2019 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Co-creating Organizational Development Interventions with CSOs for Systemic Change

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A group exercise to visualize the connections between civil society organizations in Mexico during a CLA event facilitated by Social Impact. Photo taken by Lucila Serrano, USAID.

Summary:

The Civil Society Activity (CSA) seeks to improve institutional capacities and increase the sustainability of Mexican Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to effectively implement programs related to violence prevention, criminal justice reform, and human rights. Initially, we approached this work by focusing on the development of internal capacities. However, early on in implementation, we found that our original Theory of Change (ToC) was limited in responding to CSOs needs and to USAID's desire to scale up impact. Each of our CSOs was undergoing transformation in their leadership or vision which implied shifting their position within their environments, while facing external challenges. Upon consulting with CSOs and USAID, and embracing a CLA approach, we set out to correct course.

Having established a foundation in internal strengthening per the original program design, we took a moment to pause and reflect on how to scale up our intervention holistically when rethinking the ToC. At this point, our goal expanded. We decided to not only strengthen internal capacities, but also to enhance CSO interactions with diverse actors, and to solidify CSOs' position within the system. To do so, we adjusted our ToC to focus on improving CSOs' 1) capacities to collaborate, 2) connections with stakeholders, 3) abilities to develop responsive strategies, and 4) access to resources. This approach combined the principles of Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD) with Capacity Development 2.0 and Local Systems frameworks and required us to design interventions through adaptive management, which prompted modifications to the strategy and work plan.

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can 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 is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

Since CSA began, we have learned to adapt our approach to respond to the challenges that the Mexican civil society sector faces. One such challenge is the complexity of the social conditions that CSOs in the country confront. For CSOs, it is clear that the issues they address are systemic in nature – whether it be human rights abuses, increasing levels of violence, or corruption in the justice system. Likewise, CSOs are aware that these social conditions require systemic interventions. If this is true, we thought, it is our role to ensure that processes of organizational development attend to the range of factors that affect performance with a local systems perspective.

Another challenge CSOs face is the lack of access to resources to implement organizational development and restrictions in how resources may be used. Out of the 41,273 organizations registered in Mexico, 8% access public funds, meaning that most rely on private resources. CSOs that receive private funds are limited in how they may invest. For example, by law, organizations that claim tax exemptions are not allowed to dedicate more than 5% of their budgets to administrative costs. Furthermore, there are few professionals and organizations with adequate approaches to strengthen CSOs.

A shift in the political context in Mexico brought yet more challenges. Beginning in 2017, the sector witnessed a drastic reduction in public funding and the closure of spaces of dialogue in which organizations advocated around public policy. These conditions do not lend to an enabling environment in Mexico, requiring CSOs to adapt in order to survive in this constrained environment. In conclusion, while there is a need for organizational development within the civil society sector, there are not enough resources for CSOs to access these opportunities and a lack of awareness around how strengthening organizations contributes to sustainable impact.

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

Based on the expressed needs of the organizations we supported during the first year, our team recognized the urgent need to adapt our approach to organizational development in a flexible manner, motivated by the suggestion of USAID to incorporate CLA. As we began to rework our approach in dialogue with our partner organizations, an intentional CLA practice materialized organically given our openness to be creative and flexible when exploring options.

At an early stage, CLA was incorporated into our day to day practices through team brainstorming exercises, which then transformed into a structured CLA approach based on iterative cycles of design, implementation and adaptation. By virtue of our team's dedication to learning by doing and the openness of our leadership to support adaptive management, we developed mechanisms for piloting innovative tools and methodologies, systematizing lessons learned, and documenting challenges and successes. Communicating adaptations to our organizational development approach in a way that made sense to our CSO partners was critical to ensure their commitment. Towards this end, we engaged in dialogue around the role of institutional strengthening and its impact on their agendas to achieve sustainable impact.

Having experienced CLA firsthand, we were able to identify and document these practices being carried out by CSOs. For instance, one of our partner CSOs facilitated the creation of a network of actors in the government and civil society working to co-design a ToC and indicators for a social reintegration model with an emphasis on continuous monitoring and learning around their application.

3. 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.

Upon pausing to reflect on the original ToC during one-on-one dialogues with our partner organizations after sixth months of implementation, our team began to brainstorm ways to more effectively implement our ToC. Our partner organizations had expressed an interest in improving how they communicate their work strategically and collaborate with diverse actors across sectors to fulfill their missions. Based on these conversations, it was important to incorporate additional activities into the ToC to craft a more holistic vision for organizational development in a way that strengthened our partner organizations' interactions and position in their external environment.

Over the next months, our team began to propose additional components to the ToC that would complement the original vision for organizational strengthening rooted in HICD while also drawing upon the latest in best practices in the field. Inspired by the Local Systems and Capacity Development 2.0 approaches, we began to view organizational strengthening in three dimensions: the strengthening of internal capacities, the strengthening of relationships and networks in which organizations participate, and the strengthening of organizations' position within their local systems, each linked to one another. By approaching organizational development in a holistic manner, we could support organizations as they tackled complex challenges in their environment.

During the period in which the ToC evolved, the Program turned to adaptive management when rethinking and redesigning our own internal structure and processes to ensure that the ToC would be operational. The adjusted Work Plan and ToC that were a product of this redesign both incorporated an intrinsic CLA approach. For example, during the development of the Work Plan and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan (MELP), each of our teams and implementing partners contributed objectives and indicators based on scenario planning that considered the three levels of institutional strengthening aforementioned.

