2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Leveraging observational evidence and innovative reflective practice for adaptation

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Reflecting on observational evidence, Credit: Chemonics International

Summary:

'We must learn!' is a common cry on projects often resulting in a dry and static 'pause and reflects' that – if you are lucky – include evidence on occasion. Frontline staff in peacebuilding activities observe change first-hand, and structured channels for this to reach leadership to inform decision-making, learning, and adaptation are rarely created. We wanted to change that.

As part of the Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities (DCEO) IDIQ, the 100 Solutions for Stability activity uses participatory dialogue approaches to identifying problems and associated solutions with communities across Iraq. We saw an opportunity to innovate our CLA approaches and ensure that the community dialogue team could not only learn, but inform adaptation across the activity.

Hierarchical Card Sorting (HCS) as a CLA approach can expose the mental models brought to day-to-day work and understands that not all evidence is numbers on a page – often observational, and qualitative, evidence is more revealing and useful for decision-making and informing adaptation. We adjusted HCS to be friendly to a group setting and used it to support our peacebuilding staff to reflect on community dialogue processes based on their observations, as well as to test assumptions in our theory of change with a weighting exercise. The results of this informed significant adjustments to the activity's dialogue approach.

Our submission reflects the subcomponents of adaptive management and continuous learning and improvement.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

The 100 Solutions activity works through single- and mixed-identity dialogues that are facilitated by Community Coordination Officers (CCOs). Through dialogue, CCOs support participants to identify the key drivers and issues that contribute to conflict in their community and solutions to them that 100 Solutions activity can deliver. This participatory approach ensures full local ownership of defining the current state of the context, as well as to themselves identify the work that the activity delivers – a crucial approach in a context like Iraq where trust in interventions has been fractured.

Participatory activities are highly complex, and so require complexity-sensitive evaluation and learning approaches to truly measure, understand, and learn from change. The more traditional pause-and-reflect (PNR) approach to CLA was not catalyzing the learning that we needed. Often these workshops feel like something we 'must' do and, depending on how PNRs are facilitated, they can be boring and restrictive, not allowing sufficient space or structure for creative brainstorming or deep analytical reflection. Even when people are engaged well, they are often uncomfortable with reflecting on challenges and worried about confronting mistakes even if it's done during an internal team session (something especially true for frontline staff like CCOs). Finally, traditional PNRs often happen AT staff, rather than with them: they are usually facilitated and then documented in a separate exercise. This means that the analysis and the recommendations coming out of it are produced by someone who is often not one of the decision makers or the frontline staff on a project. These factors culminate, meaning people become disengaged and are less likely to give time to CLA.

This is a blow to the CLA process. Staff like the CCOs are the ones who experience success and challenge first-hand and gain the very insights that are needed to inform adaptation. Creating engaging spaces where people own the analysis and recommendations is better for collaboration, learning, and adapation.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

The 100 Solutions activity sits within the broader DCEO IDIQ. The IDIQ was designed to have a standalone Learning Task Order (LTO) dedicated to evaluation and learning. This meant that there was a dedicated stream of work that had the required room and space to think deeply about what would support a complex programme to engage in CLA, and that this work was built in as an expectation from the beginning. This was hugely beneficial, as it meant that there was the strategic, human, intellectual, and financial resources to be able to consider how to use a CLA approach in a way that was meaningful for the teams and sensitive to the complexity of the activity It is common knowledge that different teams operate in different manners, and will have different styles in terms of how they learn and interpret evidence. Having a separate Task Order was critical to allowing the people and space that is necessary to navigate such factors. This subsequently allows implementation Task Orders to take a more adaptive approach in their work, as they could rely on the LTO to provide the necessary evaluation and CLA support that empowers adaptive management.

In addition to this, the Task Order Director is an evaluation and learning specialist who predominantly had a background working with (legacy) DFID-, NORAD-, and CSSF-funded activities, and so brought a variety of different ways of working and thinking to the LTO. This cross-donor experience meant that lessons in 'what works' in supporting learning on participatory programming in different donor contexts (especially those also operating in Iraq) could be brought to the table and fed into the overall Learning Agenda for the activity.

CLA was therefore de facto considered integral to the IDIQ's implementation given the complexity-sensitive IDIQ design.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

As a result of the complexity of our programme and the shortcomings of traditional PNR approaches to CLA, we wanted to do something different to support our CCOs. To provide an analytical, complexity-sensitive and participatory learning environment, the LTO Director selected Hierarchical Card Sorting (HCS) as an alternative way to reflect on evidence and support learning for adaptation.

HCS is an excellent learning exercise to support the exploration of experience and retrospective reflection. It uses a card sorting method where you identify ‘cases’ within a certain scenario and sort them by the ‘most significant difference’ until you reach a single card. This creates a ‘tree’ structure that allows for reflection on why certain differences felt important. As such, HCS can expose the mental models and biases brought to day-to-day work, which is valuable reflection for a programme working with diverse identity groups. Critically, HCS understands that not all evidence is numbers on a page. On the contrary, observational (and qualitative) evidence is more revealing and useful for informing adaptation. As such it was well-suited to our inclusive learning goals, and would break out of some of the issues associated with traditional PNR approaches.

To ensure buy-in, the LTO Director attended CCO team meetings to float the concept and sense-check the CCOs’ interest. They were intrigued and expressed desire to try it (though perhaps were a little skeptical of how this could help their work); as such, workshops were scheduled. Traditionally HCS is a one-on-one exercise, but we adapted it to work in groups and scheduled an additional workshop for reflecting on the learning from HCS and how to translate it into adaptation. Critically we wanted the CCOs to feel ownership over it, and as such involved them in the design of it, including co-selecting ‘cases’ (which were identity groups involved in the dialogues).

