2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

If you don't succeed, learn, adapt, and try again: Shejeh Salam's Story

Name:

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Summary:

The Shejeh Salam (Promoting Peace) Activity is a five-year program that lays the groundwork for a less volatile and more socially cohesive South Sudan. The activity is being carried out through a small grants-under-contract mechanism in thirteen USAID-designated priority counties within five of South Sudan's ten states.
Shejeh Salam has realized, thanks to the predecessor program, the USAID Viable Support to Transition and Stability (VISTAS), that project teams in different regions were engaging in activities that were similar to one another, but they were not learning from one another. As a direct consequence of this, attempts to implement program-wide learning practices were unsuccessful during the VISTAS program. We learned numerous lessons on what worked and didn't, but we did not systematically share lessons from events and activities across the program. Because of this, regions ended up repeating technical and operational mistakes that had already been fixed in other areas.

Shejeh Salam's senior management and MEL team members implemented robust systems and processes for CLA, knowing that CLA only happens with intentional planning. We use DevResults, a data-driven MEL and activity management platform, as the MEL resource hub for all Shejeh Salam program activity and programmatic inputs and outputs. USAID have access to the platform, emphasizing program transparency and accountability. DevResults enables Shejeh Salam to collaborate and share information with the COR, improving efficiency and evidence-based adaptation. We also implemented Monthly Lessons Learned Discussion Sessions, to help share learning across our team, resulting in increased adaptive management practices and improved capacity building support to our grantees.

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?**

The Shejeh Salam (Promoting Peace) Activity is a five-year program that lays the groundwork for a less volatile and more socially cohesive South Sudan. The activity is being carried out through a small grants-under-contract mechanism in thirteen USAID-designated priority counties within five of South Sudan's ten states. The dynamics of conflict in each of the USAID 13 priority counties are discrete. In this fluid environment, adaptive programming ensures that activities are focusing on the right problems and that the program is learning from both successes and failures/opportunities. In addition, a small grants portfolio requires intentional clustering, layering, and sequencing of activities to ensure the additive and synergistic effects of the activities result in the sustainable achievement of the intended development results. These kinds of goals can only be attained in an atmosphere that encourages productive collaboration, lifelong education, and flexible methods of operation.
Shejeh Salam has realized, thanks to the predecessor program, the USAID Viable Support to Transition and Stability (VISTAS), that project teams in different regions were engaging in activities that were similar to one another, but they were not learning from one another. As a direct consequence of this, attempts to implement program-wide learning practices were unsuccessful during the VISTAS program. We learned numerous lessons on what worked and didn't, but we did not systematically share lessons from events and activities across the program. Because of this, regions ended up repeating technical and operational mistakes that had already been fixed in other areas. Considering the fluidity of the current Shejeh Salam operational context, the lessons learned from the VISTAS program, and the challenges and opportunities of the current small grants portfolio, it became apparent that implementing and making use of a robust CLA approach was essential to the sustainable achievement of our results.

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

Internal Collaboration

Continuous Learning & Improvement

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

Shejeh Salam's senior management and MEL team members implemented robust systems and processes for CLA, knowing that CLA only happens with intentional planning. DevResults, a data-driven MEL and activity management platform, was essential. DevResults became the MEL resource hub for all Shejeh Salam program activity and programmatic inputs and outputs—performance and contextual monitoring data, survey and stakeholder consultation data, and analytics—facilitating communication and collaboration between staff and the Home Office Program Management Unit. USAID have access to the platform, emphasizing program transparency and accountability. DevResults enables Shejeh Salam to collaborate and share information with the COR, improving efficiency and evidence-based adaptation. Shejeh Salam's senior management and MEL team a CLA culture, a process to improve collaboration, and regular staff engagement. Thus, the entire Shejeh Salam team discussed and determined its CLA approach during the June 2021 Rolling Assessment. The team reviewed the VISTAS program's CLA approach, focusing on lessons learned collection and collation, individual contributions, and using lessons learned to sustain development results. Shejeh Salam suggested the "Monthly Lessons Learned Session" to improve internal collaboration, systematic learning, and organizational adaptation. In November 2021, the MEL Director and the Shejeh Salam COP began leading lessons learned sessions. Monthly, the team holds a facilitated discussion at the "Monthly Lessons Learned Session" focusing on what worked and what hasn't in the past month. This may be likened to an After-Action Review but done during on-going implementation. All program, operation, and schedules permitting the Shejeh Salam USAID COR and other USAID mission staff attend the sessions.

