

A Culture of Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptability: Examples from Lebanon

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Collaboration, continuous communication, learning and adaptability are concepts grounded in Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) core values and approaches to programming. Participatory reflective practice is essential in SFCG's work in peacebuilding to strengthen the organization's ability to evolve, adapt to rapidly changing, complex contexts, and achieve effective, sustainable impacts towards peace. In order to instill a culture of collaboration, learning and adaptability, SFCG systematically reflects on programming throughout the projects' cycles, both within and across country offices around the world, builds lessons learned from different perspectives, and institutionalize knowledge gained. Specifically, reflections have taken place in country offices in Madagascar, Burundi, Nepal and elsewhere over the past few years. The following highlighted case study is from our country office in Lebanon, where cross-program learning is fostered through periodic, multi-stakeholder led forums.

After 15 years of civil war, Lebanon has achieved a certain level of stability but at the same time is still struggling with sectarian, regional and socio economic divides. SFCG began working in Lebanon in 1996, and opened up a permanent office in 2008. Since then, SFCG has implemented 19 projects in Lebanon. Currently, SFCG has a variety of projects that are addressing ongoing conflict factors, including programming focused on working through tensions resulting from the influx of Syrian refugees, security sector reform, and women's socioeconomic empowerment. In order to examine the progress and adjust the approach of SFCG's active projects in Lebanon during the past year, a series of reflections took place in January and July 2015.

Projects included in the reflections were:

1. **Better Together: Improving ISF-Community Relations in Ras Beirut:** a pilot project that aims to empower the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and citizens in Ras Beirut neighborhood to work together to strengthen security and stability in their community.
2. **Better Together: A Youth-led Approach to Peaceful Coexistence between Syrian Refugee and Lebanese Host Communities:** a project in Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon which aims to develop trusting, empathetic and respectful relationships between Syrian and Lebanese youth using art.
3. **Establishing Dialogue and Local Conflict Response Mechanisms in 11 Communities:** a pilot project that aims to decrease tensions between Syrian and Lebanese communities in Lebanon caused by the influx of refugees, which significantly impact local structures and public services. This project works to establish communication and collaboration between the two communities and build local capacity within each community to enable them to jointly identify common problems and their potential solutions.
4. **Everyone Gains, Promoting Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment In Lebanon**

and Morocco: a project that aims to advocate for reducing economic barriers for women in the MENA region.

Stakeholders who participated in the reflections consisted of SFCG project staff, donors, and local partners involved in implementing the projects.

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

The main drivers behind the culture of collaborative learning at SFCG are:

1. A desire to contribute to a shift from an output-based approach to an outcome-based approach in the peacebuilding field and reflect about the expected changes vs. the achieved changes.
2. A desire to increase the management's capacity to adapt to changing contexts.
3. A desire to create a space where staff, partners and donors collaborate, exchange feedback, share challenges, and explore solutions in order to foster understanding and agree on practical recommendations for better results.
4. A desire by SFCG to enhance local capacities and equip partners with the knowledge and learning necessary to achieve common vision, ownership and sustainability.

Specifically within the Lebanon context, a growing country-led culture of reflection, coinciding project cycles, and regional volatility requiring keen flexibility and responsiveness of programming all came together to foster the January and July 2015 CLA events. The CLA events were also considered an opportunity to engage donors in the reflection process -- in order to give them a chance to see the impact their funds are making. It also created an opportunity to celebrate the efforts made by staff in implementing the many projects operating simultaneously in the country.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed

Objectives:

The reflection process aimed to make changes internally on an organizational level, and externally on a partner/donor relational level. Internally, the reflections aimed to solidify the culture of learning and adaptability across projects in Lebanon, and to encourage and support staff for taking the time to reflect.

Externally, the CLA events aimed to enhance collaboration between SFCG staff, local partners, and donors by demonstrating the value of dedicating time and space where everyone examined projects' holistically instead of working in silos, had an equal opportunity to give feedback, revisit shared objectives and challenges from different perspectives, and build joint solutions.

Tools:

The reflections relied heavily on group exercises, discussions, and brainstorming sessions.

Some of the tools used included the ABC Conflict Triangle and the River of Life. The ABC Triangle of Conflict is a framework that is used to analyze and reflect on the different factors influencing conflict dynamics (attitudes, behaviors and context). The River of Life is a visual narrative method that is used for introductions, to reflect on a project's past and predict its future, and to build a shared view compiled of differing perspectives. Tools used in each session were chosen based on the objectives SFCG aimed to achieve. For example, the session in which the ABC triangle was used reflected on a project that aimed to reduce prejudices between Syrian and Lebanese youth and build positive relationships between the two youth groups. Tracing changes in behavior and attitude and looking back at the context's influences on the project was the aim of this reflection session, thus, the attitude and behavior elements of the ABC triangle made it the most appropriate tool.

