2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Embedding Collaboration and Adaptation into Third-Party Monitoring

Name:

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Organization:

USAID MEPL implemented by EnCompass, LLC

Summary:

Recently, Lebanon has faced a complex mix of social, political, and economic crises affecting all sectors across the country. USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) program has been providing critical support through several activities. USAID Lebanon commissioned USAID's Monitoring and Evaluation Program for Lebanon (MEPL) to implement third-party monitoring (TPM) of three of BHA's activities to supplement existing monitoring systems, gather data directly from activity participants, and gain critical information about these activities in hard-to-reach areas. TPM was implemented by EnCompass, LLC, in collaboration with two sub-contractors, Management Systems International and Proximity International.

From the onset, the TPM team created an open and collaborative environment among internal and external stakeholders, which facilitated continuous learning and adaptation. The TPM team maintained regular and close communication with all stakeholders, which allowed for collaboration on the design, piloting, and implementation of the TPM activity. Meetings and periodic checkpoints were also utilized to share challenges within the TPM process or methodology and encourage necessary adaptations. The local data collection organization, in particular, was given the space to communicate challenges and observations from the field which could be addressed or adapted to improve the TPM activity and resulting data and reports. This level of engagement and leadership is not typically expected or allowed to the local organizations in other TPM activities. As a result of this open, collaborative, and adaptive process, stakeholders have reported an increase in program knowledge, applauded the relevance of the TPM coverage, and facilitated further learning sessions with other TPM teams.

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

For the last several years, Lebanon has faced a complex mix of social, political, and economic crises affecting the country nationwide and across all sectors. In response, USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) program has been providing critical support, particularly in food access and health care services for needy households. An integral component of this assistance is third-party monitoring (TPM) to inform BHA as well as implementing partners (IPs) of achievements and challenges in humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. With this in mind, USAID/Lebanon commissioned USAID's Monitoring and Evaluation Program for Lebanon (MEPL) to implement TPM of BHA's cash assistance activity for the World Food Programme and clinic-based health activities delivered by International Medical Corps and Relief International. The TPM is implemented by EnCompass LLC, in collaboration with subcontractors Management Systems International (MSI, a Tetra Tech company) and Proximity International (PI).

Through TPM, BHA, and their IPs, USAID can gain critical information about these activities, especially in difficult-to-reach areas of Lebanon. The monitoring provides a useful supplement to the existing monitoring systems maintained by the IPs, especially by systematically gathering perception data directly from individual program participants. TPM also offers the opportunity for stakeholders to receive brief reports based on systematically collected and analyzed data that can present a focused, accurate picture of the successes, challenges, and enabling and inhibiting factors related to implementation of humanitarian programs.

2. **What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?**

External Collaboration

Continuous Learning & Improvement

3. **HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?**

From the start, partners involved in the TPM design and delivery created an open and collaborative environment both internally and with external stakeholders (BHA and three IPs). They established strong relationships by maintaining close communication, collaborating frequently throughout the TPM activity, and creating an environment that facilitated adaptation. Instead of explicitly labeling its TPM activity—classic field monitoring work— as "CLA," MEPL has intentionally and systematically embedded collaboration and program learning into the entire TPM process.

1. From startup, collaboration was identified as the "lifeblood" of effective TPM.

The team engaged with BHA and IPs through initial discussions about how TPM could address monitoring and learning needs while countering implementation challenges. Based on these discussions, the team developed Monitoring Plans for the three activities, outlining work plans, monitoring approaches, sites and locations to be visited, and reporting and documentation expectations. Monitoring Plans were first shared with MEPL leadership (the Senior M&E Specialist and the Chief of Party) for input and feedback, then shared with BHA and the IPs for review and approval to ensure the monitoring design and communication approach aligned with program learning needs. Once monitoring plans were finalized, all parties were committed to a continuous loop of design, collection, reporting, feedback, and situational adjustment to the TPM approach. Collaboration, especially between the TPM team and IPs, continues week by week as site selection, data protocol adjustment, and reporting priorities evolve.

