Integrating Stakeholder Engagement into the Design Process: Liberia Strategic Analysis Communities of Practice

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USAID Liberia collaborates for strategic planning of its programs and activities. *Tanya Garnett.*

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

Liberia Strategic Analysis (LSA) is a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, and learning support contract commissioned by the USAID mission in Liberia. Adapted in response to the outbreak of Ebola virus disease, the contract demonstrates the mission's commitment to collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA), ensuring that the mission has the real-time evidence base it needs to learn from and adapt to implementation challenges, changes to context, and new opportunities that arise during project implementation. In addition to technical support in monitoring and evaluation, LSA provides CLA support to the mission to ensure that information that is collected and analyzed can be used effectively for programmatic decision making and strategy development.

In this context, the role of the communities of practice is to exact significant contributions from Liberian expertise and perspectives in the mission's evidence collection and interpretation processes. Liberia has a strong history of local development and community-based problem solving. It also has a heavy international development footprint. In this context, Liberian change agents provide insight into

what makes development programs work, the root causes of apparent failure, and how to adapt programming to the unique Liberian context.

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

The Ebola crisis clarified the importance of coordination and community engagement and mobilization to emergency response and development. U.S. government agencies and non-U.S. government donors coordinated efforts to reduce overlap and maximize resources; local organizations were engaged to efficiently build on existing social and logistical networks; government officials addressed bottlenecks, garnered support, and coordinated services; and local leaders and change agents mobilized their communities and built trust in the preventative and containment services being offered to citizens. The crisis reinforced the importance of collaboration, but it also brought to light significant gaps in information sharing, service mapping, engagement of local experts, and discussions of challenges, lessons learned, and best practices.

Although mission staff recognize and understand the importance of collaboration, in practice it has its challenges. First, collaboration takes time from the already busy schedules of mission staff for coordination and back-and-forth exchange of ideas. Second, in Liberia's post-conflict environment, where participatory and democratic processes are still being introduced, donor-led stakeholder engagement is uncommon and stakeholders sometimes need to be encouraged to critique programs and give honest opinions about the need for adaptation and change. Finally, in this donor-heavy environment, there is not always incentive to discuss failures and challenges; competition for funding can incentivize change agents to discuss only successes.

LSA designed its communities of practice to address these challenges head on. The goal is to bring together Liberian change agents in a systematic way to better inform USAID programming. This consists of identifying strong Liberian change agents who are leaders in their sectors and technical areas; establishing networks that can coordinate, complement, and clarify roles and strengthen U.S. government engagement with Liberian stakeholders. It includes building communities of practice to understand USAID's commitment to engagement and the structure of the agency's decision-making process. It also requires a focus on purposeful collaboration, systematically integrating communities of practice into USAID's Program Cycle and ensuring that formal and informal collaborative sessions are timed to actually affect program design and review.

Ultimately, LSA's approach streamlines and facilitates the process of stakeholder engagement, so that LSA can overcome the structural challenges to effective coordination and build a culture of learning, integrate and coordinate responses across multiple actors, and implement programming that is relevant and responsive to the Liberian context.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

LSA and the mission's program office designed four communities of practice — one for each mission development objective (health, economic growth, education, and democracy, rights, and governance) — and recruited members through recommendations from the development objective teams, implementing partners, LSA staff, and community of practice members.

Step 1: Recruitment: Social Impact's CLA workshop coordinator led a comprehensive recruitment process for the communities of practice, drawing on the networks of USAID staff and outside networks in the community. Although prospective members were excited to be considered "key change agents" in their sector, many found this to be a new idea and were skeptical about its utility. For this reason, the CLA workshop coordinator contacted each recommended member individually and interviewed them to encourage and gauge interest and answer any questions they might have about joining the community of practice.

Step 2: Integration of Learning Agenda: As part of its wider CLA work with the USAID mission, LSA staff help development objective teams establish learning agendas and learning questions that are in line with their logical frameworks, which prioritize areas they would like to understand more deeply, and consider how monitoring, evaluation, and learning can help address them. Communities of practice can help answer some of those questions. By preparing the agendas before the baseline workshop, the teams were able to focus workshop preparation and future topics on the learning agendas set by each development objective team.

