How Are Organizations Learning in Liberia?
August 2017

The Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative (LAVI) is a USAID funded activity designed to strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships to advocate for and monitor policy and accountability reforms. LAVI focuses on developing a portfolio of initiatives with the potential for cumulative impact around issues which have the greatest potential for change and are responsive to locally defined priorities.

USAID LAVI also helps facilitate knowledge sharing, peer-to-peer learning, continual data collection and analysis to inform the design, implementation, and adaption of advocacy initiatives to enhance their effectiveness. In line with this commitment to learning and adaption, USAID LAVI is supporting iCampus, a community, co-working and innovation space in Monrovia jointly managed by Accountability Lab Liberia and iLab Liberia. Established in November 2016, iCampus is evolving into a key hub for new thinking around development and advocacy issues in Liberia and is also the local affiliate of the OpenGov Hub.

Advocacy and development are complex and dynamic processes in contexts like Liberia where interests, relationships and incentives can change rapidly. As a result, an approach based on rapid organizational learning may be more useful. We define organizational learning in the Liberian context as the extent to which organizations engage in learning activities to capture, save and share lessons; and use this knowledge to adapt their activities.

Methodology

In July and August 2017, iCampus supported by LAVI set out to understand the state of organizational learning in Liberia through the following four-step process:

i) **Desk review** - of relevant literature related to issues of adaptive learning, politically-informed development, feedback loops, organizational management, and monitoring, evaluation and learning (ME&L);

ii) **Stakeholder survey** - of 25 representatives from a variety of organizations in Liberia at all levels from across government, civil society groups, businesses, the media, community based organizations (CBOs) and donors;

iii) **Individual interviews** - with 28 representatives responsible in various ways for data collection, monitoring, evaluation or reporting at donor organizations, government agencies, civil society organizations and CBOs (See Annex I);

iv) **Validation** - through peer review of the findings by several experts in the field of adaptive learning and ME&L globally, with feedback used to improve the content and structure of the text.

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Background

Learning and adapting represent an approach and set of tools for international development practitioners and changemakers to respond to “changes in the political and socio-economic operating environment” that affect program implementation. Adaptive or flexible development programs build in strategies to continually reflect and learn from implementation and adjust assumptions and activities accordingly. The idea is to move away from single-loop learning (problem-solving to improve the system as it exists) and towards double-loop learning (questioning the underlying assumptions, values and beliefs of what we do).

The practice of learning and adaptation is particularly important for policy reform advocacy efforts. In the complex sociopolitical environment in which policy is made, “making detailed, long-term and inflexible plans to influence policy will not work, as it is hard to understand in advance what the key drivers may be or how they will operate. Unforeseen windows for influence may be missed.” Therefore, continual reflection and learning is essential to designing and implementing a flexible advocacy campaign that is cognizant of changing political dynamics and relationships, particularly in contexts “characterized by informal institutions and relationships and unstructured decision-making.”

Adaptive learning is often hindered by environmental and operational challenges. At the program design phase or in the early stages of implementation, “the pressure to deliver results often limits the amount of time available to define the root cause of a problem [which]...can lead to projects and programs that address symptoms rather than causes.” Meaningful learning is further compromised by institutional incentives throughout the development industry, which prioritize “good news” over “bad news.” As pointed out in Strategy Testing: An Innovative Approach to Monitoring Highly Flexible Aid Programs, “implementers may try to mask information that suggests a program is failing rather than sharing it so the program can be improved.”

This dynamic is influenced by donors reporting requirements, reinforced by office or organizational cultures that do not encourage open dialogue about programmatic lessons-learned and exacerbated by “high staff turnover, changing donor priorities and worldviews and short program timeframes.” In addition, learning becomes increasingly challenging when more people and organizations are involved. This poses a unique challenge to advocacy and policy-influencing campaigns which are inherently collaborative and require the engagement of multiple key stakeholders.

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5 Ibid, p. 17.
7 Ibid, p. 11.
8 Valters, Craig, et al., 2016, p. 9.
9 Ibid, p. 10.
To mitigate these challenges, strategies can be adopted to better facilitate learning and programmatic adaptation. As the report Managing Complexity: Adaptive Management at Mercy Corps suggests: “adaptive management depends upon a respected, empowered and accountable team, equipped with the skills of critical thinking, analysis and creativity who are expected to gather and use data and information in their work.” An organizational culture that “provides the cues, expectations and incentives to prioritize learning” is essential to ensure such teams are dedicating the time to the necessary reflection, data collection, and analysis required for meaningful learning.

