2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Agile bureaucracy: BHA and Tufts use CLA for program sustainability

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Organization:

USAID/BHA & Tufts Friedman Nutrition School

Summary:

When considering how a large bureaucracy like USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) advances issues like program sustainability – that is, the persistence of program benefits after the program ends -it helps to combine a "worm's eye view" with a "bird's eye view" to appreciate the progress made in 20 years to boldly tackle challenges.

Authored by sustainability champions within BHA and researchers from Tufts University Friedman Nutrition School, this case study establishes that their collaboration over more than 20 years steadily advanced learning and shaped program goals and strategies to achieve sustainability beyond impact within Resilience Food Security Assistance (RFSA) activities. While seemingly executed in increments (one activity at a time), overall this collaboration is marked by a rich partnership and mutual determination to learn and act on evidence and is fueled by commitment to advance iteratively in understanding where, for whom, and under what circumstances sustainability strategies work.

Zooming in to PAST-Forward (their latest ongoing joint initiative), the case study highlights how this project supports BHA's efforts to reflect on successes and challenges in mainstreaming sustainability capacity in RFSAs, among staff and implementing partners. This ongoing collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) effort will enable further evidence-based refinement of BHA's sustainability guidance and improve the uptake, understanding, and application of that guidance across RFSAs, with implications for programming across USAID.

Steps taken, lessons learned, and reflections from BHA (in the role of an adaptive manager) and Tufts (in providing expertise to build the technical evidence base on sustainability issues) illustrate the benefit of such accountability and learning partnerships to improving organizational-level processes.

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?**

Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSAs) are complex, multi-sectoral activities working to address food insecurity in areas prone to recurrent shocks. RFSAs are a special category of USAID programming: a global program with the complicated task of using food assistance to achieve food security and development in vulnerable communities. The post-program sustainability of gains achieved through RFSAs is vital to achieving that goal. The challenge facing RFSAs is identifying what works to sustain gains made during the life of the program and putting those approaches into action.

USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), and its predecessor, the legacy Office of Food for Peace (L-FFP), has long been interested in learning about sustainability and working with partners to implement best practices. However, the empirical literature on post-program sustainability has been limited historically, and even more so for complex programs operating in shock-prone contexts.

For this reason, L-FFP/BHA began collaborating with Tufts University Friedman Nutrition School in the early 2000s to initiate a series of learning activities to identify what works for post-RFSA sustainability. As a result, L-FFP/BHA embraced the research findings in timely adaptations to its RFSA guidance, support, and processes. The most recent (and currently underway) learning effort, PAST-Forward, could be considered BHA's own 'pause and reflect' activity examining how and to what extent a large bureaucracy has leveraged, institutionalized, and benefited from these adaptations.

This case study illustrates how CLA efforts can span over two decades, endure through organizational restructuring, lean on new initiatives, and build project-by-project when stakeholders are committed to the issues and maintain flexibility in building evidence to enact change.

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

Technical Evidence Base

Continuous Learning & Improvement

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

Although the twenty-year-old sustainability-focused collaboration between Tufts and L-FFP/BHA started before the institutionalization of the CLA framework within USAID, it exhibited many CLA components from its inception. Those early yet unofficial applications of CLA elements paved the way for a more standardized CLA approach to propel sustainability learning further within BHA. USAID's sustainability planning in the L-FFP programs began almost two decades ago. While the L-FFP application requirements for sustainability and exit strategies existed as early as 2003, a Tufts study at that time revealed that the requirements existed without explicit guidance to support applicants. In 2009, when L-FFP engaged Tufts in another review of 64 development assistance programs implemented between 2002-2009, it found that most of the reviewed activities lacked coherent sustainability strategies. These exercises incorporated many present-day CLA elements: "pause and reflect", "external collaboration" with academic researchers, and laying the "technical evidence" on the topic of sustainability.

More importantly, beginning in 2009, L-FFP leveraged this exercise as a steppingstone to a more ambitious study with Tufts on sustainability and exit strategies (Rogers and Coates, 2015), which explored post-program outcome sustainment. The investment in this multi-year study among 12 projects in 4 countries demonstrated L-FFP's commitment to building rigorous technical evidence on sustainability. Sequencing the internal review and post-program sustainability study was emblematic of continuous learning and improvement.

Even before the Rogers and Coates (2015) report was officially released, early findings were introduced into the 2014 Local Systems Framework, ensuring that the framework was informed by the latest sustainability thinking. The timely incorporation of these early findings displayed adaptive management, real-time evidence-based decision-making, and sharing for the wider agency benefit.