Step 3: Baseline Workshop: Once the community of practice was recruited and the learning agendas were set, LSA and the mission conducted a baseline workshop. The workshop was an introduction to the community of practice and how it fits into USAID structures and processes. Facilitators introduced community of practice members to USAID policies that promote and structure collaboration, including a discussion about stakeholder engagement in the context of Automated Directives System (ADS) Chapter 203, "Assessing and Learning"; Local Solutions; and USAID Forward. Next, USAID staff introduced their development objective team's portfolio and learning agenda, as outlined in the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) and project appraisal documents (PADs). The group then broke out into teams to create an action plan for how the community of practice could support the learning agenda.

Step 4: Ongoing Engagement: Following the baseline workshop, LSA and the development objective teams reviewed relevant action plans and debriefed on conversations from the workshop to identify the best ways to integrate the communities of practice into their learning agendas. At the teams' request, LSA then engages the community of practice in learning events, informal meetings, or formal workshops, targeted and timed to fit each development objective team's schedules and decision-making processes. LSA will continue to host a space and hold quarterly community of practice meetings for discussion of discuss development issues relevant to their fields. Though still early in this process, LSA is planning to create quarterly reports and newsletters for the mission with important information gleaned from community of practice interactions. The information will also be shared through the LSA's Knowledge Management Portal, which will include a database of community of practice members and change agents with other agencies and development partners.

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

Through implementation, LSA and the mission identified three areas for special consideration, some planned from the start and others adapted as a result of learning during implementation:

- **Identifying diverse change agents:** One essential element of the recruitment process is to include stakeholders working in different parts of each sector. Community of practice members are from different levels of government, civil society, local and international NGOs, private sector, and the youth sector. This kind of recruitment was achieved through a "snowball" strategy, encouraging initial members to invite others. This approach enabled the communities of practice to include perspectives and knowledge from individuals beyond the circle to which the mission is typically exposed. Having a wide cross-section of members helps bring to light a wide range of issues. In this way, LSA can also find cross-sectoral experts, fostering networking within and across sectors. This is encouraging for members, along with the fact that they get to build relationships with different counterparts and directly with Mission staff.

- **Monetary support and remuneration for participation:** To encourage sustainability, LSA does not offer remuneration participation in communities of practice, so that they can carry on after LSA closes. There has not been a decrease in interest or engagement from members without financial incentives. LSA chose a group of individuals who are driven by their passion for the country and believe that partnerships and collaboration are crucial to Liberia's overall development. The team has also been clear and consistent in telling people that there is not, and will not be, remuneration. That said, without remuneration, LSA must ensure that communities of practice continue to feel that they are benefiting from the sessions. Creating momentum through ongoing activities and events and recognizing the communities of practice for their work is essential to maintaining interest in the groups.

- **Emphasizing relationship development and personal outreach:** LSA has one dedicated staff member, a CLA workshop coordinator, who organizes the communities of practice, with leadership from the CLA/knowledge management advisor, who ensures that the communities fit into the mission's larger CLA strategy. They build relationships directly with the community of practice members and mission staff through email, phone, and in-person interactions. Relationship-building is essential to getting information from stakeholders; communities and individuals are more receptive and open when they see our engagement and interest in the issues they face. Through these one-on-one interactions, LSA can answer questions directly and mitigate hesitancy, doubts, and misconceptions that potential members may have about the mission.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

Initial Results: LSA and the mission currently have 110 community of practice members in their database. Each member has been individually vetted and the CLA workshop coordinator has held in-depth interviews with 50 members. LSA has worked with each development objective team to

establish the four learning agendas to move the communities forward and conducted two baseline workshops, laying out each community's future support for the mission in these areas. LSA has also held three general learning events attended by community of practice members, including an early-grade reading workshop for experts and a series of informal learning nights, open to the general public, to view relevant documentaries, such as the recent special on the role of Firestone in Liberia, and expert-led discussions on crosscutting topics, such as undiagnosed and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder and its impact on developing countries.