Overview of Learning in Liberia

The literature on learning is generally written from an international perspective. The frameworks and the concepts of organizational learning are not yet well understood or used to guide strategic or programmatic practices in Liberia by either Liberian or international organizations. Many local organizations have poor goal-setting procedures, weak data collection systems, and low monitoring and evaluation capacity. Many international organizations are much better at collecting information but are often unable to integrate learning activities into grant-making and program implementation-- they largely share learning internally with colleagues rather than externally with other organizations, and can have limited ability to adapt activities rapidly based on data collected.

Key Challenges

There are a variety of challenges to organizational learning in Liberia, expanded upon below, which relate to capacity, incentives and processes. These should be considered within a broader context in which Liberian stakeholders frequently feel disempowered by a development discourse (including around learning) driven by international organizations. This dynamic came up in a number of our conversations. There is a tangible sense among Liberians--either explicitly or implicitly--that local knowledge is somehow secondary, or perhaps less valuable than international knowledge. This is an unfortunate byproduct of the development system, and creates an environment in which real, honest learning and agile program adaptation is very difficult.

As explained in the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report Putting Learning at the Centre: Adaptive Development Programming in Practice, “approaches to learning designed solely by donors and imposed on grantees are likely to learn about ‘how’ a program is performing but not ‘why’, and therefore may not generate learning suited to...adaptation.” The learning captured by staff of local governments and non-governmental organizations must be directly relevant to their work in order to get buy-in to learning and adaptation processes. Learning tasks must be: “relevant to those who undertake them and their benefits are direct and clear.”

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11 Ibid, p. 2.
there are a number of ways that learning is neither relevant, incentivized or managed in Liberia, undermining its effectiveness. For example:

i) **Lack of commitment to data**: an almost universal challenge in Liberia is collecting and managing feedback from program participants. Communication can be difficult and e-mail usage among local organizations is still highly sporadic. Online surveys are rarely responded to in meaningful ways. Generating information requires constant follow-up by phone and often in-person. At the same time, the quality of data provided is often poor - with feedback contradictory or nonsensical as a result of a misunderstanding of questions or survey formats. Further, organizations frequently lack the technical data management and analysis skills to systematically assess feedback and identify meaningful trends that can be used to learn and adapt programming.

ii) **Extractive information gathering**: the data collection and learning process in Liberia can often feel extractive to those citizens providing data, because external organizations (Liberian or international) do not take enough time to build trust locally with stakeholders and report back to them on how information is being used. Numerous interviewees mentioned the difficulty in engaging in communities where previous organizations had not set expectations with communities as to how information would be used or communicated back to them on how their inputs affected decision-making.

iii) **Dependency compromises data accuracy**: a number of organizations referenced the dependency that has evolved in Liberia by which it is very difficult to mobilize stakeholders in programs without paying for food, travel or a stipend for time. This is a complicated issue as time is valuable, particularly in a context where poverty is grinding, but nonetheless this challenge affects data collection too. Participants in programs (for which they have been paid stipends or travel costs) often only provide the feedback they think will most likely lead to further largesse rather than to improve outcomes.

iv) **Fear of retribution/failure**: Liberia remains a context in which mistrust permeates and information is wielded as power. Information is often not shared in relevant ways because there is a fear of retribution (even when feedback is anonymized) or a sense that negative data will reflect poorly on individuals or organizations (in a way that will preclude future opportunities). Liberia characterizes what the ODI report points out as: “institutional incentives across the board” that “tend to mean good news is prioritized over bad news.” In many cases, failure also leads to sense of shame rather than an opportunity to learn and improve, resulting in few organizations willing to move beyond existing development paradigms.

v) **Monitoring at the expense of learning**: a number of (mostly international) organizations in Liberia try to collect large amounts of data and integrate rigorous reporting requirements into their programs. However, this data is not always the right kind of information needed to

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improve outcomes. For example, there can be an emphasis on outputs rather than the extent or quality of change generated by programs, a particularly problematic trend for advocacy initiatives or governance programs. This begins with the questions asked of partners, which rarely focus on how information is being used to adapt or improve.