Rogers and Coates (2015) not only provided L-FFP with much needed technical evidence on the sustainability factors, but also generated a Sustainability Framework, which USAID enthusiastically adopted and adapted. In 2015, L-FFP embedded references to this study into their technical guidance for RFSAs and, starting in 2016, added scoring criteria to judge sustainability planning and exit strategies in RFSA applications. The L-FFP Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy (2016-2025) was a major inflection point, leveraging the Sustainability Framework and insights from Rogers and Coates (2015) to support the focus on sustainability and, aspirationally, extend the concepts to humanitarian and emergency programs. The period that followed was marked by continued learning and improvement as L-FFP further enriched its technical guidance (2017) and internally developed (2018) and piloted (2020) a model to improve sustainability plans.

When L-FFP merged with the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance to form BHA in 2020, the focus on sustainability and resilient outcomes remained forefront. For example, the L-FFP sustainability learning informed BHA's revisions to the Technical Guidance to Monitoring and Evaluation (2020, 2021), including the addition of evaluative questions for different program cycle milestones. Additionally, BHA commenced various Sustainability Workshops, bringing together implementing partners across RFSAs to cross-learn sustainability approaches, strategies, and plans. Aware of remaining evidence gaps, Tufts and BHA embarked on a new collaboration in 2022 -the PAST-Forward study- to systematically examine the processes and mechanisms BHA uses to support the design and implementation of sustainability activities. The project combines document review with the voices of implementing partners and USAID staff. This initiative exhibits intentional pause and reflection, continued engagement with external collaborators, the use of technical evidence for decision-making, and support for knowledge management and institutional memory.

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

Bureaucracies are not known for their agility. Yet, CLA approaches have enabled L-FFP/BHA to accelerate on an evidence-based path toward promoting post-program sustainability. For example, investment in the Roger and Coates (2015) study and wide adoption of its critical insights were followed by an increasing openness to pilot approaches, collaborate across RFSAs, and further adapt the guidance and requirements communicated to RFSA applicants and grantees.

PAST-Forward exemplifies this continued investment in iterative learning to improve organizational effectiveness. Due in September 2023, the final report will highlight how BHA can improve the sustainability guidance provided to RFSA applicants and implementers by providing practical recommendations around topics such as: what application requirements might best position grantees for sustainability and exit planning; how organizational dynamics may influence the RFA and implementation process; and how better to connect the materials submitted in the application with the tools/templates used at later stages for sustainability planning. The report will also make a case for sustainability-related topics that require further investigation.

Given BHA’s strong commitment to, and history of, putting learning into action, we envision the PAST-Forward study will herald a future where USAID staff that interface with the RFSAs, from activity design through implementation, at headquarters and in the Missions, are substantially more aligned in their expectations and practices vis-a-vis programming for sustainability. We predict strengthened relationships with and among implementing partners, brought about through transparency in evidence-based decision making, continued openness to innovation and piloting, and collaboration to identify and share promising and best practices and to discuss and tackle challenges with candor.

Additionally, the insights and recommendations from PAST-Forward, when combined with other internal BHA learning processes on the topic of sustainability, contribute to USAID's agency-level Learning Agenda, including questions on Operational Effectiveness, Resilience to Shocks, and Partnering for Sustainability.

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?**

This case study has layers of enablers and obstacles.USAID’s establishment of CLA as an agency-wide framework that is finetuned periodically has provided a critical tool for L-FFP/BHA and partners to identify factors that support program sustainability. BHA leadership’s commitment to continuous learning has enabled initiatives like PAST-Forward to unpack where current processes call for celebration or need recalibration. Leaning on relentless sustainability champions, early adopters, and allies within and outside L-FFP/BHA has allowed L-FFP/BHA to rethink how sustainability is addressed in RFSAs, and has kept L-FFP/BHA persistently focused on sustainability year after year. L-FFP/BHA's investment in facilitation and support mechanisms, such as the BHA Program Cycle Support mechanism to help implementers troubleshoot sustainability challenges, can be credited for responding with quick or interim solutions to some of the challenges implementers face. Implementers have acted as conduits for candid feedback on BHA's approach, guidance, and processes that enable or hinder field-work. However, BHA also has encountered challenges in pressing for meaningful reform of sustainability planning within RFSAs. For example, due to the merger that created BHA, a large swath of its workforce needs to familiarize themselves with factors critical for program sustainability, to ensure their correct understanding and appropriate application. There is no silver bullet to accelerate uniform sustainability capacity across missions, headquarters, and implementing and local partners. As RFSAs work in shock-prone environments where backsliding and emerging challenges are common and threaten progress to sustainability, building technical evidence on what sustainability strategies work, for whom, how, or under what circumstances is a constant task not easily tackled with one initiative. This requires ongoing BHA investment in evidence generation and translation to practice.