2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

USAID/Timor-Leste's Youth-Led Listening Approach

Name: Local Works Timor-Leste Team

Organization: USAID/Timor-Leste

The USAID/Timor-Leste Local Works team listening to youth on the street from marginalized communities in Liquica Municipality. Credit: USAID/Timor-Leste

Summary:

Timor-Leste is one of the youngest countries in the world, with 70 percent of the population under age 30, and 50 percent under age 18. Despite opportunities to directly engage youth as co-creators and leaders to address their own development challenges, donor-funded activities generally only consult with formal NGOs in the capital city of Dili and those who have previously been selected for leadership opportunities. Many youth voices go unheard. While USAID/Timor-Leste recognizes the importance of youth in its programming, USAID's activities continue to be carried out by traditional (international) implementing partners. However, the Local Works program provides the opportunity and technical support needed to design differently through listening directly to unheard voices, and learning from local partners directly. With support of Mission leadership, a core team of empowered local staff leads Local Works. This team recognized that it wasn't enough to just listen to youth - the listening process itself had to be led by youth. Collaborating, learning, and adapting in direct partnership with youth was critical to strengthen relationships among USAID and unheard youth; enhance learning for the Mission and local actors; and ensure future Local Works activities are designed to be responsive and adaptive to community priorities. After piloting listening approaches and adapting approaches for COVID-19, the team partnered with a local NGO, university faculty and students, and community leaders that had never worked with USAID. The partners conducted a listening tour through respectful, open-ended conversations with over 1,250 youth across Timor-Leste, operating fully in the local language and with local dynamics in mind. Passionate, but inexperienced youth were paired with more experienced individuals to receive mentorship and serve as local interlocutors. Youth priorities that emerged through listening will directly inform future Local Works programming. Further, lessons learned from the listening effort and the team's creative engagement of local partners will inform how the Mission approaches localization across its portfolio.

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?

Timor-Leste is one of the youngest countries in the world, with 70 percent of the population under the age of 30, and 50 percent under the age of 18. The youth demographic faces complex development challenges, including lack of access to basic infrastructure and education, high rates of unemployment, and low civic participation.

While there is tremendous opportunity to engage youth as co-creators, innovators, and leaders to address their own country's development challenges, donor-funded activities tend to engage the "usual suspects" - formal NGOs in the capital city Dili and educated youth who have previously been selected for leadership/scholarship opportunities. Many youth voices go unheard, especially in the rural areas of the country's 13 municipalities. Most institutions are based in Dili, and poor or non-existent roads make these individuals difficult to reach.

USAID has recognized the importance of the youth demographic across programming in Timor-Leste, making this a cornerstone of its 2020-2025 Country Development Cooperation Strategy. As the country's civil society organizations are still maturing and lack direct donor experience, USAID's activities to date have been carried out through partnerships with international, traditional implementing partners. Making direct awards to new, local partners requires significant effort by Mission staff to understand the local partner landscape and provide dedicated support in the local language for partners to understand and comply with USAID's complex requirements. USAID/Timor-Leste saw the Local Works program as an opportunity to design differently by first listening directly to unheard local youth, and then to pilot and learn from partnering directly with local organizations to lead solutions.

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

In May 2019, USAID Timor-Leste received a $1 million Local Works award to advance locally led development by engaging youth to develop innovative and locally driven approaches to solve development challenges in their communities. The Mission convened a cross-office core team of local staff to lead the activity design.

To make a sustainable impact on the entrenched development challenges facing youth, the core team recognized they needed to strengthen direct external collaboration with unheard local youth and partner on a process in which their voices could be heard. The core team also wanted to build trusting relationships with these actors to understand their priorities before designing solutions, and ensure sustained feedback loops could inform ongoing adaptation to changing community needs and learning.

To achieve these goals, the core team narrowed in on listening as their foundational approach for the Local Works program. Listening is an intentional locally led development methodology that goes far beyond a typical assessment to hear directly from constituents about their priorities and needs. It focuses on building trusting relationships and facilitating open dialogue between USAID, implementing partners, and local actors. Real-time data on community needs and priorities is an important output of listening, but relationship building is the core purpose, and listening is intentionally not an extractive exercise. The Local Works Timor-Leste team designed their youth-led listening tour, as described below, with this core purpose in mind.

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.

Throughout the youth-led listening effort, the Local Works team recognized that CLA approaches with local partners, youth, and local authorities was critical to strengthen relationships among USAID and unheard youth; enhance learning for the Mission and local actors; and ensure future Local Works activities are designed to be responsive and adaptive to community priorities.

The team piloted listening tools and approaches in four municipalities with youth and other stakeholders, including local authorities, community leaders, and parents. To identify these initial participants, the Local Works team conducted stakeholder mapping using Kumu and consulted with other local staff.

Local staff led the listening sessions in Tetun and served as logistics coordinators, interviewers, note takers, and observers. In addition to focus group and one-on-one interviews, the team experimented with "intercept interviews," spontaneously engaging youth they saw walking around in rural areas. This allowed them to go far beyond those who typically engage in donor consultations.

When the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the pilot, the team adapted their approach quickly by conducting virtual focus groups and interviews via Whatsapp and also leveraged USAID/Timor-Leste's following on Facebook. They created a video with support from a local contractor, posted it on Facebook, and invited ideas via comments, calls, and emails. They also did a giveaway on Facebook where they asked youth to share their perspectives and selected a few to receive USAID merchandise.

