Case Title:

Donor Coordination for Enhanced Public Education Services

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Caption: Public school teacher using improved teaching and learning materials.
Credit: QITABI project - USAID/Lebanon

Summary:

To cope with the increased pressure that Syrian refugee children put on Lebanon's public-school system since 2011, Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) collaborated with the international donor community to develop a crisis response program called Reaching All Children with Education (RACE). Now RACE is in its second phase, which broadens the crisis response to embrace a mid-term strategy to include elements of quality education and education service delivery.

The education donor coordination group was formed to provide a forum for donors to engage with MEHE and coordinate with one another on issues affecting the sector in general and RACE in particular. The education donor group co-chaired by USAID and UNICEF consists of an active membership of 12 donor countries and four Public International Organizations and uses the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach in various aspects of the work it does with both the Ministry and the Center for Education Research and Development (CERD) as well as in the interactions between its members.

While the use of CLA has proven successful in many instances, such as providing the donor group with a structured, semi-official forum and the ability discuss and collaborate on issues to obtain more visibility and achieve better communication with MEHE, obstacles remain especially in terms of MEHE's lack of transparency on data related to impact and results.

The writers of the CLA case wish to acknowledge the efforts made by UNICEF as co-chair of the coordination group, the engagement of all donors in the group, and MEHE's cooperation.

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?

After war broke out in Syria in 2011, more than a million people fled the country and sought refuge in Lebanon. To cope with the increased pressure that Syrian refugee children put on Lebanon's public-school system, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) collaborated with the international donor community to develop a crisis response program called Reaching All Children with Education (RACE). This entailed a structured collaboration among donors to respond to acute and immediate education needs of refugees and Lebanese vulnerable children.

As a result, the RACE coordination group was formed to provide a forum for donors to engage with MEHE and coordinate with one another on issues affecting the sector. The group consists of multiple donor countries and organizations, including Australia, Canada, the EU, France, Germany, Italy (AICS), Japan (JICA), KFW, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, UK (DfID), UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID, and World Bank. Key objectives of the group are:

• Streamlining, coordinating, and harmonizing the donors' engagement with the Government of Lebanon.
• Holding strategic discussions and data analysis on how to address the gaps in Lebanon's education sector.
• Building collective knowledge on the education sector.
• Adapting programs to the different necessities that may arise.

But with the crisis in the region protracting, the donor group has recently decided to review and strengthen its strategic engagement with the Government of Lebanon to move from a crisis response to a more sustainable, long-term education sector strategy.

USAID currently co-chairs the Education Donor Coordination Group, along with UNICEF. The focus is currently on:

• The need for a cohesive work plan for all donors to have visibility on their level of contribution.
• Issues with UNICEF taking an effective Education lead role within the donor community.
• Addressing the lack of transparency from MEHE on data and initiatives.
• The need to regularly update capitals on the impact of funding and justify the need for additional requests from MEHE.

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

The external collaboration and networking relationship amongst donors emerged to develop a cohesive work plan for all involved parties to leverage and accelerate the impact of contributions to the education sector in Lebanon. Regular meetings allow donors to discuss issues of immediate interest and high priority through a CLA approach that provides a structured and semi-official capacity. Documenting the issues and discussing them in a deliberate fashion helped us have more visibility and enabled us to communicate more effectively with MEHE to get the messages across.

What started as an information sharing group has become a community of practice among donors. As mechanisms for communication and knowledge sharing were put in place, the education donor group meetings have evolved from mere update-sharing gatherings to more elaborate discussion fora that allow us to follow up

on the group members' different actions and advocacy plans and even offer thematic briefings to showcase topics of common interest in the education sector and learn from each other's experiences and endeavors.

This community of practice and learning is now well positioned to address potential upcoming issues as it is a solid platform that donors can rely on in their programming and budget planning.

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.