Learning and Adaptation: While the long-term outcomes of the communities of practice have not been achieved in this short time, LSA and the USAID mission have achieved intermediate milestones. The most significant outcome has been that the act of bringing together communities of practice sparked a larger discussion about what stakeholder engagement means to USAID and how it can work within the structures of a mission. These discussions have made it essential for LSA to model adaptive management. Whereas the initial design proposed a set learning events and workshops, LSA's adapted design better integrates the community of practice into existing learning events and mechanisms.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?
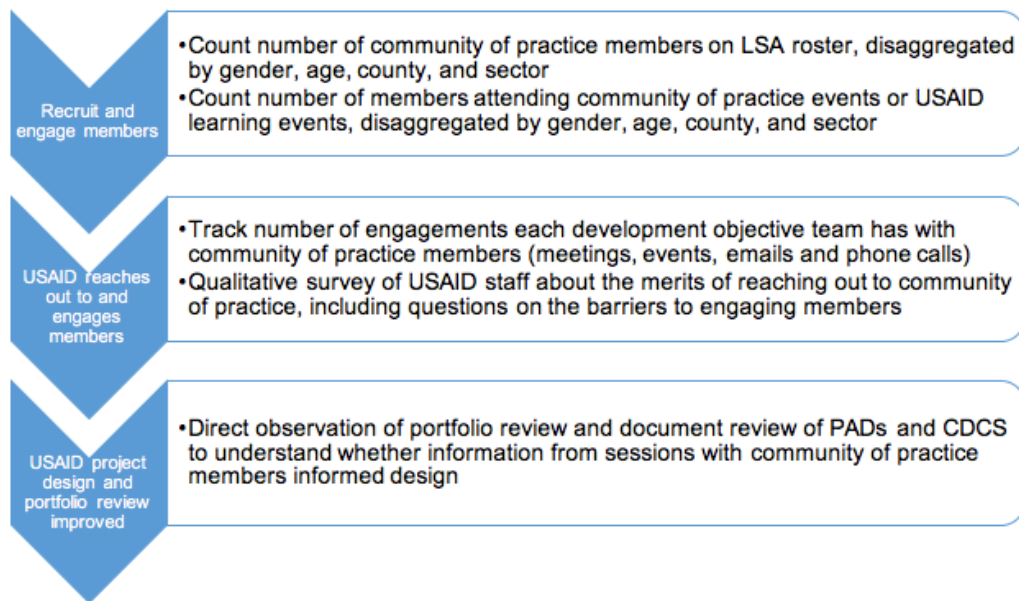
LSA's overarching goal for the communities of practice is that programmatic design and adaptation decisions benefit from the nuanced insights and perspectives of Liberian experts and stakeholders and are more relevant and effective in the Liberian context as a result of this participation. Through engagement, programs will be designed in a more relevant way, activities will be reviewed in light of local context, and bottlenecks and challenges that USAID faces during implementation can be addressed creatively and collaboratively.

LSA tracks short-term and long-term progress toward success. The Social Impact team relies on quantitative and qualitative data to track progress toward the overarching goal of more collaboration in strategy and design processes at USAID. The diagram below outlines how the LSA team will measure progress toward short-term and long-term outcomes:

Recruit and engage members	• Count number of community of practice members on LSA roster, disaggregated by gender, age, county, and sector • Count number of members attending community of practice events or USAID learning events, disaggregated by gender, age, county, and sector
USAID reaches out to and engages members	• Track number of engagements each development objective team has with community of practice members (meetings, events, emails and phone calls) • Qualitative survey of USAID staff about the merits of reaching out to community of practice, including questions on the barriers to engaging members
USAID project design and portfolio review improved	• Direct observation of portfolio review and document review of PADs and CDCS to understand whether information from sessions with community of practice members informed design

What were the most important lessons learned?

For an initiative of this nature, relationship-building is crucial; stakeholders have to know that you value their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. This takes a certain dedication of time, but once achieved, it enables the communities of practice to grow organically, as people spread the word about the activity and engagement continues to grow. This is a novel activity for the Liberia mission, and there is a process to changing the perceptions and thoughts on stakeholder relationships. This process is easier leaders of the development objective teams buy into the process. Their buy-in helps drive others to recognize the importance of engagement with local stakeholders.

Facilitating change is part of implementing this activity. It is also facilitating the relationship between the USAID mission and local stakeholders due to a lack of trust that may have developed over time. It would be difficult to build these partnerships and collaboration without developing these relationships and trust.

It is important to use the ADS and USAID strategy documents such as USAID Forward, the CDCS, and the Local Solutions framework. We use these key documents during our baseline workshops to explain the importance of local stakeholder engagement as an agency-wide policy. This is important for the mission staff; given their busy schedules, it is sometimes necessary to justify the use of their valuable time. For stakeholders, it helps them better understand the purpose of our interactions. This puts community of practice members and mission staff on the same page and lays the groundwork for shared learning.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Although the primary intention of the communities of practice is to improve USAID program design and implementation, there are external benefits. The communities of practice are somewhat revolutionary in Liberia's development-heavy space: these communities are one of the few places where donors, government officials, experts, and community leaders come together on equal footing. They facilitate a wider conversation about development, promoting thoughtful development programming, ownership, and sustainability.