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# Collaborative Learning and Adapting (CLA)

Civic Engagement Initiative  
April 2019

## **BALADI CAP**

Building Alliances for Local  
Advancement, Development and  
Investment – Capacity Building



## **DISCLAIMER**

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# Introduction

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is a conceptual framework and set of practices that aim to improve USAID development effectiveness through the application of an iterative process of learning and evidence-based program adaptations..

The central function of CLA is to ensure that progress toward development objectives is guided by continuous learning through analysis of a wide variety of information sources and knowledge that bring to light new best practices. This emphasis on a learning approach to development seeks out ways to improve the process of generating, capturing, sharing, and using knowledge to support and improve development outcomes.

Aligning its programming with USAID, MSI integrated CLA activities into its BALADI CAP program cycle and

implemented in January 2018 the first set of its 'pause and reflect' sessions with program staff and beneficiary / partner organizations, based on which adaptations were introduced and are being implemented. MSI BALADI CAP is now in its sixth and final year of program implementation and has conducted a second series of CLA activities to extract the program's best practices and lessons learned. This report covers the CLA assessment findings and learning results under BALADI CAP's Civic Engagement Initiative (CEI) component.

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# CEI OVERVIEW

CEI is one of three components of a USAID-funded six-year, \$14.9 million civil society support Activity implemented by Management Systems International (MSI) in Lebanon.

BALADI CAP's CEI component aims to increase citizen engagement and participation in the advocacy of priority issues in Lebanon through the support of three advocacy networks. Primarily, CEI implementation has entailed three consecutive phases: The first phase identified three priority areas that reflect advocacy issues of major concerns to Lebanese citizens, namely: (1) Environment Protection and Solid Waste Management, (2) Human Rights, and (3) Good Governance and Accountability. The second phase managed through competitive bidding the selection of three Intermediary Service Organizations (ISOs) on the premise that these ISOs will act as service providers to build the capacity of advocacy CSOs, and to function later on as leaders and coordinators for the networks to be created for each of the identified priority areas. In tandem with the selection of the three ISOs, CEI opened opportunities for CSOs to

apply and benefit from grants to implement advocacy initiatives of relevance to the three priority areas. The third and last phase entailed provision of capacity building training by ISOs to the selected CSOs (CEI grantees) and the concurrent implementation by the CSOs of their advocacy grants. CEI's central advocacy model is based on the assumption that advocacy grants and capacity building by ISOs would manage the creation of three networks, with ISOs as network leads and CSOs as members, actively advocating for citizen's concerns.

CEI implementation of its first CLA exercise resulted in program 'adaptations' primarily through re-directing and increasing support for the establishment of the three networks, designing the networks' charters and by-laws, developing their respective advocacy strategies and plans, and implementing for the first time a network-led advocacy initiative.



# CLA IMPLEMENTATION

The objective of this second series of CLA activities is to review the revised CEI capacity-building model for advocacy and assess if the recently introduced adaptations have resulted in improved advocacy effectiveness and enhanced sustainability of the three advocacy networks.

The CLA review was implemented from February 2019 starting at BALADI CAP's "CSO Governance, Capacity and Innovation" Conference through early April 2019. The CLA assessment entailed a desk review of CEI progress reports, background documents from BALADI CAP's "CSO Governance, Capacity and Innovation"

Conference, conference proceedings and report – summary notes. The CLA exercise also included interviews with BALADI CAP's project leadership, CEI staff and the three ISO organizations in addition to a CLA workshop attended by ten representatives from nine CSOs - CEI grantee organizations.



# CLA FINDINGS

## - LESSONS LEARNED

The CLA assessment attempted, to the extent possible, to provide answers to the questions proposed in the design report.

These questions focused primarily on the impact of the recently introduced CEI adaptations with reference to network sustainability and CSOs' buy-in, and a review of the CEI advocacy capacity-building model to extract lessons learned and a way

forward. Analysis of the desk review documents, workshop and interviews' discussion notes revealed the following summary findings, structured and presented by CEI component/CLA questions.