Internal CLA sessions included only SFCG staff and were facilitated by MENA DME specialist who is based in Beirut. External reflections included SFCG staff, local partners and donors and were led by facilitators contracted by SFCG.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

Success Factors:

Many factors contributed to the success of the reflection sessions. First, local partners' and donors' willingness to collaborate and openly reflect on positive and negative sides of planning and implementation was crucial.

The sessions also focused on giving equal opportunities for everyone present to share any thoughts or issues they felt they needed to reflect on or discuss. The main focus of the sessions was about creating a safe environment for sharing and learning without any pressure for participants to prepare presentations or report on their projects. In Lebanon specifically, the leadership of the country director towards reflective practice increased project staff buy-in and encouraged other stakeholders in their participation and understanding of the value being placed on these sessions and likelihood of applying lessons learned in future programs.

Finally, the engagement of staff from all levels, including management, helped the reflections be thorough and review all aspects of the project implementation. This also increased ownership and buy-in around the challenges presented and solutions proposed across all levels, leading to effective adjustments post-reflection session.

Financial Resources:

The internal reflection sessions did not induce any fees as they were held at SFCG's offices and facilitated by the SFCG DME specialist. The external reflections induced venue and facilitators' fees; those fees were covered by the projects' budgets under planned activities' fees. In order to incorporate more stakeholders and participants, SFCG has found that it is necessary to plan for CLA events and periodic reflective practice activities at the proposal stage, incorporating activity costs into the budget, including renting of a venue, transport costs, etc.

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

M&E of the reflections:

In order to document the sessions' for future reference, reports of the reflection activities were produced and kept. Also, to gather SFCG's partners' and donors' feedback on the sessions, participatory evaluations were carried out and adjustments were made for the following reflection session. Some highlights from the feedback given by participants were:

- “The open-discussion structure used in the sessions is very helpful in allowing the conversation to move beyond the operational and logistical aspects and cover broader sides of project work.”
- “Project coordinators and local implementing partners found the presence of donors and SFCG's management staff to be very helpful as it allowed an overview of the steps that led up to implementation. Taking a close look on the overall project logic from donor/management point of view helped get everyone more engaged and more productive.”

A document of the reflection events was created, including lessons learned. It has been shared with the Tunisia country office and West Africa regional team to assist in ongoing development of their own collaborative learning workshops, and upon finalization, the document will be shared out to all Search staff.

The reflections in Lebanon resulted in:

1. Reconnecting with donors and local partners and maintaining open discussion channels and sustained conversation, as well as ensure that all stakeholders share the same goal and objectives and vision for the project.
2. Created the expectation for CLA as part of a project thereby reinforcing the culture of CLA.
3. Adjusting the M&E plans for the projects that were reflected upon according to the findings of the reflection.
4. Key lessons drawn in January reflections were integrated in the remaining time of projects' cycles and another round of assessment was carried out in the July reflections - this added to the depth of the learning and adaptability by closely following up on the results of the previous reflection sessions and the progress made.

What were the most important lessons learned?

The culture of CLA is not new to SFCG -- reflections take place regularly across country offices, such as in Madagascar, Burundi, Nepal over the past few months. The organization is increasingly aware of the importance of documenting and sharing the CLA experience of each country office with all the teams globally in order to have a repertoire that is readily available for

staff to refer to and build on.

Lessons Learned in Lebanon:

1. The internal reflections allowed project coordinators to take ownership and articulate their own project changes. The reflections acted as a platform for project coordinators to step back and see projects' logic holistically. It also gave them the chance to assess those projects more simply and in concrete terms, than if reading through logical frameworks or other project documents, especially since they do not always partake in the design of the projects from the beginning.
2. Local partners do have a change-oriented thinking. With the assistance of a facilitator, that thinking can be shared and molded together with that of SFCG overarching strategy and approach to programming.
3. Reflections where local partners and donors are involved help grow and deepen those relationships as it sets aside time for in-depth communication and collaboration in order to ensure a common understanding.

Considerations for implementation:

1. Starting off the day by assessing the conflict context surrounding the project usually gets all participants to a common starting point and understanding of the current situation. It serves as a productive icebreaker.
2. Having brainstorming and free discussions help stir ideas and push the conversation forward.
3. Having staff from all levels participate in reflections is crucial as it enhances collaboration, learning and adaptability significantly.