2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Acting Locally, Thinking Globally: Harvesting Outcomes in South Sudan

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DAI

Summary:

Throughout its short history as an independent country, South Sudan has experienced conflict, natural disasters, and other shocks and stressors. As the largest donor in South Sudan, USAID aims to build resilience and empower communities. Policy LINK, a global Feed the Future activity that advances leadership and collaboration for better policy systems, shifted tactics at USAID's request to focus on working with communities to decide on their own resilience priorities. The activity's five-step process seemed to produce promising results. As the activity ended in December 2022, Policy LINK wanted to learn more about the outcomes of its South Sudan work and share lessons with others working in the country.

With support from the Policy LINK global team and USAID's Bureau for Resilience and Food Security, a team was engaged to design and implement an outcome harvest evaluation. This methodology uncovers intended and unintended outcomes and, in keeping with the Policy LINK approach, is centered around community members' voices while maintaining rigor. The recently-completed evaluation identified a variety of positive outcomes, including that community members' mindsets had shifted and that they had felt more agency over prioritizing and sharing their needs. These "expected outcomes" led to others, like women in the community taking on a larger role in local decision-making and leadership, and communities applying improved agricultural practices. The outcome harvest helped Policy LINK understand how its work had affected communities and enabled the team to share those lessons with others.

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 operating environment was riddled with numerous challenges, including the lack of field-level coordination among implementing partners despite the existence of coordination platforms, limited participation of local government and communities in the implementation of resilience programming, lack of integration of community priorities in joint work planning exercises, the use of resilience evidence in decision-making is exclusive to international organizations, and the lack of agency among community stakeholders. Additionally, there was a lack of coherence at the county level of the resilience priorities among the payams of a county, and the lack of opportunities for inter-payam action planning and consensus building on how to best address the shocks facing the households within the county.

As we described in a CLA case competition entry last year, Policy LINK operated in South Sudan from 2019-2022. Originally, Policy LINK provided backbone support to the United Nations-led Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR), but in September 2021, USAID asked Policy LINK to change course and focus on facilitating collaboration between communities and USAID implementing partners in several target counties (Akobo, Budi, Jur River, Kapoeta North, and Wau). The shift was meant to support more locally-led approaches and work toward USAID's Development Objectives, including decreasing aid dependence and increasing resilience and social cohesion. As Policy LINK ended its work in South Sudan, we wanted to better understand whether and how our approach succeeded in engaging local communities, and we hoped to share those lessons with other implementing partners working there.

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

External Collaboration

M&E for Learning

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

As an activity devoted to systems-level change, Policy LINK has consistently incorporated collaborating, learning and adapting practices into its work. Policy LINK does not advocate for or pursue specific policy objectives; instead, our approach involves supporting collaboration and advancing local ownership and leadership over policy objectives. As such, Policy LINK uses systemic approaches to collaboration, supports participatory learning and pause and reflect opportunities, and engages in adaptive management.

CLA approaches were particularly important for Policy LINK's adjusted mandate in South Sudan. Policy LINK and USAID hoped to foster community-led resilience, meaning that an inclusive group of community leaders has the capacity and autonomy to identify and set resilience priorities, develop action plans, and communicate, coordinate, and collaborate with key partners to implement those plans. To support these goals, Policy LINK facilitated a robust collaborative process, based on evidence, that put community members in the lead. The process involved:

1. Engage stakeholders - Introduce the five-step process to community members and leaders from the key elements of the community—local government, traditional authorities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector—to establish a foundation of trust for cooperation and coordination.
2. Gather evidence - Conduct a community mapping exercise to understand the institutions, structures, processes, and capacities available for community-led resilience.
3. Facilitate sense-making workshops - Share the findings of the community mapping exercise with community stakeholders at workshops, promote learning around the evidence, and facilitate stakeholders in developing a list of resilience priorities, needs, and actions and selecting representatives for subsequent workshops.
4. Facilitate local action planning workshops - Help community members translate resilience priorities into payam-level and county-level plans that instill in communities a sense of agency and contribute to improved collaboration.
5. Support joint work planning - Facilitate workshops in which payam delegates, county government department heads, state line ministry representatives, and USAID implementing partners produce coherent plans for effective collaboration and mutual accountability.

Policy LINK implemented this process in the targeted counties and believed it to be effective in helping communities take charge of their development. As the activity ended, Policy LINK hoped to better understand outcomes of the process for building community-led resilience and what factors enabled or inhibited those outcomes, in order to share them with others.

The team decided to pursue an outcome harvest evaluation. This methodology uncovers intended and unintended outcomes and, in keeping with the Policy LINK approach, is centered around community members' voices while maintaining rigor. Policy LINK conducted 137 interviews for the evaluation, which an evaluation team coded and analyzed. The evaluation team substantiated a number of outcomes resulting from Policy LINK's work that speak to the effectiveness of taking a facilitative approach to engaging communities.

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

The outcome harvest evaluation identified and substantiated 13 outcomes, which include three "expected outcomes," meaning that the evaluation confirmed attribution of the anticipated outcomes to the Policy LINK activities. The outcomes were described as: communities' mindset shifted to be more self-reliant; community has an improved understanding of shocks, potential contributions to solutions, and experiments with more resilient practices; and communities enhance agency through prioritizing and sharing their needs with others. These three "expected outcomes" are the most likely to be replicable in other contexts due to the nature of their direct connection to Policy LINK activities. They also served as the foundation for other unexpected, positive outcomes.

The evaluation showed that Policy LINK's CLA-focused approach of engaging communities in collaborative learning, use of evidence, and priority-setting and joint work planning was successful in helping communities develop an enhanced sense of agency. Community delegates built their capacity to: understand the shocks impacting them, create adaptive solutions to implement in their communities, translate their solution ideas into action plans, identify the resources they possessed and resources needed from development actors to implement self-reliant practices, and share their needs with others. These community delegates returned to their communities and disseminated their skills with the broader community along with their plans to adopt resilient practices to address the most impactful shock(s) in their community.

The evaluation described several outcomes that arose from the development and implementation of community-owned action plans, including the election of two women to the traditional authority, which inspired women and created opportunities for women to take on a larger role in local decision-making and community leadership, and increased the use of improved agricultural practices.

By empowering communities to organize themselves and collaborate with others, the Policy LINK approach facilitated several other, farther-reaching outcomes, rooted in community priorities.

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?**

During the final phase of Policy LINK's work in South Sudan, resource constraints posed significant challenges to sustaining CLA efforts. In July 2022, Policy LINK South Sudan had to terminate the contracts of its technical team and was left without human resources to undertake data collection for the outcome harvest. To implement the outcome harvesting evaluation, Policy LINK leveraged financial resources and support from its sponsoring office in the Bureau for Resilience and Food Security to recruit and train enumerators to conduct the data collection, pay for the evaluators' LOE to conduct the analysis and report writing, and organize and participate in learning events. Having completed the outcome harvesting evaluation, the activity team was able to share lessons learned and the strategic outcomes which were expected and unexpected with other Policy LINK buy-in countries, the USAID Mission and implementing partners in South Sudan, and Horn of Africa resilience projects.
Enablers to Policy LINK's CLA include Policy LINK's culture (collaborative, transparent) and processes (iterative, reflective) as were its resources, including staff committed to and versed in CLA approaches. Moreover, Policy LINK's clients—USAID/RFS and USAID/South Sudan—are invested in CLA approaches and understand that, although such approaches may take more time and resources to apply, they produce better results.