



Planning workshop Responsive Governance Activity Y2. Credit: RG Activity.

Case Title:

Empathy strategy: a CLA approach from Colombia

Name:

Carla Aguilar -COP Angela Cepeda -Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Director

Organization:

Responsive Governance (RG) Activity – USAID

Summary:

Imagine implementing a local governance project in the midst of a global pandemic in dispersed rural areas of a country most severely affected by an internal armed conflict of more than 50 years. The government only recently signed a Peace Agreement with one of the armed groups but others have already taken its place. Having never worked in this country and beginning to understand the local context and culture, there will be no ability to convene the team in person for at least the first year. There are promises of efficient implementation to achieve, through employing truly evidence-based decision-making processes and telling a story with data. Only a four-year project, time has already running. This is the story of Responsive Governance (RG).

The project quickly recruited technically-skilled specialists and highly-recognized local partners. However, RG was far from achieving the rigorous demands for information and knowledge management incorporation. Some perceived the task beyond their implementing role, others did not find it enjoyable, and even others thought it is only the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team's responsibility. Out of this context the Empathy Strategy was born.

This strategy puts team members “ in others “ shoes to strengthen internal and external collaboration by implementing training sessions and designing a set of guidelines to gather, systematize, analyze, and use technical evidence throughout the program cycle. By developing customized tools tailored to their needs, abilities, and limitations, RG team members now work together through evidence-based decision-making processes to tell a story with data.

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?

RG began implementation in Colombia in October 2020 in six regions and 27 municipalities in the midst of several challenges:

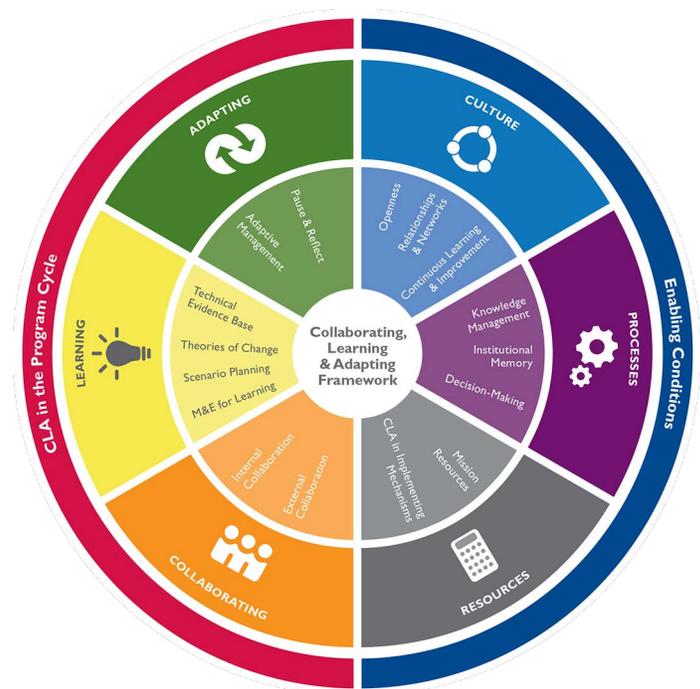
- a) The coronavirus pandemic forced the declaration of a health emergency with significant restrictions on mobility and social life through total isolation from March to August 2020. After the lockdown ended, RG implemented a large proportion of activities through remote or hybrid work.
- b) Activity recruitment and start-up was done virtually. Team members met in-person after one entire year of working together.
- c) Implementation began in 27 of the municipalities historically most affected by the armed conflict four years after the national government signed a peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas in 2016. There were major security risks for public servants and civilians alike.
- d) Newly elected and appointed local authorities launched their four-year mandates in January 2020.
- e) RG generated trust at the beginning of implementation virtually in areas with significantly dispersed population, low internet connectivity, and sometimes with stakeholders and beneficiaries inexperienced with communication technology.
- f) Some team members were not familiar with evidence-based decision-making processes and the use of data throughout the program cycle and required training to incorporate these strategies into their daily tasks.

Within this context, RG intentionally formulated a systematic strategy focusing on three variables: actors, rules, and relations. And so, this Empathy Strategy was born at the start of Year 2 of implementation.

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

Internal Collaboration

Technical Evidence Base



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

The first step was to define the need. RG needed to integrate CLA practices appropriate to its context by strengthening internal collaboration and utilizing organizational learning and adaptive management in order to employ evidence-based decision-making processes and tell a story with data. The second step was to define the solution. RG developed a knowledge management and organizational change strategy—the Empathy Strategy—focused on three variables: actors, rules, and relationships. The objectives of the strategy are: a) Promote in all RG members (actors) an empathic understanding of the need to collect, systematize, analyze and use technical evidence throughout the program cycle. b) Structure a set of formal and informal guidelines favorable to knowledge and information management and transform informal rules (prejudices, values, beliefs, and customs) that hinder cooperation into organizational routines, procedures, and tools to decrease complexity and demonstrate the importance of utilizing data for daily tasks. c) Transform human relations within RG from apathy to cooperation. d) Strengthen the technical skills of young MEL professionals to facilitate the strategy daily.

