2024 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Using CLA to Move from Project to Progress in Laos

Name:

Mark Granius and Sengthong Phothisane

Organization:

Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International

Lao higher education leadership.
Credit: Anouphab Bounphanith

Summary:

Inflation coupled with currency devaluation has made life hard for Laos citizens, and an exodus of young people seeking better opportunities abroad casts a shadow over the country's future. These trends highlight the need for change in the higher education sector which could catalyze national socioeconomic development.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Laos struggle to meet labor market demand and develop the future workforce. University enrollment has plummeted as students opt to work or emigrate. Other ASEAN universities are more highly recognized and contribute more to national growth than Lao universities. Lao HEIs need a "reboot" to become increasingly adaptive, student focused, industry engaged, and innovative. RTI was uniquely situated to address this challenge though the Local Solutions Support (LSS) project. LSS began as a straightforward capacity development project, but it utilized collaboration, learning, and adaptive (CLA) approaches to achieve significant progress led by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MOES) and four public universities. Working adaptively with our university partners at the forefront has led to systemic change in Lao higher education. Lao universities now collaborate more with government, business, and civic partners as well as with regional and global universities.

By embracing an adaptive mindset and integrating tactical CLA approaches within our project, Lao universities are positioned to lead a new era of higher education quality, autonomy, and equity. As universities continue to refine their self-identified and locally led strategies, they will serve as catalysts for positive change, ensuring they have the knowledge, resources, and capacity to thrive.

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 public university system in Laos is relatively young (started in 1996), comparatively small (consisting of 5 major institutions), and originally designed to educate future leaders for government employment. The USAID LSS project was designed to help four Lao public universities develop their capacity and their ability to provide management training to other local organizations. LSS faced numerous organizational and developmental challenges from the onset – namely that HEIs were under strict government control, their engagement in policy research was minimal, their strategic plans were antiquated, and they had become insular and outmoded. Furthermore, the project itself faced severe challenges from the Government of Laos and the existing HEI legal and policy frameworks. The government did not allow the project to work directly with businesses nor non-governmental organizations; the project needed to create a government-infused project Implementation Management Council (IMC); and HEIs had no professorial job descriptions and scant ability to build networks or provide services to non-students.

Fortuitously, the government had understood how dire the HEI situation was and they updated the national higher education policy to give universities more academic freedom, fiscal autonomy, and the ability to forge partnerships and build networks. Through the LSS project and with USAID support, RTI embraced these policy changes and designed our work to provide the financial, technical, and human resources to our four university partners so that they were equipped to spearhead and chart their own development pathways. This model would not have worked without a thoroughly infused CLA approach in which USAID, RTI, our four university partners, and the Government of Laos convened, consulted, and collaborated regularly so that all stakeholder equities were met, and the program could focus on the progress of the higher education sector in Laos.

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

External Collaboration

Adaptive Management

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

Prior to the LSS launch in October 2021, RTI had been planning a standard project with straightforward work and performance plans that consisted of the project team designing and delivering a series of management trainings to our university partners. However, contextual challenges (restrictions placed on which organizations LSS could work with) and opportunities (the government allowing HEIs greater fiscal autonomy) pushed us to re-evaluate our course of action and employ regular CLA approaches, tools, and activities to make progress and achieve impact in the higher education sector.

Our LSS team used a three-step process to apply CLA: (1) organizing regular meetings with all project stakeholders (universities, government, USAID) to strategize and respond to challenges; (2) co-creating project plans, technical content, activities, grants, and events with our university partners; (3) building trust and delegating product and activity ownership by our university partners.

An early LSS CLA approach was to make the IMC an important consultative body for the project. To do this we sent out agendas and program materials to all participants a few weeks prior to the quarterly meetings. This allowed the government, university, and USAID to get the latest information about the program and prepare questions, corrections, and new initiatives for the LSS team. This also created a sense of ownership and authentic engagement of the IMC members which built up social capital amongst all project stakeholders. This multistakeholder project steering committee resulted in new relationships among government and university professionals which has already led to inter university collaboration and HEI policy proposals that are now being considered by the government such as a greater emphasis on internationalization, greater academic freedom, and the ability of HEIs to generate external resources.

