2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Testing Theory of Change for USAID in Niger Using "Structured Experiential Learning"

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Members of a CSO consortium conduct a seminar with Members of Parliament on the inclusion of disability rights in the national budget. Credit: FSVC Niger

Summary:

In mid-2019, USAID/Senegal awarded FSVC a cooperative agreement to implement the "SHIGA" activity with the goal, "civil society more effectively engage the government while key government institutions are more effective in their mandate and responsive to citizen needs." In its proposal, FSVC emphasized CLA approaches and tools, including "emergent" design precepts to support adaptive management. The approach included the use of "Structured Experiential Learning" ("MeE") which supports CLA and emergent design through trials of design alternatives to test what works best and explain why. FSVC's use of a form of MeE in Niger appears to be among the first experiential applications on a USAID project.

Under SHIGA's Objective 1, civil society organizations (CSOs) are strengthened through a year-long incubation process involving 10 to 12 CSOs per cohort. The final phase of the process is a six-month small grants program (SGP). Selected CSOs receive funding to develop and implement a project to put into practice what they learned during the first half of the incubation. An implicit theory of change (ToC) held at the outset was that the SGP would be more successful if CSOs worked in coalitions of 2 to 3 members, the effort thus benefiting from collective action.

Several more seasoned CSOs in cohort 1 however expressed doubt about the value of such collaboration, based on their experience. The FSVC SHIGA team thus decided to utilize MeE to test/validate the ToC. The main design variable and subject of the test was the use, or not, of collective action. Results found that collective action is not necessarily more effective, but rather that success appears dependent on how coalitions are created, and degree and type of communication and collaboration between members during implementation. While subsequent incubation cohorts all required coalition-based SGP work, the FSVC SHIGA team has adapted the method of coalition formulation to reflect the results of the experiment.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

Niger, a landlocked country with a population of approximately 25 million in the West African Sahel region, is one of the world's poorest countries, consistently ranking at the bottom of the UN's Human Development Index. The country also includes regions afflicted by violent extremism (VE) in the west along its borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, and in the southeast abutting Chad and Nigeria. In 2018, the USAID Niger Country Office conducted a Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) assessment which found a weak civil society, low civic engagement and a poor policy reform environment. At the end of 2018, USAID issued a Request for Applications (RFA) for a three-year, $7 million program to promote participatory responsive governance. In mid-2019, FSVC was awarded a cooperative agreement to implement the "SHIGA" activity with the goal, "civil society more effectively engage the government while key government institutions are more effective in their mandate and responsive to citizen needs." SHIGA is a supporting mechanism for the Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced II program (RISE II) managed by the USAID Sahel Regional Office.

Given Niger's constantly evolving economic, geopolitical and security environments, it has been particularly valuable for the FSVC SHIGA team to use CLA in a learning-informed adaptive management approach predicated on a high degree of collective action involving RISE II and other Mission partners. SHIGA's CLA-infused "emergent design" recognized the potential impact of the planned national elections near the program's mid-point. It was also able to adapt to unforeseen events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and coups in the neighboring countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad, which exacerbated levels of VE in border areas.

Finally, Niger is a particularly difficult place for women and girls, with high levels of inequity and teenage marriage. USAID has therefore been implementing a centrally-funded Women, Peace and Security (WPS) program for several years in Niger. In 2022, the Mission extended SHIGA and awarded FSVC an additional $5 million in WPS funding. Much of the original programming will continue, albeit with a greater emphasis on women and girls. The learning gained through the experimentation described in this CLA case has informed adaptation in the original program and will be reflected in the extension design and implementation as well.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

The RFA noted that the program should contribute to USAID's "commitment to a multi-faceted Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach to development." It highlighted the value of "testing promising new approaches in a rapid, yet targeted manner to generate improvements and efficiencies and build on what works and eliminate what doesn't", and required the implementing partner to monitor the operating context.

FSVC's application and subsequent program implementation fully responded to these mandates, regularly using After Action Reflection (AAR), conducting a midterm stocktaking exercise, employing a program-level learning agenda, administering a robust system of context indicators to monitor the operating environment and critical assumptions identified in the logical framework, and utilizing MeE to trial a design alternative which emerged during the first year of programming, to test what works best to achieve the desired results. FSVC also employed an innovative "incubation" approach to address the development challenge that Nigerien CSOs needed organizational capacity building to fulfill their roles as advocates for public policy reform and as governmental watchdogs. Aspects of the incubation process became the subject of the experiment described in this case, as incubation had not been used before in this manner and thus deserved scrutiny.

