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## CASE COMPETITION

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) have long been a part of USAID's work. USAID staff and implementing partners have always sought ways to better understand the development process and USAID's contribution to it, to collaborate in order to speed and deepen results, to share the successes and lessons of USAID's initiatives, and to institute improvements to programs and operations. Through this case competition, USAID and its LEARN mechanism seek to capture and share the stories of those efforts. To learn more about the CLA Case Competition, visit the USAID Learning Lab at [usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition](https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition)

# A Culture of Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptability: Examples from Lebanon

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### What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Collaboration, continuous communication, learning, and adaptability are concepts grounded in Search for Common Ground's (SFCG's) core values and approaches to programming.

Participatory, reflective practice is essential in SFCG's work in peace-building; it strengthens the organization's ability to evolve, adapt to rapidly changing, complex contexts, and achieve effective, sustainable impacts toward peace. In order to instill a culture of collaboration, learning, and adaptability, SFCG systematically reflects on programming throughout the project cycles, both within and across country offices around the world, builds lessons learned from different perspectives, and institutionalizes the knowledge gained. Specifically, reflections from the past few years have taken place in country offices in Madagascar, Burundi, Nepal, and elsewhere. This case study is from our country office in Lebanon, where cross-program learning is fostered through periodic, multi-stakeholder led forums.

After 15 years of civil war, Lebanon has achieved a minimal level of stability, and is still struggling with religious and ethnic divides. SFCG began working in Lebanon in 1996 and opened a permanent office in 2008, implementing 31 projects since then. Currently, SFCG projects in Lebanon are addressing ongoing conflict factors, including programming focused on working through tensions resulting from the influx of Syrian refugees, security sector reform, and women's socioeconomic empowerment. To examine the progress of SFCG's active projects in Lebanon during the past year, a series of reflections took place in January and July 2015. The following projects were included in the reflections:

- *Better Together*, a project that aims to empower the Internal Security Forces and citizens in Hbeish to work together to strengthen security and stability in their community.
- *A Youth-led Approach to Peaceful Coexistence between Syrian Refugee and Lebanese Host Communities*, a project in Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon, which uses art to develop trusting, empathetic, and respectful relationships between Syrian and Lebanese youth.



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- *Establishing Dialogue and Local Conflict Response Mechanisms in 11 Communities*, a project that aims to decrease tensions between Syrian and Lebanese communities caused by the influx of refugees, which has significantly decreased Lebanese people's access to housing, jobs, schools, water, electricity, and other services. This project works to establish communication between the two communities and build local capacity within each community to enable them to jointly identify common problems and potential solutions.
- *Everyone Gains, Promoting Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment In Lebanon and Morocco*, a project that aims to advocate for reducing economic barriers for women in MENA region.

Stakeholders who participated in the reflections consisted of SFCG project staff, donors, and local partners involved in implementing the projects.

**What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?**

The following are the main drivers behind the culture of collaborative learning at SFCG:

- A desire to contribute to a shift from an output-based approach to an outcome-based approach in the peace-building field
- A desire to increase the management's capacity to adapt to changing contexts
- A desire to create a space where staff, partners, and donors collaborate, exchange feedback, share challenges, and explore solutions in order to foster understanding and share visions for better results
- A desire to enhance local capacities and equip partners with the knowledge and learning necessary to achieve sustainability

In the Lebanese context, a growing, country-led culture of reflection, coinciding project cycles, and regional volatility requiring keen flexibility and responsive programming coalesced for the January and July 2015 CLA events. The events were seen as a great opportunity to engage donors in the reflection process, in order to give them a chance to see the impact their funds were having. The events also created an opportunity to celebrate the efforts made by staff in implementing the many projects operating simultaneously in the region.

**Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.**

**Objectives:** The reflection process aimed to make internal changes on an organizational level, and external changes on a partner/donor relational level. Internally, the reflections aimed to solidify the culture of learning and adaptability across projects in Lebanon and to encourage and support staff for taking the time to reflect. Externally, the CLA events aimed to enhance collaboration among SFCG staff, local partners, and donors by demonstrating the value of dedicating time and space where everyone examined projects' holistically, instead of working in silos, and had an equal opportunity to give feedback, revisit shared objectives and challenges from different perspectives, and build joint solutions.

