2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Navigating an Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka with Continuous Learning

Name: Avanthi Kottegoda

Organization: Global Communities, SCORE Project

SCORE IKG Activity with a local CSO in the Southern Region of Sri Lanka. Credit: South Regional Team of SCORE

Summary:

Sri Lanka is facing an unprecedented political and economic crisis with a lack of access to basic needs, daily power outages, and regular protests by citizens expressing frustration and demanding change. The SCORE activity was designed and implemented in 2018 with the overall purpose of strengthening Sri Lankan efforts to advance social cohesion and reconciliation and support Sri Lankan-led efforts to build a more inclusive and resilient society. As the current economic crisis began to impact implementation, SCORE faced new challenges which shifted focus from long-term post-conflict recovery more immediate response.

To undertake these changes, the SCORE team relied heavily on Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) to gather learnings around the current crisis to understand if a change in the strategic direction was needed, identify opportunities in a challenging environment and leverage them to support SCORE objectives within the framework of the project, and to inform possible adaptations to the SCORE work plan. CLA allowed SCORE to adapt with less difficulty and more precision to support communities to address recommendations based on key findings together with staff and stakeholders in the economic crisis while still keeping an eye on the broader project goal of strengthening social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

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?

Sri Lanka is experiencing an extreme economic crisis, the biggest since post-colonial independence in 1948. The country is in severe debt having exhausted its foreign-exchange reserves and reached third place in April 2022 in the weekly global inflation dashboard computed by the John Hopkins University. Since September 2021, import limits have been declared on many items including essentials such as medicine and fuel which has resulted in daily power outages and limited or no access to cooking gas and fuel for vehicles. While the continued impact of COVID-19 and inflation have contributed to the situation, this current crisis extends past these global factors.

The USAID SCORE project was designed to advocate for and encourage changes in the mindset, attitudes, and perceptions among conflict-affected Sri Lankans especially marginalized and vulnerable populations to facilitate social cohesion and reconciliation through a mix of short and long-term development-oriented activities. However, the current economic crisis has shifted the discourse from the effects of the past conflict to the effects of new shocks and stressors with which people are currently affected. By March, Sri Lanka's currency rapidly depreciated, inflation was on the rise, and vast import restrictions were imposed. By the end of April 2022, the government in power had lost its majority and political turmoil increased. Almost all the budgets for SCORE activities have required modifications due to the daily fluctuating prices and suppliers have been unable to deliver items on time due to the unavailability of fuel and items. This had a domino effect on the timeline of SCORE's activity implementation. More importantly, the communities with whom SCORE has worked hard to build resilience and cohesion are now facing more pressing survival challenges.

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

CLA is a set of practices that help USAID and partners to become nimbler and more receptive to evolving changes be it contextual or programmatic, and supports knowledge driven adaptive management to improve development effectiveness. CLA encourages a project team to go beyond the routine reviews, monitoring, and evaluations to understand the pulse of a problem and develop a way of thinking which is innovative, creative, and holistic.

The SCORE project was designed to be guided by CLA due to the sensitive nature of the project's thematic areas of social cohesion and reconciliation within a volatile country context that has a dynamic history of periodic civil unrest and armed conflicts. Hence SCORE was designed to allow for flexible data collection and continuous learning to inform responsive and adaptive management to guide the strategic direction of the project. Because CLA was built into the program, which emphasized deep collaboration between SCORE's front-line staff, local partners, community, and government stakeholders SCORE did not need to create new mechanisms for mapping and assessing the new context when the economic crisis occurred. The integration of constant feedback loops between the SCORE team as well as between key project stakeholders and SCORE were already in place to enable SCORE to seamlessly transition towards needs-based activities, developed jointly with staff and stakeholders. SCORE also integrated CLA with Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) principles which influenced iterative political economy analysis to address the challenges SCORE faced in the current turmoil.

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.

From the start of the project, SCORE attempted to integrate CLA into its programming with the intention of building a culture where adaptation to address challenges and leverage opportunities around the project's goals was continuous and collaborative. SCORE worked hard to ensure that CLA was embedded at the very core of its programming. One way that SCORE did this was to structure the project staff so that program teams live and work in the project's target communities. As a result, SCORE has been able to sustain operations throughout many ups and downs throughout the past four years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and now the economic crisis.

SCORE has strengthened community platforms called co-existence societies (CES) in target communities to build relationships and connected local partners with them through Regional Partner Programs to strengthen opportunities for learning and adaptation. SCORE initiated regular Program Activity Learning Meetings (PALM), a Pause and Reflect activity involving a representative cross-section of SCORE team members which has helped to identify what worked in program implementation, discuss follow-on activities to build on what was achieved, or to fix what did not work during implementation. Most importantly, PALMs have created opportunities for the team to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them. In addition, SCORE has conducted additional Pause & Reflect activities and data gathering to specifically collect learnings from the ground on how the economic crisis is impacting SCORE stakeholders, asking what different challenges do they face, are conflict stressors increasing, and what are the key priority areas identified by stakeholders that SCORE can address? All of these CLA activities have helped to derive quick learnings and create constant feedback loops in order to understand the compounding challenges that SCORE stakeholders are facing with the continuation of the economic crisis.