Moreover, our team explored a broad range of assessment and performance improvement tools with guidance from experts in our home office and lessons learned from civil society actors in other countries to implement our holistic vision for organizational development at a technical level. The continuous process of learning that took place during this time involved checking in with our partner organizations to ensure that these tools were viable and relevant in their application. In general, it was crucial that all modifications to our ToC, Work Plan, MELP and technical operations were designed with the support and collaboration of our main stakeholders, namely USAID Mexico, our home office, our implementing partner Fundación Appleseed, our partner CSOs and others.

As modifications to the ToC, Work Plan, MELP and tools for institutional strengthening were being introduced and implemented, it was vital to establish collaborative mechanisms for dialogue with partner organizations and other stakeholders who were to participate in processes of organizational strengthening in order to answer any questions and promote buy-in. If not, it would have been difficult to guarantee that the newly expanded, systemic vision for organizational strengthening would be fully understood and embraced by those who were to replicate it. As a result, the legacy of the program would be compromised by having produced a relationship of dependence.

To ensure our approach to organizational development is truly sustainable and systemic, we have also established alliances with influencers in the civil society sector who are recognized as leaders, trend setters and connectors with significant impact. By leveraging the position and resources of these influencers in targeted ways, we can achieve structural change in key areas such as bringing visibility to the contributions of CSOs and changing practices among donors, which will extend the legacy of CSA by creating a more enabling environment in the long-term.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: 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?

By taking an intentional CLA approach, we have been motivated to put into practice what we preach around institutional strengthening by prioritizing internal knowledge sharing, collaboration, and adaptation. This intentional CLA approach has led to the creation of digital platforms and spaces for dialogue to exchange information and make decisions across different areas of the program. Our different areas are no longer siloes, rather we have reorganized how we collaborate internally to be more integrated.

Our team meets monthly to review M&E data from partner reports and our digital time tracking system to help us understand how much time we spend with each CSO. This system helps us identify gaps in implementation and how much effort it takes to result in the change we seek. We have also restructured how we work with organizations internally, assigning one member of the institutional strengthening team as a focal point to coordinate each step of the process across the programmatic areas and disseminate information to stakeholders in an efficient manner. Also, our institutional strengthening, M&E and grants teams now utilize weekly check-ins and digital platforms to work in coordination with one another at each step as we support organizations.

These changes to the way we work internally allow us to be agile in making informed decisions on the spot by being attuned to organizations' needs and status in their organizational development process. This structure has also cultivated trust between our CSOs and staff because we are more responsive to their realities on the ground and their staff know to reach out to their focal point with any need, knowing that information will be disseminated appropriately. Moving forward, the fully integrated structure in which we work as a team will allow us to be adept at managing any obstacle or shift in implementation strategy.

5. Development Results: 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?

Involving our partner CSOs during the process of redefining our ToC was key to co-designing solutions that are viable and relevant to their organizational goals in order to truly achieve a systemic impact that advances their development objectives. Additionally, this process required us to better communicate the importance of institutional strengthening across its different dimensions – internal, environmental and systemic – in order to fulfill their respective agendas with tangible outcomes.

For example, CSA created spaces of generative dialogue to better understand how to link internal capacities with the organizations' abilities to build relationships and be influential actors within their environments. We did this by linking the criteria of the Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) and Organizational Performance Index (OPI). It has been important to utilize each step in the assessment process, the presentation of findings, and the implementation of solutions as moments to learn the importance of connecting progress in activities and inputs with results-based outcomes in theory and practice.

Furthermore, we implement systems-based assessments that allow organizations to understand their impact within their environments. Our Systems Mapping exercise and Social Network Analysis (SNA) have encouraged CSOs to map and evaluate their position within their local systems. Our CSOs have gone on to utilize these findings during strategic planning to formulate objectives and indicators that reflect a systems-based approach. Our organizations have also become more motivated to develop and strengthen their strategic alliances once they visualize their role systemically.

Given the integrated methodology we have co-designed which incorporates OCA, OPI, Systems Mapping and SNA, our CSOs now visualize performance at various levels. As our CSOs internalize the value of these tools and appropriate new practices to achieve impact, we have observed them implement more robust M&E systems that allow them to track progress towards their development outcomes and learn how to improve.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

Bringing CSOs together and convincing them to participate during a new phase of the program was a significant challenge. Our partner organizations were not used to having such a participatory role in co-constructing the program design of a large donor, so we were intentional in actively involving them to ensure that the collaboration was fruitful. As we paused to reflect collectively as a program with our CSOs, the principles of adaptive thinking and continuous learning, and the support of our leadership further enabled us to move forward with a CLA approach.

Designing a different set of strategies and tools under a short deadline was the biggest challenge we encountered during this period of modification. When we were combining an HICD framework with a Capacity Development 2.0 and Local Systems based approach, we needed to learn their respective methodologies, design and pilot tools, adjust efficiently, and systematize results along the way, which all took place within a six-month time frame with different specialists involved. Our continuous approach to learning and improvement helped us to systematically socialize the new tools and approaches and bring everyone onboard. Ultimately, this methodological and strategic design brought us to a more flexible and efficient assessment tool that could be applied fully or in a modular fashion. This allowed us to arrive at findings and recommendations in a semi-automized way to quickly move into the tailoring and implementation of solution packages.

We also encountered challenges when transitioning quickly from a small to a larger and more complex team while rolling out a new ToC, work plan and strategy that were much more ambitious. During this transition, the CLA approach was useful to learn, socialize and operationalize the new work plan with our staff and consultants while still allowing for modifications along the way.