### **A ISO trainings: Did they better respond to CSOs needs/network requirements post the first CLA adaptations?**

The second phase of CEI (post-CLA and ensuing adaptations) did not involve many trainings. Whatever was provided during this period as training / capacity-building or facilitation sessions, either directly by BALADI CAP or through the ISOs' contracts, was aimed towards establishing the foundations of the network on more sustainable grounds. These 'training activities' covered sessions for strategic planning and intensive consultations with network members to achieve a shared vision for each network, draft networks' charters and by-laws, design a network advocacy strategy and plan for a joint network advocacy initiative. Feedback of CEI stakeholders – CSOs and ISOs on the adaptations introduced during the second

phase with respect to trainings are captured in the following summary points:

**Adaptations addressed the CSOs' concerns raised during the first CLA.** Participants in the CLA workshop confirmed that the adaptations introduced by BALADI CAP during the second CEI phase have addressed their concerns with regards to 'training activities', specifically in reference to two main issues:

1- Consensual Approach: Facilitated by an external consultant, workshop discussions and network related decisions followed a consensual decision-making process, whereas previous training topics were

decided upon without input from the CSO members and irrespective of their capacity-building needs.

- 2- Training activities / network institutionalization sessions were devoted to building the institutional framework of the respective networks and thus were much more aligned with the networking needs of the CSO members, if not the individual capacity-building needs of these CSOs. These sessions have potentially improved the CSOs' buy-in to the network as it brought them together with their respective ISO to discuss and find common grounds.

**The impending end of BALADI CAP led to increased pressure and focus on 'deliverables' rather than process.** A common observation among CSOs and ISOs was that they felt pressured during these sessions to come to an agreement on the network-related issues, arguing that consensus is a process that requires time specifically

when looking for a common ground between organizations working in different areas (though still within the same realm of environment or human rights). Admittedly, this time pressure was imposed by the impending close out of the BALADI CAP Activity.

**Participation in both CBC (Capacity Building Component) and CEI ISO trainings implied numerous trainings which ultimately affected the level of CSO involvement.** The increased number of training and workshop sessions was also a limiting factor for CSOs with a small number of staff as they also had to attend trainings and other BALADI CAP capacity-building events under CBC. This fact led some CSOs either to absent themselves from some of the CEI trainings or to send representatives who did not have decision-making authority on behalf of the CSO, which led to additional time delays in reaching consensus and agreement on the network-related matters.

**Recent program adaptations have positively addressed training issues that stem from initial design assumptions, but introduced a bit late they created time pressure to be attained within the project lifetime.**



Support for the institution of a network is to be planned as part and parcel of project design.



## CLA LEARNING

Network formation discussion sessions need to (1) be planned as part of the original project design and, (2) implemented mid-way through the project lifetime to provide time for consultations and application of a consensual process in network-building.

The benefits of CSOs' involvement in both organizational capacity building under CBC and advocacy networking under CEI are evident, though this training intensity seems to be a bit challenging for small CSOs.

**B Advocacy Grant: What were the benefits of the advocacy grant(s) in building/enhancing organizational capacity for advocacy? Which elements of the advocacy grant proved to be most effective in realizing the planned change? What did you learn as a result?**

Discussions with CSOs in reference to the advocacy grants is summarized under the following points:

**Overall agreement on the benefits of CEI grants in increasing effectiveness of CSO advocacy.** In addition to the financial means that that CEI grants have provided, CSOs have pointed out to additional direct and indirect

benefits of their grants in enhancing the overall effectiveness of CSO advocacy, namely:

1- The grants provided the financial means to hire technical experts in the fields targeted by the advocacy initiatives. According to the CSOs, CEI's financial support was instrumental in enabling them to

**“** A strong advocacy case is built on experts’ research. BALADI CAP grants enabled such research to be conducted and have thus greatly enhanced advocacy effectiveness



**“** Though challenging, MSI grant making process taught CSOs to come up with clear advocacy objectives and to implement a structured project planning approach to achieve advocacy results



contract experts to undertake base research, to draft and review laws, decrees and policies, and to make use of social media and other communication platforms for advocacy. This technical know-how, which is missing in-house, enabled CSOs to build their advocacy on solid technical and professional grounds, and has thus greatly enhanced their effectiveness.