Like all development efforts, SHIGA's ToC was high-level, linked to the activity's goal and objectives. ToCs or development hypotheses however also exist throughout various levels of the logical (or results) framework as these ToCs, like many assumptions, are often implicit. In this case, the issue arose in conjunction with Objective 1 work involving interventions to strengthen CSO advocacy efforts. The ToC in question was that working in multi-organization coalitions improved such efforts through collaboration and collective action. This "design variable" is common yet it was questioned by experienced incubation cohort 1 CSOs when the FSVC SHIGA team recommended they work together in the final phase of incubation (a project supported by a small grant). As a result, the FSVC SHIGA team decided to test/validate the ToC using structured experiential learning, or MeE.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

To strengthen the ability of CSOs to more constructively engage with government institutions, effectively advocate for public policy reforms and conduct public sector oversight, FSVC proposed a new approach. It involves a year-long incubation process consisting of six months of preparation, assessment and capacity building, followed by an award of a small grant of up to $25,000 to most (but not all) participating CSOs, based on competitive project proposals. Each of the five incubation cohorts implemented by the FSVC SHIGA team to date consisted of 10 to 12 CSOs. As a new, innovative approach, the incubation process demanded special scrutiny, which it receives through regular AARs, the midterm stocktaking and the MeE experiment.

The FSVC SHIGA team assesses overall CSO strengthening as a result of the incubation process by using two means employed by USAID: 1) the Organizational Capacity Assessment tool (OCA) and 2) an "advocacy index" adapted from OTI's Lebanon index. CSOs participating in each incubation cohort are subject to before-and-after OCAs and conduct a participatory advocacy rating at the beginning and end of the incubation period. These two measures provide somewhat quantitative data to compare and understand results.

The eight CSOs in incubation cohort 1 which received a total of four small grants were also subject to the MeE experiment methodology. All but one of these CSOs were grouped into three coalitions consisting of one group of three CSOs and two groups of two CSOs. Several CSOs had initially wanted to work alone but were then grouped into coalitions. One CSO was allowed to work alone for the purpose of the MeE process. Each CSO participating in a coalition was surveyed at the outset of the SGP and again at the conclusion (along with the CSO working alone). The pre-SGP questions probed the reasons for choosing to work in a partnership and the initial impressions of the arrangement; i.e., what has worked well so far in organizing the coalition and what could be improved. Even at this early stage in the experiment, differences in coalition dynamics and perceptions were evident. One two-member coalition already exhibited signs of dysfunction while, in another case, the two CSOs were already familiar with each other and formed their coalition based on complementary roles.

The post-SGP interviews (essentially a post-intervention AAR) worked off the four final reports submitted by the CSOs. They also were based on the FSVC SHIGA Objective 1 team's knowledge gained from monitoring the entire incubation process. Interview questions largely covered lessons learned in terms of what worked and didn't, and why. Prior to the interviews, the FSVC SHIGA technical staff carefully assessed the achievements of each SGP recipient, comparing the initial stated objectives and those actually achieved based on the final report and the Objective 1 team's expert knowledge. While the interviews used a standard line of questioning, the set of assessments informed individual organizational interviews.

Using the data/evidence from all sources (OCA, advocacy index, final reporting, expert knowledge and pre- and post- CSO interviews), the Objective 1 team leader, the FSVC SHIGA MEL Director and FSVC's Senior MEL Advisor then collaborated to develop experiment findings, conclusions and recommendations (FCR). The FCR focused on two issues: 1) how successful were SGP achievements; and 2) how were achievements (or lack thereof) linked to collective action. The OCA and advocacy index results were used to assess overall organizational improvements, which are presumed to be correlated with whether (and how) achievements are evidenced in the SGPs.

OCA and advocacy index measures are CSO-specific, while SGP achievements are attributable to collective action - with the key exception of the single-CSO-award "control." The delta, if any, between the collective and individual efforts is the question at hand, which the MeE experiment intended to illuminate. The FSVC SHIGA team also sought through the experiment to learn more about what makes a collaborative coalition more effective. For instance, what variables may account for any evidenced performance differences among coalitions; e.g., their size, composition of the CSO members, communication protocols and/or other ground rules?

