2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Displacing Ignorance: CLA for applied humanitarian learning

Name:

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Organization:

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Summary:

The steep global increase of people needing humanitarian assistance each year can overwhelm those responding to the crises. The increasingly complex crises, protracted emergencies, displacement contexts, and disasters require swift, adaptable responses and better evidence of what works, where, how, and for whom.

Learning agendas have emerged as a sound approach to focus and prioritize such evidence needs. Leveraging insights from research and regular monitoring and evaluation, they propel evidence generation, translation, and use. However, their use within the humanitarian and emergency setting is relatively new.

This case study, through the concrete example of evidence-building efforts for the Ultra-Poor Graduation model (UPG) in displacement settings, showcases how using adaptive management, leveraging monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for learning, and creating a culture of continuous learning and improvement helped World Vision develop and operationalize a learning agenda for its humanitarian and emergency programs.

More practically, the evidence generated around the UPG model for displacement settings has improved the model's application in three ongoing programs in Somalia, Zambia and Rwanda. It also has been used in new project designs and, more importantly, has laid out an evidence-building pipeline for the model, which will serve World Vision and others using it.

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 many years, the humanitarian and emergency space was characterized by its excellence in delivering quickly, adapting to changing situations, and concentrating resources on life-saving interventions. Emergency programs were considered too short, risky, and simple to warrant robust evidence-building and learning activities. World Vision emergency programs were no exception. The landscape has been changing, both internally at World Vision and externally in the broader industry—including among donors. In particular, the programming surrounding complex, protracted emergencies, displacement contexts, and contexts vulnerable to disasters require better evidence, with study designs and learning processes that produce actionable information for adapting quickly in dynamic and complex situations.
One of the ways that World Vision responded to this changing landscape was to create a learning agenda for its Humanitarian and Emergency Affairs (HEA) portfolio, funded primarily through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA/USAID) and the Bureau for Population, Migration and Refugees (BPRM). From this exercise, four learning areas emerged. The first one to be operationalized was the application and effectiveness of the UPG model in displacement contexts. When the learning agenda was created, WVUS had just started implementing three UPG projects in displacement contexts. These projects are implemented in Somalia among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and host communities (funded by BHA), as well as in Zambia and Rwanda, among refugees and host communities (funded by BPRM). Implementing in such contexts presents new dynamics and challenges. Project teams had questions about whether the model was being implemented with fidelity and whether, and how, it could still be as effective as in traditional development contexts. Through the example of UPG in displacement contexts, this case study illustrates how useful learning agendas can be for HEA settings.

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

M&E for Learning

Continuous Learning & Improvement

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

Early in the process, the HEA team agreed on the value of owning the evidence-needs strategy process, creating an evidence pipeline, leveraging ongoing projects, systematizing learning, and translating findings into usable formats for internal and external purposes. Yet, the timing to develop a learning agenda never seemed perfect. The HEA team tried leading the process with the WV's Evidence and Learning (E&L) team supporting. After a few false-starts, the teams switched roles, recognizing HEA's heavy and urgent workload and acknowledging that there is more than one way to build ownership. In this year-long process, a handful of learning agenda champions and subject-matter experts emerged from within the HEA team. The learning agenda drafting process piqued interest and buy-in from among many other WV sector teams. To take the pulse of the agenda's direction and priorities, the HEA team organized a handful of meetings, including with BHA staff in the Asia Pacific Region who demonstrated a keen interest in the proposed topics. BHA's and other external stakeholders' buy-in)reassured the team of its next steps. With four priorities selected, the HEA learning agenda was ready to be operationalized. Sequencing the work to keep it manageable, the first target was the UPG model.