Importantly, the pilot sessions gave the Local Works team the opportunity to practice and hone their listening skills and develop concrete strategies to ensure the nation-wide listening tour effectively engaged local communities. Following the pilot, the Local Works team convened to reflect on what worked well, and what should be adapted for the nation-wide listening tour. Then, through a Request for Information, the team identified local organizations with capabilities to support the listening tour and individuals who could serve as local interlocutors. They followed this with a Request for Proposals (RFP) to select a local implementing partner. They revised and extended the RFP twice to better respond to local partners' needs.

The team partnered with a local NGO named Haburas Ita Moris (HIM), university faculty and students, and community leaders that had not previously worked with USAID to conduct a culturally and linguistically appropriate listening tour with youth across 13 municipalities. In each municipality, passionate, but inexperienced youth were paired with more experienced individuals to receive mentorship and serve as local interlocutors. The interlocutors' role included supporting HIM to identify relevant local stakeholders to include in sessions, providing translation support for local dialects, and advising on local gender and power dynamics.

The listening tour also took a locally led approach to data capture and analysis, and to building feedback loops with local communities. HIM collaborated with the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL), including a local professor and 16 students from the International Relations department. The students, eight men and eight women, served as interviewers and note-takers during listening sessions. The professor applied a qualitative research methodology to analyze the listening tour findings and create learning products for USAID and local communities. Findings were shared with listening participants in follow-up sessions, which invited their reactions and feedback.

Through local leadership, focusing on relationship building, and respecting local dynamics, listening sessions created a safe space for youth to share open-ended information regarding their lives and challenges in their communities and their hopes for the future. Over three months, the listening tour reached 1,250 people across the country. Listening sessions identified clear youth priorities around agro-entrepreneurship, access to clean and reliable water sources, and rural village development that will directly inform forthcoming USAID/Timor-Leste Local Works programming.

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?

USAID/Timor-Leste learned important lessons about engaging local communities to shape the Mission's approach to localization. The listening widened USAID staff's perspectives about engaging with stakeholders beyond those who USAID typically consults. It was the first time that most youth who participated in listening sessions had the opportunity to share their opinions and priorities directly with a donor organization. USAID learned how important it is to partner with local coordinators who are able to speak and understand hyper-local dialects. Typically, USAID staff make an assumption that everyone is able to speak the national language. However, in many rural areas, community members do not speak the official language, and are thus left out of processes to share their opinions.

Further, local coordinators provided real-time information about the people and dynamics in local communities, and provided guidance on structuring conversations to take local gender/power dynamics into account. For example, involving local leaders in group discussions can limit other participants from sharing their perspectives freely. The team learned to pull these leaders aside for individual conversations instead. The team also learned to separate men and women in focus groups - in combined groups, men tended to dominate the conversation. With this knowledge, in future activities USAID/Timor-Leste staff will think deeply about local engagement approaches, do the work to understand the local context in partnership with local people, and include resources for translation. Recently, with these lessons in mind, the Mission hosted a first-of-its-kind event for local organizations to share local NGOs' partnering experiences, provide resources on working with USAID, and facilitate networking in the local language.

Within the Local Works team, local staff now feel more empowered to speak up and take on extra work in support of locally led development. Each individual team member is taking initiative to engage in new leadership activities. For example, local staff are now representing offices in internal meetings, confidently expressing their opinions, and representing USAID in external meetings.

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?

While the activity resulting from this CLA approach is still in the design phase, the Local Works Timor-Leste team expects the activity to directly respond to youth priorities that emerged during the listening tour. In implementation, USAID/Timor-Leste will continue collaborating, learning, and adapting with local actors to support unheard local youth to lead productive lives where their voices are heard.

The activity will specifically pilot approaches to agro-entrepreneurship capacity-building and system strengthening; access to clean water and reliable water sources; and rural village development and programming in one municipality where USAID currently does not have programming. A pilot approach will enable USAID/Timor-Leste to strengthen its knowledge of youth-centered locally led development approaches and generate learning to inform possible future replication in other municipalities. The activity will be led by a local organization and have a strong inclusive development focus, targeting 60 percent women's participation and engaging persons with disabilities, religious minorities, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community. By mobilizing small grant funding to local individuals and groups, the activity will enable youth to own and lead improvements in their home communities.

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?

Local Works's flexible funding, technical support, and emphasis on taking time to deeply understand local priorities before designing solutions provided the enabling environment for the Local Works Timor-Leste team to think creatively about engaging unheard local youth and listen to their priorities. Mission leadership support of Local Works and commitment to the current administration's localization agenda was also a critical piece. Mission leadership designated and empowered a team of newer local staff to lead the effort, including creating a full-time Local Works Coordinator/Youth Specialist role. Locally led development is hard and time-intensive work, and having dedicated staff to champion the process and engage closely with local partners is key. The team was also fortunate to have dedicated support from the Local, Faith, and Transformative Partnerships Hub team in USAID's Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation to advise on CLA and locally led approaches to inform the listening effort.

To navigate any future challenges, USAID staff should be aware that Mission leadership changes and staffing changes can have a big impact on activities. It takes effort to convince others of new initiatives that approach partnering differently. Further, while newer staff bring important perspectives and creative ideas, there can be a steep learning curve to understand USAID's project management and award process. It's important to recruit experienced staff to provide dedicated mentorship to these individuals.