Based on the information collected from key stakeholders, the SCORE team then reviewed the annual work plan, targets, and budget and brainstormed adaptations required. While more time is needed to better gauge the impact of the economic crisis on Sri Lanka, the SCORE team prioritized key areas of interventions identified by SCORE program teams and community stakeholders based on the learnings gathered from the ground and adjusted program operations. Adaptations included:

• Integrating metal health/psychosocial support services (MHPSS) MHPSS across all SCORE activities, especially non-clinical MHPSS activities at the community level.
• Focusing on livelihood activities particularly in-kind/cash transfers to vulnerable populations and strengthen local agricultural produce for small farmers.
• Re-evaluating continuation of certain activities due to the increasing costs, especially those involving provision of equipment, supplies or transportation.
• Prioritizing proposals sent in through Requests for Applications (RFA) for funding, which focused on livelihood recovery and resilience, keeping within the framework of the SCORE objectives to support the needs identified by SCORE stakeholders.

SCORE has also developed rapid outcome assessments to measure, understand, and inform shifts of opinions from key actors and end users of SCORE Activity in relation to reconciliation, trust, local government services to marginalized communities, psychosocial support mechanisms, and participation of youth. These adaptations, informed by evidence-based learning, will hopefully ensure that SCORE continues to provide immediate support to communities, while still working towards the project's goals of social cohesion and reconciliation.

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?

CLA helps the SCORE team to be intentional in planning interventions and making strategic decisions in a context that is constantly changing. The regional positioning of the project team has enabled a culture of CLA on the project and helped them to understand the more nuanced impact of the crisis. It has opened opportunities for learning between the different teams, keeping them engaged and immersed in the unfolding situation which made the shift towards crisis response easier. It also encouraged them to think of innovative approaches to still work towards the project objectives of social cohesion while responding to the immediate needs. CLA has also helped the project to think beyond itself and share information and learnings from the ground with USAID in real time so that course correction with guidance from USAID take place without major delays. CLA has improved the co-creation process of SCORE grants with civic, government, private actors because the SCORE team is equipped with evidence-based knowledge from its frequent discussions with community members and stakeholders which has been pivotal throughout the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis.

Additionally, SCORE's leadership has embraced CLA and has encouraged and CLA values within the team such as openness and trust. This has boosted the spirits of the team who has faced considerable stress since 2019 with the Easter Sunday attacks, followed by COVID-19 and now the economic crisis. Having a CLA culture within the team that promotes open and honest dialogue has had a positive impact on the team.

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?

It is too early to assess development outcomes of SCORE's CLA approach to address the challenges discussed above but it has to be assumed that addressing the immediate needs of Sri Lankan communities will result in an overall positive impact. While some original goals of the project might be harder to obtain given the continuously changing conditions, CLA may have presented a window of opportunity for SCORE to bridge some ethno-religious divides while responding to the economic crisis because the crisis has impacted all communities alike and has enabled SCORE to engage with a larger number of communities with traditional ethnic divisions.

In addition, SCORE, through its co-creation process, has engaged the national and sub-national government to strengthen buy-in and ownership in community level activities. SCORE will continue working with communities, government, and other key actors, with the aim of building their resilience to face the oncoming challenges, stimulate dialogue around the sensitive socio-economic issues, give voice to marginalized groups (particularly youth and women), and enforce do-no-harm principles. These external collaboration opportunities and subsequent discussion and analysis within the SCORE team will enable the project to continue to derive learnings remain agile. Further, integrating monitoring into learning activities helps to ensure SCORE's commitment to the data driven decision making process supported by TWP principles.

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?

While the deliberate design of the SCORE project to integrate CLA to all aspects of programming is the most evident of the enabling factors, what truly drives CLA within SCORE is the leadership of the project. The constant encouragement to have discussion and dialogue around “what did we learn” has brought CLA to the forefront of the SCORE project. The teams are integrating learning into grant activities and including CLA sessions in capacity building trainings for SCORE grantees, to the extent that small local NGOs and CSO are aware of and using CLA lingo when discussing their activities. Utilizing resources to have a dedicated staff member to lead CLA and giving visibility and importance to CLA through the buy-in of the leadership and senior management helped CLA to gain traction within the team. Further, regular activities and discussions focused on learning created a space for the team to be open and honest about what went wrong and stimulate thinking around what can be done differently next time. USAID supported this by giving SCORE the space to share what did not work. All CLA reports are shared with USAID and SCORE is given the allowance to take risks which has been especially enabling during the economic crisis to prioritize interventions within the scope of the SCORE framework.

SCORE learned through the years that continuous engagement with the team is important to enable CLA, and one of SCORE’s biggest successes is to witness CLA being intentionally cascaded to the project stakeholders. CLA has become more than just a set of practices, it has become a way of thinking within the team, because of which SCORE is not just replicating successes but learning from failures and building on successes through iterative adaptation. CLA is the pulse of the SCORE project and has been integral to help SCORE navigate through continuous challenges.