These sessions also identify gaps or challenges from the previous month and examine how they can be used to improve implementation strategies. The Monthly Lessons Learned Sessions differ from the Shejeh Salam planned annual strategic review of the program's portfolio and biannual Rolling Assessment in that it is intended to be a regular forum for all program staff to openly discuss, virtually or in-person, actionable lessons, and the best ways to adapt to achieve the intended results.

The weekly activity notes program staff use to track program activities includes a structured method for real-time lesson capture. Shejeh Salam maintains an activity notes template in DevResults with a "Lessons Learned" tab for regional teams to use to record learning events. Weekly activity reports include lessons learned from Shejeh Salam program teams. The MEL Director and Database Officer extract and clarify with the Regional Program Director lessons learned. All program staff can access the consolidated document, which underpins and provides structure to the monthly meeting, and the inclusion of lessons learned into USAID reports. These consolidated lessons learned documents select actionable lessons for discussion on the first Friday of each month. Topics include collaboration between Shejeh Salam staff and other USAID and non-USAID implementing partners, broad stakeholder consultation and inclusion, meaningful engagement of women and youth in Shejeh Salam activities, and evaluation recommendations.

This monthly CLA session also reinforces USAID's localization strategy by strengthening local CSOs by applying lesson learned to their capacity building. Our localization strategy includes the following steps:1) Conduct pre-award capacity assessments to identify gaps before awarding small grants to local CSOs; 2) Provide tailored capacity development approaches to address gaps "just in time" and allow for continuous improvement throughout grant implementation; and 3) Conduct post-award assessment to assess progress and identify areas that require additional development. Monthly Lessons Learned Sessions help sustain local capacity development. By sharing the grantees' experiences and challenges, and identifying best practices, the grantee receives capacity development support from Shejeh Salam.

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

Before launching the structured Monthly Lessons Learned Discussion Session, Shejeh Salam struggled to keep up with operational changes. The team struggled to consistently innovate new grant activities, and team members felt disconnected and made consistent mistakes. Team members used the challenges to criticize other team members. The CLA approach has changed our culture, in that the Monthly Lessons Learned Sessions have brought together our team's diverse perspectives and expertise. It has encouraged creativity, risk taking, thinking out of the box and reduced fear or hesitancy of talking about challenges and areas that other activities would call failures. Our team is more open to sharing ideas and collaborating, which has led to more innovative solutions, especially from the local partners. Shejeh Salam has used innovative methods to build local organizations' capacity, such as providing in-kind support to a new grantee with little experience. After initial support, hybrid funding opportunities help the grantee gain expertise. Thanks to this capacity development, Shejeh Salam is now able to support a fixed amount award for grantees that have showed improvement through this process. Shejeh Salam also train, co-facilitate, co-create grants, and mentor grantees to improve program strategies. Shejeh Salam has helped five nascent CSOs improve through these methods.
Our Shejeh Salam refined processes are more efficient and agile due to a comprehensive lesson-learned document accessible repository by all staff in DevResults and SharePoint. We can also better allocate resources to the areas that will have the biggest impact on our success. Our efforts will improve program delivery, communication, feedback, and positive change agility.
It has allowed Shejeh Salam staff to regularly discuss activity design, implementation, challenges, and opportunities to inform future events/activities. It has changed the Shejeh Salam team's CLA culture, behavior, and attitude. These discussions have enthusiastic support across the program.

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?**

Culture: Shejeh Salam's leadership has been instrumental in creating a culture of continuous improvement, trust, and transparency within the CLA approach. By fostering a culture where failures are seen as opportunities for growth, the team has learned and improved continuously. The leadership's facilitation skills have also played a significant role in framing failures as the wider team's responsibility, leading to willingness and openness to discuss failures. Overall, Shejeh Salam's leadership has been a crucial factor in the CLA success.

Knowledge Management: Although the team collected various lessons learned, the emphasis has been centered on discussing what works to remedy an issue, focusing on issues that arise across most locations and emphasizing the practicalities of suggested recommendations. Using this approach guarantees the conversation produces concrete ideas to create actual change in terms of the activity's effectiveness, which in turn is assisting to propel it forward.

Obstacles: While CLA efforts have strengthened partnerships and made teams more cohesive, the fear of criticism or blame did hinder open discussion. Staff felt that admitting past mistakes or failures was weak or incompetent and they tended to "point the finger" rather than investigate and prevent mistakes. To overcome this, Shejeh Salam leadership encouraged openness, communication, and accountability. This requires a safe space for staff to express their opinions. Shejeh Salam stressed learning from failures rather than assigning blame. In addition, some team members thought a monthly discussion hour was a waste of time. However, once staff saw that the meetings were meant to share knowledge and improve efficiency, not assign blame, they bought into the process. Each team grew to understand that sharing results, lessons, and challenges was paramount to growing as a program.