2. Continuous learning and improvement have kept monitoring relevant to program issues and reinforced a collaborative stream of communication.

As monitoring plans were being finalized, the field team was recruited to implement the TPM activity. This included field managers, field monitors, and a technical lead for day-to-day field monitoring and reporting. To facilitate collaboration, the field team's first task was to pilot the methodology and data collection tools and share subsequent recommendations before implementing the TPM. Throughout the piloting process, IPs and BHA openly shared their thoughts on the tools, and the field team made various adjustments as the specifics of data collection were agreed upon. The team's clearly identified communication roles and responsibilities meant technical and logistical questions—within the team and with BHA and IPs—could be readily addressed.

Learning within the TPM team has been multidirectional and localized. For example, after a few weeks of implementation the team held an internal learning event, in Arabic, to facilitate active contribution by field monitors. This open discussion brought some new issues to the team's attention.

The TPM team has remained open to recommendations and needs for adaptation throughout the TPM activity. For example, the team learned that timing of field visits for the cash assistance program would be more likely to gather beneficiary engagement data if they were more closely aligned with the dates when beneficiaries collect cash assistance. The team communicated with the IP to determine the best timing for field visits and altered the schedule accordingly. Similarly, a few months into TPM implementation monitoring teams received feedback from beneficiaries that rising local costs of transportation created significant barriers to access to food purchases and public health services. Working with BHA and IPs, the TPM team adjusted data collection protocols and reporting so stakeholders would have systematic and up-to-date reports of field-based data on evolving access challenges. After eight months of monitoring the team has already begun focusing on learning improvements in both the humanitarian programs and the TPM itself. After the first six-month cycle of TPM, stakeholders gathered for a lessons-learned session on successes and potential improvements for the next cycle which informed adaptations to the tools for the second, current six-month cycle of TPM.

4. **RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.**

We know you may have answers in mind for both questions; However please choose one to highlight as part of this case story

B. ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Collaboration, learning, and adaptation were established in MEPL's TPM process from the beginning through the communication and feedback mechanisms as well as regularly scheduled check-ins which facilitated identification of lessons learned and opportunities for adaptation. Since an open and collaborative environment was established from the onset, the local data collection organization (PI) took on more responsibility for staying complexity-aware in its data collection. Within the PI team itself, there was a heightened awareness of BHA's and the IPs' program priorities, which has resulted in a more informed data collection methodology. After several months of experience, PI has added a third monitor to its site-visit teams to ensure adequate coverage and timing of data collection.

In the coming months, MEPL intends to deliver a learning event for all TPM stakeholders, and others in the Lebanon humanitarian assistance space, to share its collaboration and learning experience and facilitate cross-learning with other TPM teams carrying out similar work.

5. **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?**

Collaboration and learning both depend on, and mutually reinforce, shared trust among all stakeholders. MEPL's TPM approach has applied program learning for adaptation multiple times: after the pilot site visits, each time new information or challenges are presented during field reporting (such as the cash assistance and transportation cost examples mentioned above), and before the next cycle of site identification and data collection. The feedback and communication mechanism, centered at MEPL in Beirut, facilitates these rounds of learning and adaptation. Regular check-ins, as well as the learning session at the end of the first cycle, created opportunities to share learning throughout phases of the TPM activity rather than just at the end.

The team has used draft activity monitoring plans (which included data collection protocols), as well as pilot site visits and reporting templates shared with the IPs and BHA, under the initial assumption that the TPM would need to be adjusted, not just once but on multiple occasions. These adjustments sometimes have taken more time than expected, and the schedule of site visits has had to be adjusted to realistically accommodate the communication steps involved. But stakeholders have reported to MEPL that this adjustment has resulted in a net gain to program knowledge, as this dialogue has improved the timeliness and relevance of the TPM coverage.