To better understand the state of the evidence and application of the UPG model in displacement contexts, World Vision commissioned a foundational research study comprised of a literature and desk review. Literature review insights were disseminated virtually to an audience of WV, BHA, and BPRM staff. While the UPG model in displacement contexts has been steadily scaling up for the past eight years, the literature review found limited, low-quality studies on the model in such settings (i.e., only 5 of the 58 eligible articles reviewed focused on refugees or IDPs). Many of the findings emphasized the need for further research on various aspects of UPG programming, such as the most effective selection methods or graduation criteria. Evidence showed that while a wide range of coaching delivery methods were successful, coach-to-participant ratios had to remain small to achieve success. WV project teams realized their own ratios were insufficient and took immediate action to increase the number of coaches. Lastly, the literature review highlighted the lack of well-documented implementation and theories of change for UPG programs in displacement contexts. WV project teams immediately acted to better document operational processes, which will be useful to generate theories at a later stage.

To illuminate the ongoing challenges, differences, similarities, lessons learned, and best practices across WV's three awards implementing the UPG model, WV held a learning event at the start of the project's second year to help improve programming. Thirty-six participants representing six organizations gathered in a learning event co-funded by BHA and WV, to share lessons learned and best practices when implementing the UPG model in displacement contexts in Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, and Zambia. Through presentations, a field visit, small groups, and plenary discussions, participants learned the unique challenges of implementing in four very different displacement contexts. While some lessons were noted for future benefit, others had immediate applicability. Project teams left the event eager to improve their coaching approaches, graduation, and resilience measurement. Plans for future learning events and a community of practice to continue knowledge sharing and program improvement emerged. The HEA team rapidly produced a learning brief for all participants, translating the rich insights into digestible pieces. Furthermore, WV immediately incorporated learnings into new applications proposing the use of UPG in displacement contexts, such as the need to build-in sufficient time for graduation. As they say, "success begets success". In our case, the successful operationalization of this first learning priority helped the team replicate this for its next learning priority on Disaster Risk Reduction.

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

Demonstrable Ownership:
Using a collaborative and iterative approach to the development and operationalization of the HEA learning agenda produced more widespread ownership around evidence generation and use. It expanded beyond WV's E&L staff, to those working across project management, business development, and leadership roles in the HEA team. Once the learning agenda was championed among the HEA leadership, a case was made to incorporate specific work on learning agendas into staff work-plans and performance goals. This enabled more dedicated staff time and greater motivation to complete the work with quality.

Investment in evidence activities that can stand alone and build on each other:
WV is now using various internal funding sources to flexibly cater to learning needs as they arise. For example, in the UPG case, as additional learning questions arose or existing ones were better defined, resources were available to support research into these questions. As a case-in-point, during the in-person event in Rwanda, project teams recognized the value that a detailed programmatic Theory of Change could offer to a process or to a mid-term evaluation of the existing projects. However, these ongoing projects were not designed with such contextualized theories of change. The teams adapted learning plans and kicked off another study funded internally to focus on developing and testing such theories of change as an important way to facilitate learning at the mid-point of implementation. This second ongoing internal study picks up where the literature review and the cross-organizational learning event left off. The HEA and E&L teams have a sequence of other empirical studies and activities to follow the results from the theory-building exercise.

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?**

Externally, BHA's general acceptance and willingness to fund research and learning activities, and peers' work in this space paved the way for WV's HEA learning agenda to start successfully. Additionally, the CLA framework allows for candid sharing and cross-learning among peer NGOs and academic researchers, creating safe spaces for research and M&E collaboration. High population displacement globally has generated a heightened interest in UPG for displacement settings. BHA's participation in WV's UPG learning event in Rwanda in 2022 demonstrated its commitment to build evidence on this topic.

Internally, the HEA learning agenda succeeded because it was lifted by many champions, supported by leadership, made quick pivots, and creatively used available funds and staff., Making learning agendas a crucial part of the HEA departmental strategy and goal-setting moved the discussion from "what do we do now?" to "this is how we do it". For the UPG research priorities, current progress can be credited to the dedicated and sufficient staff time allocated within M&E and HEA programs.

However, WV has also experienced obstacles when advancing its humanitarian research and learning. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, protracted conflict, and increasingly severe cycles of climate-related emergencies have increased the number of those in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023 to 339 million people worldwide (Humanitarian Response Plan, 2023). This increase of 65 million people in just the last year has stretched WV, not only in its technical work, but also in its ability prioritize CLA. It also has challenged donors like BHA to ensure the continued prioritization of research and learning in a shrinking funding environment.