2023 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Beyond Funding:USAID/Liberia's ongoing journey for inclusive local part

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Organization:

USAID/Liberia

Summary:

In Liberia, there are many challenges to sustainability and increasing local ownership. These include limited institutional and human resource capacity after years of conflict and health emergencies, lack of political will to implement decentralization of authority and resources, and inadequate public sector funding for basic social services, such as health and education. Within two different grants-based activities, USAID/Liberia is making progress towards our localization goals by addressing some of the underlying barriers to local partner engagement.

Both activity designs incorporated specific approaches for working with local partners in the Liberian context, but also further adapted the approach based on engagement with key stakeholders. The Youth Advance activity modified the grant process to include an option of in-kind grants, which provided resources and mentoring to aid nascent local organizations in growing their capacity. The Agribusiness Incubator and Development activity modified its co-investment grant opportunity application to be more inclusive of rural and marginalized groups, based on feedback from key stakeholders.

Through the use of adaptive management and external collaboration, both activities have sought to contribute to the enabling conditions for sustainable development among prospective local partners. As a result, the USAID/Liberia Mission is able to meet local organizations where they are. This allows for greater flexibility and agency in the ways local organizations can partner with USAID.

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?**

Liberia has had many setbacks that hinder sustainable development. The country was in civil war from 1989 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2003. Progress toward recovery and rebuilding was then devastated during an Ebola outbreak, from 2014 to 2016. Institutional knowledge that existed forty years ago is still being pieced back together, often by those most directly impacted by the civil strife, who lacked the opportunities and resources available to previous generations. Local partners in Liberia possess the motivation and determination to build a better tomorrow, but the impact of nearly thirty years of devastation has left many organizations without the foundation needed to grow and expand. Despite these challenges, survey data suggests that Liberian youth organizations can invigorate positive change when participating in advocacy-related activities. The Youth activity identified that the capacity of local youth organizations varies greatly across the country, particularly when comparing urban and rural organizations. There are few successful rural youth organizations, and these organizations lack the technical capacity of their urban counterparts. As a result, the most experienced and capable local organizations are the ones who typically continue to receive donor funding. The Agribusiness activity spoke with many local organizations that described multiple barriers to access grant opportunities from USAID/Liberia, including cumbersome procedures and bureaucratic hurdles to apply for grant funding. In particular, rural applicants found challenges in the required concept note length, the complexity of the application process, and the necessity of reliable internet to access and submit applications.

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

Adaptive Management

External Collaboration

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

The number and location of potential partners to implement a small grants program under the Youth Advance activity was identified within a youth assessment. This included a mapping exercise to identify the capacities of local youth organizations. The activity design was based on finding and working with strong local partners initially, then expanding later. However, the assessment uncovered overwhelming demand for a small grants program. Many of the organizations were too small to even qualify as partners because they could not meet the basic requirements. Yet, in the weeks following the assessment, organizations that had been interviewed began to proactively reach out directly to the Youth Advance activity in order to request the opportunity to serve as a partner. USAID/Liberia identified the need for a shift in the design. The Mission practiced adaptive management and diversified the approach for working with local partners by piloting an in-kind grant option as a predecessor to the original cash-grant approach. The in-kind grant option was appropriate for more nascent local organizations. Instead of providing funds, in-kind recipients were provided with resources they needed in order to grow as an organization, particularly capacity building opportunities, such as training classes and materials, learning meetings, and training materials. While five in-kind grant organizations came to demonstrate the capacity to implement the USAID Youth Advance activity as cash grantees after one year as in-kind grantees, the story does not end there. Given the limited resources of small local organizations, the Mission wanted to ensure transitional support. This required an unexpectedly heavy lift from the Youth Advance activity staff, including through ongoing guidance and mentorship. The external collaboration between Youth Advance activity staff and in-kind grant local organizations was not planned for in the original design, but without it the number of local organizations with the capacity to serve as cash grantees would have remained stagnant and concentrated in urban communities. The Mission also launched an activity for local partners to gain interest in co-investment grant opportunities through the Agribusiness Incubator and Development activity. The opportunity was advertised to local agribusinesses and farmers, and yet the number of applicants was small at just 28. Through outreach with prospective partners, the Mission identified barriers to local partner engagement and, through adaptive management, modified the grant application process to simplify it. A media campaign and roadshows were conducted to provide personalized guidance on the new, simplified application process. Service centers were established in each county, providing internet access for agribusinesses to submit their applications. With an intentional effort to reach rural agribusinesses and farmers, by the close of the grant application window, the Mission received 148 concept notes. This was a significant improvement. The Agribusiness Incubator and Development activity focused on external collaboration by conducting a co-creation exercise with local business development firms. This allowed the team to tap into the expertise of local organizations that had worked on similar interventions in the past, and incorporate local contexts. The participants shared key insights on the Liberian business context and agribusinesses' needs. Liberia was then divided into three zones, with one local firm selected to run the program in each zone. The selected firms will run cohorts of 25 small and emerging businesses/entrepreneurs at a time.

