

Tips on Collective Sensemaking

These tips are part of a series of tips and resources to support context-driven adaptation in programming. For other resources, see the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection at <https://usaidlearninglab.org/context-driven-adaptation-overview> (internal staff version at <https://programnet.usaid.gov/collection/context-driven-adaptation>) or the Google Doc versions [here](#).

Previous tips have explored the importance of [building diverse alliances](#) and of [strengthening local capacity to think and work politically](#), and in both cases, some of the tips focused on engaging local actors in making sense of data and patterns related to both programming and context. Defining how things are changing with local stakeholders and partners both helps programming to be more alert to changes in context and shifts ownership, enabling greater local leadership of the effort. This set of tips focus in further on what it takes to do collective sense-making with local partners.

- 1) *Gather valuable data.* Before you can engage in collective sense-making, you need something to make sense of. Investing to gather data that is useful to a variety of stakeholders can make a huge difference. This can range in scope from major national surveys (e.g. the donor-supported Demographic and Health Surveys that most countries run periodically) to more targeted information, such as mapping networks of businesses or actors around an issue. In addition to collecting data, displaying it can help prompt a sense-making conversation - either through GIS mapping or techniques like social network mapping. Social network mapping (for example, a [network map of business connections](#) in Serbia's Business Enabling Project (BEP), or [live data](#) on stakeholder connections from as part of the Nigeria [Strengthening Advocacy for Civic Engagement](#) (SACE) program) can reveal patterns even to those who already are familiar with the context, and can spur interesting insights. To improve its value to stakeholders, data should be around an issue area, rather than organized by USAID project.
- 2) *Be transparent and inclusive.* In order to host useful sense-making, USAID or our partners need to be very transparent with those coming about the data they're seeing, how it was gathered, and what our related programming is. In addition, we should seek to gather a diversity of voices - especially those often marginalized in the context - to participate in the sense-making, as they may see the same data through a very different lens. A great example of bringing together stakeholders who don't usually sit together to discuss information comes from the [Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative](#) (LAVI), where they reviewed information on the education system's performance with a variety of NGOs, teachers union representatives, ministry of education staff, and academics, leading to some unexpected points of agreement around steps that could be taken.
- 3) *Let partners find patterns.* The more we step back from the process (a [facilitative](#) approach), the more likely that it will spur local actors to take their own actions in support

of our effort or in their own directions. For example, in the Serbia [BEP](#), regular conversations with businesses helped the implementers to gauge shifting levels of interest in pursuing reform and navigate multiple changes in governments. They captured and analyzed this data to inform programming. Going further, as their [CLA case submission](#) highlights, their broad consultations around that analysis “stimulated a number of relevant professional associations and other stakeholders to contribute to conceptualizing, legislating, and implementing the reform, which effectively crowdfunded the reform. Private-sector construction professionals donated hundreds of hours of their time to inform this reform, especially after they realized that their advice was heard. This not only enabled the development of a broad coalition that could see the reform through; it also provided a basis for regular feedback and improvement of reform proposals.”

- 4) *Embrace different answers or disagreement.* One common outcome of gathering a number of stakeholders to make sense of data is that they will have different takes on what it means. Rather than try to “solve” this and reach consensus, it is important to accept that these different ideas can be useful for work. As in the Liberia example above, this can help to find common denominators while retaining organizational differences more broadly. In [Zambia](#), this enabled richer feedback to allow adaptation to which aspects of work needed adjustment for different groups. Having built openness to adaptation into the project culture, staff reflected on the feedback they were receiving from participating farmers who had applied project-promoted technologies to their own fields, including their reactions to cross-farmer data. This unearthed opportunities such as demonstrating new weeding techniques that reduced labor burden on women and children. In Nigeria, the welcoming of different perspectives in the sense-making process was critical for [SACE](#) to enable each cluster of partners to resolve their own path forward.
- 5) *Make collective sense-making part of Pause and Reflect.* An increasing proportion of USAID programming is including [pause and reflect](#) moments in work plans. These are an excellent opportunity to gather stakeholders for sense-making, making the process more efficient and easier to repeat at set intervals. In Nigeria SACE, a formal tracking of advocacy progress as well as stories from most significant change monitoring were presented to each cluster of partners at [annual learning summits](#) to be validated and updated with interim outcomes. This produced a rich understanding of collective impact as well as opening a deeper discussion on collective strategy: “In the SACE project, change agents (clusters) were prioritized as the heart of the MEL process, and once they received coaching in how to apply the MEL techniques, they institutionalized the processes in their own work without externally-imposed structures or standards. Clusters used advocacy strategy matrices as a planning and monitoring tool in cluster reviews, and clusters regularly pivoted and refined strategies based on the outcomes reported in that process. The annual learning summits also served as opportunities to discuss their progress with peers and program officers in a low-stakes environment that facilitated

relationship-building and capacity-building, while also generating evidence for mid-course project corrections and summative evaluation.”

- 6) *Link the sense-making process to understanding of the context.* Although in many cases, the gathered data and patterns spotted by stakeholders stand meaningfully in their own right, they can become more useful if implementers can refer back to baseline information and reflect on how their prior understandings should be updated. A common example of this is where a baseline [political economy analysis](#) was conducted, and needs to be periodically updated, particularly the section identifying dynamics (or factors likely to change). In SACE, [collective mapping of accountability systems](#) and their underlying power dynamics was done by clusters of partners, for themselves, with peer learning across clusters. Collective sense-making can be a rich way of updating those understandings. In any case, the types of data used to spur collective sense-making are best situated as a way of monitoring the context, rather than monitoring programming per se.