Support to education in Lebanon from the international community has taken different forms. Some donors (bilateral and multilateral agencies) have a longstanding relationship with the Government of Lebanon, whilst other players were new to the table. The education donor coordination group, currently co-chaired by USAID and UNICEF, has initially been convened under an informal arrangement. A donor survey was launched and by autumn 2017 feedback was gathered to help inform how the group should evolve. This feedback was designed to help to formalize the chairing arrangements and scope of the group. By February 2018, a clear scope of work for the co-chairs was agreed upon and objectives were defined. Additionally, advocacy messages were agreed upon to help improve knowledge sharing and learning, that would result in evidence-based adaption of donor programming; those implicate MEHE contribution to official data gathering and dissemination in a timely and structured manner.

Advocacy messages are agreed upon in collaboration with all donors to reach an agreement on how best to formulate and communicate the messages. These common advocacy points are revisited during monthly meetings and actions against each point are documented and tracked.

The donors' advocacy has resulted in MEHE becoming more open and pro-active in sharing timely evidence and up-to-date data on enrollment, retention, and transition rates that can be taken away and used by donors. This was critical to planning, financing, and measuring the success of RACE, and understanding trends in student drop-out. Data disaggregated factsheets are now updated on a quarterly basis to support a deeper analysis and better identify causes of variations from goals, expectations, and norms.

Building on this achievement, an additional advocacy message that all donors agreed upon is to advance data collection and quality. This suggests that the School Information Management System (SIMS), which was funded by donors, be fully utilized across MEHE's departments and in all public schools as well as cycles of education and be fully accessible by public stakeholders to ensure common data are used in analyses across the education sector. The Donor group is recommending the establishment of a vision for a national database. It is worth noting here that the development of SIMS was based on USAID's School Information Management System Project - Assessment Report (May 2013) that was conducted by PMPL, a USAID-funded project implemented by Social Impact. The software was provided by the EU while implementation was funded by the EU and UNHCR, among other donors.

Advocacy messages are communicated at high diplomacy level and help maintain the sustainability of previous donor interventions, bringing additionality and refocusing future ones through an adaptive overarching communication strategy and well-coordinated national education program.

The CLA approach is flexible enough, and changes over time will be made to adapt with education and emergency needs. This is further catapulted by the Support to RACE II (S2R2) program led by the World Bank and funded by DfID. S2R2 consists of nine disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs), a pay-for-results approach, which achievement serves as an incentive for MEHE and the Center for Education Research and Development

(CERD) to receive donor funding. Among the most notable of these nine DLIs are frameworks related to data systems to ensure the timely availability of data and the best data management approach. Using CLA, the opportunities that emerge under the DLIs often are supported by other donors. For instance, USAID was pressing a reluctant MEHE for a regularized approach to student assessments. Coordination in the donor group resulted in DfID funding a DLI for an assessment approach. USAID then launched an intervention to develop a national assessment framework. MEHE is now fully engaged because successfully completing and implementing a national assessment strategy is rewarded by a DLI. Other equally important frameworks include the Teacher competency framework, the Teacher professional development framework, along with the USAID-led National framework for learning assessments.

One of the education donor group's advocacy points draws on the CLA method to push MEHE to move to a more comprehensive approach to the education sector, capitalizing on the accomplishments and lessons learned from RACE II in order to establish an Education Sector Strategy that would take advantage of the financial and operational data available to inform planning and address the multiple barriers to education, quality of education, and protection in a comprehensive and sustainable manner.

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?

The education donor coordination group has reinforced donors' communication and relationship with MEHE and streamlined development strategies in the education sector to feed into both donor outcomes and GoL priorities. It has also allowed the interoperation of the donor bilateral programs to reinforce each other and motivate MEHE to pursue a logical progression of improvements. Furthermore, the donors engage with MEHE to press for how MEHE will use its funding earned from DLIs to further reinforce their development path. The funding resources from donor communities are now better allocated per intervention and geographic region with very limited overlap in donor activities.