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

Local actors want to show ownership and they want to have a seat at the table to discuss their development agenda and approaches. However, extensive capacity challenges have limited past engagement. Using CLA approaches allowed the Mission to modify our grant processes to be more inclusive. Adaptive management and external collaboration aided the Mission in identifying realistic and attainable steps for implementation, that addressed some of the underlying challenges and key obstacles to reaching Agency priorities and development goals.

By being part of the USAID Youth Advance activity family of local organizations, the nascent organizations increased their capacities and positioned themselves to apply for cash grants. In year one, the Youth Advance activity partnered with eight local organizations to be recipients of in-kind grants, and nine local organizations competed to receive cash grants. In year two, the number of partners expanded to 19 in-kind grant recipient organizations, and ten cash grant partners. Furthermore, in year two, five of the in-kind organizations from year one were selected as cash grantees.

The Agribusiness Incubator and Development Activity received just 28 concept notes one month into the co-investment grant application window. After increased integration of CLA, there was a sizable increase from 28 to 148 concept notes by the four month deadline. This provided a proof of concept to the Mission that many rural prospective partners were willing to apply if the messaging and process were modified to be more inclusive. The external collaboration also contributed to increased participation of youth- and women-led agribusinesses, as evident by 65 of the 148 applications coming from these traditionally less-represented groups.

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?**

Youth Advance and Agribusiness Incubator and Development activities were able to incorporate CLA concepts despite existing resource constraints by re-balancing limited resources. The Agribusiness Incubator and Development activity began the process of making adjustments to the grant application process before opening the application window. Working with colleagues in Washington, USAID/Liberia identified measures for making the process more inclusive based on lessons learned from other Missions. Then, during the grant application window, USAID/Liberia reached out to key stakeholders for feedback, and discovered that additional barriers were still deterring stakeholder participation. Having addressed one issue in the design stage, the Mission sought to address additional barriers during the grant application window. There was a limited amount of time to conduct roadshows, advertise the process via radio jingles, and sit down with individual prospective partners. Working with a branding company to accomplish this meant that USAID/Liberia was allocating additional funds in order to make this pivot and socialize the application process. Choosing a local company ensured progress was made within the predetermined time frame at minimal cost. The Youth Advance activity was able to save funds by adapting the grant process to include an option for in-kind grants. Those savings were then rebalanced to account for the additional staff time required by the Youth Advance staff to train and mentor the more nascent local partners. USAID staff, in turn, expended more time in order to foster a culture of learning between Youth Advance staff, more experienced local organizations, and nascent local organizations. Had the activity's definition of success only been defined by the number of cash grantees, this re-balancing of resources might not have appeared worthwhile. However, in the long-term, this adaptation to the Youth Advance activity is imperative to building local capacity.