- 2- The process of grant negotiations and CEI monitoring of the CSOs’ proposal design and grant implementation had a learning impact and have thus increased CSOs’ advocacy effectiveness. To substantiate this finding, a CSO representative said “we learned a lot when implementing the grant. Though we disliked it, CEI/MSI guidance compelled us to come up with ‘an achievable’ advocacy result ... something that we can measure and report on at the end of the grant. Previously, we used to produce objectives that lacked focus and which were impossible to reach within the means at our disposal ... now we can claim this ‘performance’ within our organization’s capabilities and apply to other sources of funds based on the successful achievements of this grant.” On a further note, this CSO also noted that the grant reporting requirements by milestones required a structured project planning


approach which, in spite of its difficulties, have taught CSOs to think along tangible measures and steps to achieving advocacy objectives.

- 3- USAID branding is mostly viewed as a positive point in support of CSOs' advocacy effectiveness, as it facilitated outreach to and meetings with high-level government and non-government stakeholders to campaign for the 'advocacy objective'. This is often though not always the case, as in some contexts USAID branding can impede CSOs' advocacy efforts, as one ISO representative stated, "when USAID funding is said to have a political objective."

**Some issues posed challenges and or limited CSO advocacy effectiveness.** Though CSOs had an overall positive assessment of the benefits of CEI advocacy grants, some challenges were also noted specifically with regards to:

- 1- Time was looked upon as a challenge and limitation when implementing advocacy initiatives. Unlike other projects, advocacy deals with many external challenges that are beyond the organizations' control. Such challenges can be a political stalemate (which can be quite frequent in Lebanon) or a change of government, etc. These external

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The 'uncertain contexts' of advocacy necessitate flexibility and a long time frame.



impediments could compel advocacy CSOs to withhold all related activities, to cancel them altogether, or at other times to devise alternative strategies.

- 2- Fixed Amount Award (FAA) contractual agreement(s), which basically aim to facilitate disbursement of grant funding according to agreed upon payment milestones, can pose challenges to CSOs when applied to an advocacy project. For the reasons stated above in terms of the uncertainties of the external environment, strict conformity to original plans and/or document requirements posed challenges and often times required multiple reviews, changes, and or contract amendments, to which BALADI CAP was open and have greatly facilitated.

## CLA LEARNING

Grants seems to have direct and indirect benefits in improving CSO advocacy capacities and also in enhancing advocacy effectiveness and thus should always be maintained as a base element in future advocacy/capacity-building Models.

Operating under mostly uncertain contexts, advocacy initiatives required longer-term timeframes to achieve the advocacy objectives, and

increased flexibility and adaptability of the grant contractual requirements.

As CSO advocacy grants were extended prior to the formation of the network, they did not directly align nor contribute to the network objectives. Future advocacy networking models, should consider a different sequence with the grants to be extended after the network formation and not before.

### **C** Program Adaptation: ISOs - Issue Networks: In what ways would the newly adopted measures improve CSO members buy-in to the network? How could we enhance the sustainability of the issue networks once program support ends?

CEI CLA adaptations have set the foundations for the networks and grounded them on a more solid basis. The second phase adaptations involved (with the support of an external consultant) intensive consultations between network members who managed to develop a shared vision for each network, design a network advocacy strategy and action plan, and implement a joint network advocacy initiative. Network lead issues were resolved in

the network charter with agreement on a consensual decision-making model, as compared to the earlier approach of the ISO-led networks. Feedback from both ISO and CSO organizations confirmed that the CEI adaptations have addressed the 'network lead issues' and network institution issues which were identified during the first CLA and have thus improved the CSOs' buy-in to their respective network.

Potential sustainability will vary between the three networks with the Human Rights network sharing more sustainability pull factors than the others. ISOs and CSOs feedback on the question of network sustainability was unclear stating "it's too early to tell...we barely finished the network launching event ..." Both ISOs and CSOs stated that

CEI adaptations institutionalized the three networks and managed to find common ground and a shared advocacy objective.



they only experienced working together as a network for a very short period of time given the impending 'closure of CEI'. Also, when questioned about their short-term steps or plans as a network post-CEI, both CSOs and ISOs were unable to provide definite plans on their immediate follow-up steps. Nevertheless, members of the Human Rights network were the most adamant about the potential sustainability of their network and crediting their positive affirmations to the following factors:

- 1- Some CSO members have more grounds in common as organizations that address issues affecting 'similar' vulnerable groups. Moreover, these organizations have already worked and cooperated in the past (before CEI) and would not have a problem working together again through the network.
- 2- CLA interview conducted with LAU IWSAW as 'network lead' identified another 'network pull factor', namely, comparative advantage. IWSAW is an academic research institute able to offer CSOs access to research skills and facilities not readily available to these CSOs. On the other hand, CSOs have 'field' access and experience which is not readily within reach of the Institute. Thus, the Human Rights network members tend to 'technically' complement each other.