In addition, donors can now more easily get formal clearance to access and work in public schools, something that was hard to get in a timely manner in the past and induced at some point delays in project implementation and school rehabilitation, especially for smaller donor countries. Now, MEHE has a clear vision of the foreseen activities and can to a certain extent grant access as needed way ahead of time. This implies more efficient management of the implemented project at both the Mission and Implementing Partner levels.

Project timeframes allocate a relatively longer time for the implementation of activities compared to the period reserved for logistics preparation. A slight change has been noticed so far, but more is expected in the future. Agreement and coordination at high level was translated in smoother implementation and reporting of more accurate and timely data. Implementing partners management and senior leadership teams were able to increase engagement with MEHE on operational and strategic levels through several coordination meetings. These meetings aimed to consolidate and agree on the activity structure and implementation timeline needed to advance all activities. For instance, MEHE nominated regional officers as focal points to maximize the coordination efficiency and ensure swift correspondence and actions.

Implementing partners in the education sector are now benefiting from more hands-on data that allows them to set achievable and realistic targets. This enables them to invest and develop a rigorous knowledge management tool that will facilitate tracking and mapping the support for each public school and disaggregate beneficiaries to the lower level per sex, geographic region, nationality, and age.

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?

Collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) approaches have contributed to USAID/Lebanon's development outcomes by pushing the MEHE to pay closer attention to data and report on it in a regular fashion, which helped address the donors' need for regular data to support monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for learning and provide more transparency in donor spending in the education sector. This supports adaptive management for USAID project implementation, donor programs, and the country's education strategy. In addition, USAID has a forum to promote a pathway to self-reliance for the education sector in Lebanon. Other donors see how their interventions can further Lebanon along this path, which essentially multiplies the effect of USAID investments.

The sustainability of interventions is being maintained in USAID programing now that donors have been proactively engaged in collaboration, discussing their vision with MEHE, and advocating for their approaches. Based on the positive impact of the Early Grade Reading (EGR-Arabic) intervention, MEHE is willing to replicate the work in a larger number of schools, adopt the approach, and apply it beyond Arabic. This example describes the results of a strong coordination and relationship with MEHE that will drive USAID strategic support in institutionalizing previous interventions and building MEHE's capacity in providing better quality education services for vulnerable students.

Because of high-level agreement and coordination and the continuous engagement between implementing partners and officials, USAID recently launched preparations for two institutionalization activities. These are the development of the National Student Learning Assessment Strategy (NSLAS) and holding a National Day for Literacy. Both activities will contribute to the institutionalization of the EGR intervention on different dimensions. The NSLAS will guide, inform, and enhance evidence-based educational policy making at all levels related to student achievement, teacher performance and the school environment. The National Literacy Day will establish a platform that will carry forward the discussion on literacy instruction and acquisition at the national level and will inform and guide public investment in this area in both the public and private education sectors.

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 together donors that have different development perspectives, priorities, and ways of doing things was not easily accomplished. Finding common ground was challenging, and to be able to move forward the coordination group set the following key principles:
- Partnership.
- Trust.
- Transparency.
- Inclusive discussion and exchanges.

The education donor coordination group then formalized the chairing arrangements and the scope of the group by agreeing on a set of objectives that meet key and common donor needs. But this was not the only challenge, as obstacles were faced in communicating and bringing MEHE on board.
In the beginning, there was little traction and many donors were frustrated with MEHE's approach.
However, by persisting in requesting the information and being consistent in the group meetings and messaging, the group evolved and became a consolidated and unified voice to advise the ministry and push for policy change.

This process was complemented by the ability of the donors' different implementing partners to build relationships and establish communication networks with officials in the public education sector. For USAID projects, for example, the choice of the implementing partner's managing staff was crucial for the success of the project and the efficiency of high-level coordination. Management needed to have previous knowledge of the public education system. This enabled coordination and collaboration at all levels and was materialized in enhancing MEHE's institutional capacity for better monitoring, building frameworks for enhancing learning outcomes, and discussing and adapting workplans.