**Tools:** The reflections relied heavily on group exercises, discussions, and brainstorming sessions. Some of the tools included the ABC Conflict Triangle and the River of Life. The ABC Triangle of Conflict is a framework that is used to analyze the negative attitudes behind violent/negative behavior. The River of Life is a visual narrative method that is used for introductions, to reflect on a project's past and predict its future, and to build a shared view compiled of differing perspectives. The tools used in each session were chosen based on SFCG's objectives. For example, the session in which the ABC Triangle was used reflected on a project that aimed to reduce prejudice between Syrian and Lebanese youth and build positive relationships between the two groups. Tracing changes in behavior and attitude was the aim of this reflection session; thus, the attitude and behavior elements of the ABC Triangle made it the most appropriate tool.



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Internal CLA sessions included only SFCG staff and were facilitated by a Middle East and North Africa design, monitoring, and evaluation specialist who is based in Beirut. External reflections included SFCG staff, local partners, and donors, and were led by facilitators contracted by SFCG.

**Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?**

*Success factors:* Many factors contributed to the success of the reflection sessions. First, local partners' and donors' willingness to collaborate and openly reflect on positive and negative sides of planning and implementation was crucial. The sessions also focused on giving equal opportunities for everyone present to share any thoughts or issues they felt they needed to reflect on or discuss. The main focus was about creating a safe environment for sharing and learning, without any pressure on participants to prepare presentations or report on their projects. In Lebanon, the country director's leadership toward reflective practice increased project staff buy-in and encouraged other stakeholders in their participation and understanding of the value being placed on these sessions — and the likelihood of applying the lessons learned in future programs.

Finally, the engagement of staff from all levels, including management, helped make the reflections thorough in reviewing all aspects of project implementation. This also increased ownership and buy-in around the challenges presented and solutions proposed across all levels, leading to effective adjustments post-reflection session.

*Financial resources:* The internal reflection sessions did not induce any fees, as they were held at SFCG's offices and facilitated by the SFCG specialist. The external reflections came with fees for the venue and facilitators, which were covered by the projects' budgets (under planned activities). To incorporate more stakeholders and participants, SFCG has found that it is necessary to plan for CLA events and periodic reflective practice activities at the proposal stage, incorporating activity costs for venues, transportation, and other fees into the initial budget.

**What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?**

*Monitoring and evaluation of the reflections:* To document the sessions for future reference, daily reports of the reflection activities were produced and kept. To gather feedback on the sessions from SFCG's partners and donors, the end of each external reflection day included a participatory evaluation, with adjustments were made on the following day. The July session was planned using feedback from the January session.

*Highlights from participants' feedback on the sessions:*

- "The open-discussion structure used in the sessions is very helpful in allowing the conversation to move beyond the operational and logistical aspects and cover broader sides of project work."
- "Project coordinators and local implementing partners found the presence of donors and SFCG's management staff to be very helpful as it allowed an overview of the steps that led up to implementation. Taking a close look on the overall project logic from donor/management point of view helped get everyone more engaged and more productive."

A document summarizing the reflection events was drafted, including lessons learned, and has been shared with SFCG's Tunisia country office and West Africa regional team to assist in development of their collaborative learning workshops; upon finalization, the document will be shared with all SFCG staff.

The reflections in Lebanon resulted in the following:

1. Reconnecting with donors and local partners and maintaining open discussion channels and sustained conversation



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2. Creating the expectation for CLA as part of a project, thereby reinforcing the culture of CLA
3. Adjusting monitoring and evaluation plans for the projects that were included in the reflection, based on findings from the reflection
4. Integration of key lessons drawn in January in the time remaining in the projects' cycles, with another round of assessment carried out during the July reflections, which added to the depth of learning and adaptability by closely following up on the results of the previous reflection sessions and the progress made

#### **What were the most important lessons learned?**

The culture of CLA is not new to SFCG: reflections take place regularly across country offices. The organization is increasingly aware of the importance of documenting and sharing the CLA experience of each country office with all of its teams around the world, so staff have ready access to the information.

#### *Lessons learned in Lebanon:*

- The internal reflections allowed project coordinators to take ownership and articulate their own project changes. The reflections acted as a platform for project coordinators to step back and see a project's logic holistically. It also gave them the chance to assess those projects more simply than if reading through logframes or other project documents, especially since they do not always take part in the design of the projects from the beginning.
- Local partners do have change-oriented thinking. With the assistance of a facilitator, that thinking can be shared and molded with SFCG's overarching strategy and approach to programming.
- Reflections that involve local partners and donors help grow and deepen those relationships by setting aside time for in depth communication and collaboration.

#### *Considerations for implementation:*

- Starting off the day by assessing the conflict context surrounding the project usually gets all participants to a common starting point and understanding of the current situation. It serves as a productive icebreaker.
- Having brainstorming and free discussions help stir ideas and push the conversation forward.
- Having staff from all levels participate in reflections is crucial, as it enhances collaboration, learning, and adaptability significantly.