**Some challenges to networks' sustainability stem from CEI design model and cannot be addressed without additional intrinsic changes to the network.** CEI project design brought together organizations with wide differences in terms of 'advocacy focus area' and 'advocacy approach'. Though still within the same broad priority areas, organizations within the same network have different focus or areas of concern. Such is the case with LRI that works almost exclusively on reforestation and forest protection and Terre Liban whose organizational priority is solid waste management and waste reduction. Additional differences or 'push factors' stem from opposing 'advocacy approaches': Whereas some CSOs believe in challenging the government through advocacy, others believe in a positive advocacy approach of working with the

**Numerous challenges face the work of advocacy networks specifically within the Lebanon context. The learning mined through the BALADI CAP experience is to identify and build on the network 'support factors'.**

**//** In addition to sharing a common cause, members of an advocacy network need to bring different capacities to enhance the network competitive advantage and to minimize inherent CSO competitiveness.

government to promote the needed change. These differences can be further complicated with the different political allegiances of some CSO leadership in addition to inherent CSO competitiveness for visibility and financial resources. All of these issues would have needed more time to be massaged out or possibly to consider introducing additional intrinsic changes to the networks.



## CLA LEARNING

To work jointly under one umbrella network, organizations need at the basic level to share a common cause. This common cause was later identified for each network through CEI support in the second phase. However, the common cause is what initially should constitute the basis for bringing organizations together to join forces through the formation of an advocacy network.

The potential of a network's sustainability depends to a good extent on the willingness and ability of organizations to work together and most importantly on the competitive advantage that each member organization brings to the network. Complementarity of reach, skills or resources between members will increase the network pull factors and can potentially minimize push factors such as CSO inherent competitiveness.

## **D Capacity Building / Network Model: Given the opportunity, what would you maintain and or change in this advocacy programming model for capacity-building and networking and why?**

MSI's BALADI CAP programming in advocacy networks was designed based on the following model: The provision of advocacy grants to CSOs and concurrent grants to ISOs to build CSO grantees' capacity for advocacy and subject matters related to their issue network; lead, manage and sustain the advocacy network in the future; and, implement network advocacy campaigns in support of the 'identified issues'.

When asked about the CEI design/capacity-building for the advocacy and networking model, both ISOs and CSO organizations found it difficult to suggest an alternative better working model. Instead, their answers focused mostly on what should not happen in future projects, such as: pre-selecting the training topics, pre-selecting the network lead, and compelling CSO grantees to join a network based on a general identified priority area. Additionally, one ISO organization proposed that the advocacy grant ought to be provided to the ISO rather than to the CSOs. Another ISO argued that advocacy does not necessarily require 'numbers', i.e. numerous CSOs to be effective, giving the example of their

own organization's successful advocacy for Horsh Beirut. Still, considering the CSO conference background research on the Lebanese networks experience and the learning stemming from this CLA and the previous one, we can safely summarize the following **advocacy and networking model success factors**:

- ▶ A network should begin with a common advocacy cause/objective to plan for adequate time and institutional support to create the network, facilitate the election of a lead organization from within its members and provide initial support for its common advocacy campaigning.
- ▶ CSO members need to bring complementarity and 'niche' value added to the network to enhance advocacy effectiveness and minimize inherent networks' challenges.
- ▶ Advocacy grants and concurrent direct and indirect capacity-building for advocacy is a must in future advocacy/network project design.

- ▶ An alternative to networks can be coalitions, a temporary, short-term pool of organizations that gets together for a specific advocacy objective. Donor support can be provided through a grant to a lead entity provided that: 1) this organization has the willingness and ability to reach and form a coalition of CSOs around a common advocacy issue; 2) organizations to be involved in the coalition share a common purpose while also offering diversity in value added or competitive advantage; and, 3) organizations involved in the coalition will participate with the lead entity (CSO or other) in the **planning and implementation** of the advocacy campaign each within their own respective fields/area of expertise.

**Future advocacy networks design model should build first on a common cause and then create networks or coalitions of CSOs that offer a complementary set of capacities and skills.**