Secondly, we co-designed and awarded each of our four university partners capacity and training grants with which they could identify their most pressing capacity development needs and chart their own growth and development opportunities. We also then used co-design in annual work planning and organizing events. One example of progress over projects was when the National University of Laos (NOUL) applied for and met the quality assurance standards to join the ASEAN University Network (AUN). NOUL will now use this experience to help the other Lao public universities meet AUN standards and join the network even though LSS will have ended.

Finally, we helped universities build out a system of technical content including an online instructional platform; outreach and service learning; and a practice of innovation labs including student entrepreneur business pitch competitions. In addition, we assisted each university select and provided on-the-job training for 16 instructors to become Management Trainers and Advisors (MTAs). These 64 university employees are now supported by their respective universities and encouraged to determine fees and secure contracts to deliver training, provide consulting services, and organize other learning and research events to individuals and organizations.

This locally led approach to project administration will lead to changes in the Lao higher education system, and ultimately in the country's development. From our management perspective, this allowed LSS to go beyond our USAID agreed upon workplan as well as government restrictions placed on our project. Because we used CLA from the beginning and adapted our training model from direct training provision to one of cascading partner provision – our university partners were able to market training

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

A. DEVELOPM ENT RESULTS

After less than one year, it became evident that our CLA approach began to pay dividends. While our LSS project team was prohibited from working directly with local businesses or civic organizations, our university partners had strengthened nearly 70 local organizations by June 2022 and more than 200 by the end of the program in August 2024. This result could not have been achieved without using a CLA approach.

In addition, our move from projects to progress approach would not have been possible without the integration of CLA methods and tools throughout the project. Our IMC meetings became a core CLA method in that we used pause and reflect, context scanning, open dialogue, and participatory planning at each quarterly meeting. Because USAID attended these meetings, they could hear firsthand from the government and university partners what was needed. We then worked with them on getting approval for new activities or modifying the work and performance plans if necessary. This consultative, deliberative, and locally led approach required CLA in terms of RTI making change logs, reallocating budgets, and providing subsequent rounds of grants. As a result of this collaboration, learning, and adaptation – we were able to have impacts that were not envisioned in the original planning documents such as the start-up of 18 youth businesses though microgrants, NOUL joining AUN, university to government policy dialogues, and increased gender equity and social inclusion on campus.

Moreover, the use of CLA and following the lead of our university and government partners has significantly increased the sustainability of our project inputs (15 management training modules, online management training platform, cadres of trained trainers, and network development of the universities) and built both the capacity and confidence of our university partners to accept more academic, managerial, and fiscal autonomy and accountability toward improved future performance.

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?**

A critical enabling condition for CLA was the motivational mindset of LSS university partners. They were motivated to actively participate in the project for several reasons including pride of performance, ownership over the work, and the government mandate to increase the viability of HEIs. They have also become the owners of the project's technical results and products – leading to sustained progress and the ability to market these services. A second enabling factor of success was an adaptive approach practiced by USAID. USAID had very high standards for RTI on this project, but they also gave RTI the freedom to innovate, adapt activities, and allocate resources to meet the prioritized needs of the HEIs. USAID acted like a vested partner in the project and shared in our success and failures – earning gratitude from the MOES and gaining new university partners for future programs and possible direct funding. Additionally, RTI built a team culture that embraced both the mentality and the tactics of CLA. The LSS Chief of Party is a leader who practices, hires, and coaches our team to have a growth mindset. The team was willing to collaborate with new partners, learn new things, and adapt activities for the greatest results. The team held regular consultative meetings with USAID, MOES, HEIs and other stakeholders which enabled the project to be inclusive and collaborative. A significant challenge for LSS was building trust and ensuring transparency. Our advice to overcome this in instituting CLA is to emphasize the "softer" aspects of the approach such as building relationships, forging social capital among stakeholders, and consistently and honestly talking about what went well and what went wrong. If you institute the right approach on your team – the tools, tactics, and advantages derived from CLA will emerge.

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