. & Knokes, D. (2005). "Strategic Alliances and Models of Collaboration." Management Decision, Vol 43(1) <http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/1967/1/fulltext.pdf>
- Valters, C., Cummings, C., and Nixon, H., "Putting learning at the centre: Adaptive development programming in practice," ODI report (2016)