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

In early 2018, USAID designed what became the SHIGA activity with an emphasis on CLA. The activity description contained in the RFA stated, "The CLA approach is based on the understanding that development efforts yield more effective results if they are coordinated and collaborative, test promising (and) continuously identify new approaches in a rapid yet targeted manner to generate improvements and efficiencies, and build upon what works and eliminate what doesn't." This "understanding" became the foundational development hypothesis underlying FSVC's overall approach to SHIGA.

Evidence of organizational impact is provided by the original AMELP and its subsequent iterations, as well as the annual SHIGA work plans prepared by the FSVC SHIGA team. The former contained a comprehensive CLA Plan, including a collaboration plan, learning agenda and means to support adaptive management, including the use of AAR, stocktaking and the experiment which is the subject of this CLA case. The latter plans reflected the evolution of SHIGA, which the FSVC SHIGA team came to view as an "emergent design" that reflects lessons learned and the changing operational context. The FSVC SHIGA team, with the support of USAID, reflected the results of its fall 2021 stocktaking in the FY 2022 annual work plan.

In the specific case of the experiment described here, the findings affected the FSVC SHIGA team's decision making even before the conclusion of the experiment. While it may be tempting to suggest particular CSO partnerships based on factors such as levels of experience and complementary organizational strengths, it became clear early on in the experiment that such "forced" groupings undermined the spirit of collaboration, which effective collective action requires. The FSVC SHIGA team therefore shifted gears beginning with the second incubation cohort and supported CSOs to form "natural" coalitions.

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

As noted above, the CLA experiment was linked to strengthening CSOs through an innovative incubation process, typically used by others for the development of start-ups, but rarely if ever to build the capacity of CSOs in the DRG realm. In terms of coalitions, the experiment results do not conclusively prove that CSOs working in a coalition are more effective in advocacy efforts than those working alone. The evidence does however suggest this is the case, depending on how coalitions are formed and, once this is done, internally managed.

As previously noted, the FSVC SHIGA team adapted its approach to coalition formation based on preliminary evidence, and this was reflected in subsequent CSO incubation cohorts, including cohorts 2 and 3 located respectively in the cities of Maradi and Zinder. For the FY 2021 SHIGA Annual Performance Report, the FSVC SHIGA team conducted an Outcome Harvesting exercise, which identified evidence of development impact in those two locations. CSOs in both cities which had formed "natural" coalitions as part of the SGP subsequently prepared project proposals which then received funding, respectively, from another USAID project and the European Union. The coalition in Maradi included four CSOs, while that in Zinder included three CSOs; none of the seven CSOs had received outside funding, particularly through a competitive process, prior to their coalition-based strengthening under SHIGA.

The perceived development impact of the broader CSO incubation experiment has also been acknowledged by USAID. SHIGA was initially a three-year, $7 million activity, but FSVC was recently awarded an additional $5 million to continue its work in Niger. This new WPS-focused work will emphasize related development issues and include additional CSO incubation cycles in new regions within Niger afflicted by insecurity. All will reflect the broad lessons learned from previous implementation and the particular results of the structured experiential learning experiment.

6. 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?

As noted in Section 4, USAID has provided supportive overall enabling conditions since the outset of the SHIGA activity. Any CLA successes exemplified in this case are in large part attributable to this. The FSVC SHIGA team embraced the approach, and recruited for the design and implementation of the SHIGA activity a U.S.-based Senior MEL Advisor with significant knowledge of CLA and over 25 years of experience working with USAID (lastly with its Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning). The FSVC SHIGA Chief of Party (CoP) was also experienced in CLA practices and had previously led a USAID MEL platform project elsewhere in Africa. Together, the CoP and MEL Advisor took the significant time and effort required to build the general CLA knowledge of the Nigerien professional staff, and guide them in how to conduct an experiment in particular. During the third year of SHIGA, a local senior MEL Director position was established, which greatly facilitated the operationalization of CLA approaches, including the experiment highlighted in this case. This enabled the FSVC SHIGA Objective 1 team leader, responsible for the CSO incubation, to become a champion of the experiment, and CLA more broadly.

Conducting a CLA experiment as described in this case requires commitment, planning, determination and a degree of patience - on the part of both the implementing organization and USAID. This case demonstrates that, with these elements as a foundation of a conducive enabling environment, structured experiential learning and other experimental methodologies are critical to USAID's CLA repertoire.