The third step was to establish an agenda of knowledge management activities—meetings with the central technical team, visits at the regional level, and meetings with local partners: a) Understanding the field and the players: This activity accomplishes face-to-face recognition between the MEL and technical teams based on empathic listening and the temporary change of roles. b) Strengthening the central players: The MEL team strengthens the knowledge of the technical teams in the collection, systematization, analysis, and use of evidence tools to improve organizational routines. c) Strengthening the regional MEL player: RG hired one MEL assistant strategically in each region in charge of simultaneously supporting the regional team and at least one technical leader at the central level thereby achieving on-the-job training with one foot in the national context and one foot in the territory. d) Ensuring local partners act as a single team: RG established a technical support process for local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) based on permanent dialogue and virtual monitoring of the completeness and quality of the products including special support for the use of MEL tools and their follow-up plans.

The fourth step was to design customized tools for information management considering the needs of the Activity in general and those specifically of the central technical team, regional teams, partners, consultants, and the MEL team. Such tools include (https://dai0-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/ana_moreno_dai_com/EqJ7_a1MWiICsleMMwv5ZzQB-8wUOoqpVtMt7iMFssIEDA?e=7kMWI2): a) Pause and Reflect Methodologies: 22 pause and reflect methodologies/events; 22 knowledge management products. b) Annual Work Plan (AWP) and Activity MEL Plan (AMELP): one evidence review process designed and implemented on a quarterly basis for the AWP and AMELP at the operational level; one public dashboard with 20 indicators and one semaphore. c) RG Beneficiaries: one input per event (participation list); one systematization process (including validation of person-to-person identification data); one tool to systematize information (macro-level); one quality control process. d) Map of Actors: One Map of Actors methodology; one database; one document (periodically updated). e) Network Index: one Network Index using mixed methodologies. f) Calendar: two tools (one to collect data and one to add data); one report document (periodically updated). The fifth step is to stop and reflect periodically—to see what we are doing, how we are doing it and what we need to improve. With the pause and reflect exercises, RG has been able to identify its adaptation needs and create solutions.

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

During RG ' s first year, decisions about what, how, and where to implement depended on the situation described in question 1. Through implementation of the Empathy Strategy, the Activity created guidelines and procedures to quantitatively assess implementation progress at the operational level and gather evidence (AWP and AMELP). RG designed dashboards to present information on results on a public website accessible by anyone, including USAID counterparts:

<https://analytics.dai.com/dashboard/responsive-governance-rg-activity>.

In addition, the MEL team provided technical support to develop internal pause and reflect sessions that qualitatively explained the progress, obstacles, and opportunities for implementation, as well as provided external consultations with interested stakeholders and beneficiaries for planning and adaptation (co-creation). Gradually, the level of rigor and depth of the analysis increased as more team members incorporated the CLA approach in their daily tasks, used the technical evidence capture toolkit, and consulted the MEL team. This information has contributed to the planning of implementation scenarios, identification and response to early warnings, and supported decisions to increase the geographic scope from 27 to 34 municipalities.

The rigorous documentation and organization of the qualitative and quantitative data has been useful for other procedures, including the mid-term evaluation. RG was able to provide high-quality, systematically organized information so that the assessment of compliance with the theory of change and the results of the first two years of intervention was fully supported by evidence.

In fact, DAI—taking advantage of RG's experience—will start a community of practice for its projects in Colombia through knowledge transfer sessions in which RG presented the Empathy Strategy and related tools. Finally, RG has presented the strategy to its Task Order Contracting Officer Representative (TOCOR), who considers the experience to be of high value and is interested in having a CLA workshop with other USAID projects lead by RG.

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 origin of the Empathy Strategy lies in an obstacle: the team had a low willingness to work with the CLA approach, perceived it an additional burden and thought that knowledge and information management was only a MEL team responsibility. Consequently, the general behavior was resistance, apathy, or defection, and even those who expressed a more cooperative behavior thought their contribution was limited to simply providing data. This factor inhibited the incorporation of the CLA approach in the first year. Some conditions that facilitated the change are: a) Actors: The MEL team took the lead on the empathy strategy and focused on changing the knowledge and perception of the rest of the team. As a result, knowledge and trust have been secured in a large part of RG members. Nowadays, the number of people who assume a strategy of defection is steadily decreasing. b) Rules: beginning with the strategy and design of the tools indicated before, RG has assumed procedures as a "rule of the game". No person involved in the implementation have the option to refuse to collect, systematize, analyze and use technical evidence throughout the program cycle. It is also a "rule of the game" to incorporate reflection, learning and adaptation into the daily work of the team, which is why RG has supported the systematic performance of "pause and reflection" exercises (more than 20 in less than 3 years) and their documentation. Finally, it is also a "rule of the game" that the organization's decisions are based on the rigorous collection of evidence. c) Relationships: The Empathy Strategy is a deliberate and systematic effort to improve a willingness to relate. As a consequence of the strategy, there has been increased responsiveness, trust, and strategic collaboration between the MEL team, the central team, regional teams, local partners, and USAID. This is a low-cost strategy led by the MEL team which is made up of eight members: one director, one specialist, and six assistants. The Empathy Strategy did not require additional staff, logistical expenses were already included in the proposal budget, and some pause and reflect events were virtual.