The workshops were very revealing. The CCOs choices around how to divide the cases provided valuable insight into how different identity groups have contributed to the problem and solution identification goals of 100 solutions. This learning was integral and fed into community action plans that underpinned the new communities that the CCOs were to engage with in the next year of implementation. This learning also allowed the CCOs to test some critical assumption in the theory of change about the relationship between certain identity group's ability to create change and their interest and ability to participate in the dialogue process.

However, the most revealing leaning occurred in the learning workshop. The purpose of this workshop was to allow the CCOs to analyze their own learning and generate recommendations rather than it be done for or at them by a third party. This meant that they could engage in deeper, more strategic, conversations as a group and translated their learning into actionable steps and recommendations for the Task Order. They were even able consider how to communicate these reflections and recommendations to activity leadership. This distillation process has subsequently translated into both understanding the intrinsic and instrumental value of the dialogue process, as well as direct adaptations to it. One example of the adaptations was that it was revealed that the process of identifying problems was a longer and more structured process than the process for identifying solutions which was having a negative impact on participants. As such, they felt that it was important to adapt this so that it is more proportional. A planning workshop for the new year was scheduled the week after the workshops and so all of the learning and findings was poured straight into planning, and is subsequently feeding into theory of change refreshes. These adaptations, such as the one highlighted, have since been taken on board in the new year of work in new communities. Due to the participatory nature of the workshop, the CCOs felt ownership over their learning and felt empowered collaborate directly with their leadership to communicate the adaptations they felt were needed.

In terms of our broader CLA, the CCOs found HCS so useful that they asked it be repeated at each 'phase' of 100 Solutions to help them reflect and adapt. They are actively excited about it! Interestingly this reflects the fact that learning is rarely quarterly or on a regular schedule; instead it must follow the rhythm of implementation.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Having CLA embedded as an expectation from the beginning via a standalone Task Order was a double-edged sword. While it meant that resources and time were available, it also risked it being perceived as an impetus rather than something that was embraced naturally. However, taking a more people-centred and innovative approach to CLA helped ensure that risk was not realized.

Over time, with approaches including and beyond HCS (such as participatory theory of change workshops), we have seen different attitudes in our team and broader culture grow to be more positive towards engaging in CLA. It has also, slowly, led to organizational change in terms of not just valuing CLA but making space for it, as well as actively hungering for it. Our teams are asking us about the relevance of things to the theory of change, and ask when they will get to do more learning workshops. This is a far cry from when we started where teams were a little uncertain as to whether it would be worth prioritizing these kinds of engagements.

In the future, we are hoping CLA can be completely owned by teams. While HCS, for example, was facilitated by a third party, we are hoping that we can teach the CCOs to facilitate it for one another. This is important because it helps grown an independent culture of CLA that no longer relies on someone instigating it and instead happens naturally, as well as ensuring that our staff gain valuable skills in facilitation and learning.

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

CLA, especially in the form of HCS, has led to adaptations in the way the activity is delivered. This was reflected directly in community action plans and workplans for the new dialogue processes in the new communities; delivery of the new round of activity is still underway and so evidence of changed outcomes is not to-hand yet. However, we anticipate this to improve dialogue processes and solution identification, which contributes to the development objective of community cohesion and improved resilience.

In addition, CLA and HCS has really supported our CCOs to lean into their analytical natures and see the power of reflective practice. While not a direct link to our development outcomes, this is still a substantive change to illustrate. CCOs are the backbone of delivery to achieve community cohesion and overall increased resilience in the communities in which we operate. Supporting their ability to learn and collaboratively identify adaptations is critical to seeing our outcomes delivered effectively. This change has translated into their increased engagement with, and enjoyment of, CLA, but also to their language – they use more causal terminology, for example, and think more clearly about how their work contributes to overall goals. This is evidenced in the work they produce, but also the conversations one can have with them. Even yesterday in conversation with a CCO, she was explaining how she is observing improved capacities and motivations, which she noted leads to behaviour change in the community. This causal awareness did not exist before we started using more participatory approaches to CLA.

6. 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?

By nature of the work, CCOs and the 100 Solutions team more generally are extremely busy with the day-to-day delivery of dialogue and solutions projects. In this fast-paced working environment, setting aside time for reflective exercises like HCS are always a challenge. Added to this is the additional fatigue that people frequently have in the face of CLA: as discussed earlier, it is often seen as something one 'must' do and often people de-prioritize it. In this context, the benefit of a dedicated Learning Task Order and CLA Director, in combination with broad organizational support for CLA, were significant enablers for the HCS exercise in the face of the obstacles of teams being busy with the day-to-day. Project leadership and USAID supported HCS and empowered CCOs and 100 Solutions to carve out time to participate in the exercise.

The purpose of the HCS exercise was not clear to the CCOs at first. Even when the purpose was explained, without tangible experience some of them struggled with the idea of retrospective learning and how it could lead to improvements in project design and implementation going forward. They also questioned how the HCS exercise fits with the theory of change that they had spent considerable time working on. However, the purpose and benefits of the exercise became clear as they progressed through it and most clearly in the final learning workshop; the interpretation of it gave them the purpose. As highlighted above, when CCOs were given the time to reflect on their findings further after conducting the exercise and to analyze and synthesize the findings into actionable recommendations for themselves and for the project management team, the value of retrospective learning became clear. Subsequently, they have asked for more!