2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Using CLA to Strengthen Evaluation Capacity in the DRC

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Organization:

Datae for Impact (D4I)

The Kinshasa School of Public Health (KSPH)

Summary:

This case study highlights the partnership between the Kinshasa School of Public Health (KSPH) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Data for Impact (D4I) project to strengthen evaluation capacity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). D4I works to mobilize data for better health, including through capacity strengthening with local partners. USAID/DRC asked D4I to evaluate the USAID-funded Integrated Health Program, which is focused on strengthening the DRC's health system, and KSPH is subcontracted to collaborate on the evaluation.

In addition to learning via collaborative implementation of the evaluation, USAID/DRC recognized an opportunity to strengthen evaluation capacity locally in a sustainable way. To accomplish this, D4I has collaborated with KSPH to first identify priority areas for capacity strengthening for KSPH faculty and students and then to design and implement a coordinated set of interventions to meet these needs, guided by a results framework. Specifically, D4I has supported KSPH in implementing capacity strengthening interventions intended to 1) increase opportunities for evaluation skills training, 2) improve the infrastructure for internal collaboration within KSPH, and 3) acquire more direct funding for evaluations and other research. Key to this effort was the process of external collaboration between D4I and KSPH along with a conducive learning enabling environment that enabled continuous learning and improvement to strengthen evaluation capacity in the DRC.

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 Kinshasa School of Public Health (KSPH) is the DRC's flagship public health school, whose graduates go on to work with government health agencies, local research organizations, and USAID implementing partners. KSPH also has a history of partnering with external collaborators, especially to carry out data collection for evaluations and research. However, KSPH and other local research institutions are often contracted for quantitative data collection or other segmented portions of the evaluation and research process, and less frequently take leading roles. Stakeholders at KSPH have expressed a need to strengthen affiliates' experience and the organizational infrastructure needed to independently pursue research funding opportunities.

KSPH already had structures and systems in place to provide evaluation and research training for students, including evaluation coursework and an online platform for providing and archiving training resources. D4I has been able to offer opportunities and resources to bolster this system in response to local actors' priorities. While there have been previous external collaboration efforts intended to strengthen capacity at KSPH, these activities struggled to obtain buy-in from local actors and effect sustainable change. Therefore, a key first step in this process was working with local actors to collaboratively identify priorities and understanding their unique roles within the existing system. Intentional, demand-driven engagement with the school meant thinking strategically about how individual capacity among faculty members and students contributes to and benefits from the university's institutional capacity, and, by extension, leverages and strengthens the organizations and networks with KSPH affiliates as members.

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?**

A key first step in D4I and KSPH's external collaboration process was designing a capacity strengthening plan and a results framework. As KSPH already provides evaluation training, it was key for D4I to first understand what training KSPH did and did not offer and also in what competencies students and faculty most desired to grow their skills. D4I conducted in-depth interviews with KSPH department chairs and school administrators about learning and professional development opportunities for students and faculty, existing resources, and perceptions of graduates' capacity for specific evaluation competencies. Interviewees were identified in collaboration with school leaders. Findings from the interviews were used to design a set of surveys for faculty and students, with questions about self-assessed evaluation competencies; experiences with grant applications, conferences, and publications; technical areas where individuals would most like to grow their skills; and preferred forums for training and support. Participants most strongly expressed the desire to strengthen their capacity to identify and apply for funding opportunities, network with international funders, and develop skills for leading complex analyses and economic evaluations. Interviews and survey results were compiled into a report and presentation slide deck, shared with the school community, and used to identify a slate of potential interventions. A steering committee of KSPH faculty was formed to provide feedback on the suggested interventions. Based on this process, three main interventions were selected, comprising an integrated approach designed to leverage and build on KSPH's existing systems networks:

1. Provide enhanced evaluation training opportunities: A core set of evaluation learning modules was developed and made available through the school's online learning platform, designed to complement the school's existing training in evaluation methods. KSPH plans to add content over time, including recorded lectures and additional course resources. A small number of students were given access to the online materials for testing and provided feedback which resulted in updates such as an option to receive a certificate after completing the online modules.
2. Create a grant resource library: As acquiring more direct funding for evaluations and research was a goal for KSPH, school stakeholders needed increased access to information about funding opportunities and to supporting materials for grant applications (like biodata templates and institutional capacity statements). The new grant resource library was created to include a catalog of funding opportunities and a repository of documents to support proposal development.
3. Develop forums for networking and information sharing: An online community of practice (COP) was created with the aim of increasing communication within KSPH, especially among the school's academic departments. The COP's discussion board is open to the KSPH community and moderated by a core set of administrators. Users can post technical questions, articles related to evaluation, job opportunities, and more for discussion. D4I also provided financial support to upgrade KSPH's existing server to accommodate increased traffic to the online training modules and COP.

These three initiatives were supported with a dedicated budget for capacity strengthening, which included staff time for D4I and a dedicated capacity strengthening lead at KSPH, a subcontract with a trusted third partner to support building out training content, funding to support the initial assessment, and funds to upgrade the server to support increased traffic to KSPH online platforms.

The process has been enabled by a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Faculty and students' reflections and input were central to the selection and development of the interventions. Ongoing and early engagement in the iterative design and implementation processes have also provided local ownership and motivation for KSPH students and faculty to use and promote the new learning materials and resources designed to meet the school's needs.

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

By engaging the KSPH school community early and iteratively in continuous learning and improving, D4I has been able to incorporate plans for capacity strengthening activities into the evaluation workplan that are aligned with the priorities of KSPH and build on the school's existing strengths and platforms. Through interviews and surveys with local actors at multiple levels, D4I gained an understanding of KSPH priorities both for the institution and affiliated individuals and has been able to co-design interventions to support these local priorities. As the KSPH steering committee gave input on the capacity strengthening plan design, some of the originally suggested interventions (especially training topics) were modified in response – embodying the "best fit" as opposed to a "best practice" approach advanced by USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening policy. For example, D4I had originally suggested providing trainings on mobile survey data collection, but this was one area where KSPH felt they did not need additional training and instead felt that focused training on evaluation capacities would complement and reinforce the school's work on the evaluation.

This collaboration between KSPH and D4I will continue as the evaluation is ongoing. The KSPH capacity strengthening lead is also the activity lead overall including for the evaluation, further integrating the learning by doing aspects of the evaluation with the capacity strengthening efforts at KSPH. At the end of the evaluation partnership, D4I and KSPH plan to reassess the school community's perceptions of learning and professional development opportunities, including of the new resources, along with perceptions of graduates' capacity for specific evaluation competencies. Information from this continuous learning and improvement process may be used to inform further evaluation capacity strengthening and initiatives.

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?**

The process of external collaboration and culture for continuous learning and improvement has created an environment and process through which D4I has been able to engage with the KSPH school community early and often, focusing on local priorities. The capacity strengthening plan grew out of input from faculty and students and focused on working at multiple levels, in addition to being nested within a larger impact evaluation to provide additional mentoring and collaborative working opportunities. In creating the resource library, evaluation training modules, and the COP, D4I contracted with a trusted third party, Tropical Health, an organization with whom faculty at KSPH had worked previously and felt had the right expertise. With a sole focus on co-designing an effective response to the school's priority needs, Tropical Health was able to offer support without expectations about preexisting capacity, needs, or performance.

In this collaboration with KSPH, the steering committee members were key to providing input on the capacity strengthening intervention design. However, steering committee members' time was not budgeted for and was added to the list of their existing responsibilities. Future efforts should consider how to engage individuals from local institutions without introducing additional burdens. Another noted challenge at KSPH has been engaging the full school community in the new COP discussion boards. The pool of active users is currently small, and the local capacity strengthening lead at KSPH is considering how to further engage users, especially with faculty who may not be as comfortable with online forums. Although cost and sustainability were key considerations in the design phase, some questions remain about the hand-off process. Finding ways to foster local investment could ensure the sustainability of these forums and resources.