vi) **A bias towards scale**- as a result of the need by donors for robust data collection systems (among other issues), development funding in Liberia is biased towards larger (usually international) organizations that can provide accountability in terms of reporting. This is understandable, but it is simultaneously undermining the potential of smaller, local Liberian organizations to build capacity, learn from mistakes and build organizational learning into their day-to-day operations.

vii) **An absence of flexibility**- many Liberian and international organizations, regardless of size, are not flexible enough to adapt to feedback in meaningful ways in real time. Project goals and timeframes are often set before project initiation, with little room for change as the context evolves; project funding is often tied to key deliverables rather than outcomes; and evaluations tend to be periodic or ex-post, at which point it can be more difficult to integrate learning into programs. Advocacy programs are especially hindered by these factors since responsiveness to the evolving sociopolitical context and changes in relationships is essential to effective advocacy.

viii) **Key person dependency**- at the same time, regular staff turnover in Liberia means that elements of learning in larger project evaluations can be lost in transitions. Some staff handover notes and processes can be quite comprehensive but there is rarely enough overlap between various project staff to ensure “soft” transfer of relationships, knowledge and contextual understanding. At the same time, there can often be gaps in information flows between staff members in different offices (either within Liberia or from Liberia to offices outside the country).

ix) **Lack of internal knowledge management systems**- the majority of organizations we spoke to indicated that the primary ways that learning is communicated on a daily basis within organizations is in person or by email. Often, simple tasks like writing and sharing minutes from team meetings are overlooked. Reports are written but no Liberian organization we spoke to maintains a database of lessons, for example, which could be easily and quickly accessed for advice or guidance. This means the knowledge flows reinforce the key person dependency challenge outlined above.

x) **Poor dissemination of lessons**- where learning is happening, it can be poorly communicated. Local organizations sometimes share lessons through word-of-mouth internally or perhaps through social media and reports, but not systematically. International organizations often create long and detailed reports that are inaccessible (either through the density of the content or because they are distributed online) or in some cases are prohibited by funders from sharing project related information. International and local organizations both expressed confusion
around what information or reports they were permitted to share publicly by their managers or donors. This means a great deal of learning in Liberia is currently not used to improve development outcomes.

xi) **Financial, human and logistical constraints**—many of the organizations we spoke to face trade-offs when it comes to ME&L. The overwhelming consensus was that not nearly enough funding or capacity is available to support meaningful learning, either within international or national organizations. Some organizations have dedicated ME&L officers, but many do not; while others delegate decision-making on these issues to junior staff. Our survey indicated (Annex 2) that among Liberian organizations as whole, the responsibility for learning tends to be split in a variety of ways between Executive Directors, Communication Officers, M&E Officers and Program Managers. A number of our interviewees also pointed out the logistical constraints to learning. In Liberia (especially during rainy season) it can be incredibly difficult and time-consuming to get to parts of the country, and even reaching them by phone can be almost impossible. This impedes any ability to have meaningful conversations about learning.

**Survey Analysis**

The learning survey was sent out through the iCampus e-mail system to over 200 organizations in Liberia, with responses recorded anonymously. The quantity and quality of responses is instructive (full survey results in Annex 2). Despite several follow-up emails and phone calls, we only received 25 responses—illustrating the difficulty of collecting data mentioned above. The answers showed that in relation to advocacy in particular, 67% of organizations in Liberia think their organizations are successful at what they do (indicating 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale); while 63% felt that their organizations use the information they collect to adjust advocacy strategy or activities. At the same time, over 80% of the respondents indicated that there were no incentives to change approaches or opportunities to admit failure. This dichotomy reflects exactly the challenges outlined above—organizations fear admitting failure and suffer from a lack of effective data collection.

**Progress and Best Practices**

At the same time, and despite significant constraints, the survey and interviews indicated that there are pockets where organizational learning is happening in Liberia, even if at times it may not be in the form or using the language the international community might recognize. Our surveys and interviews
indicated that organizations want to learn for a variety of reasons, including: to understand progress, to improve outcomes, to codify and reform processes and to ensure accountability.\(^{15}\)

There are Liberian organizations that are listening hard in their communities, and using the information gained to adapt programs, but this is often an informal process. Time and energy are delegated to collecting data but these are often split across multiple staff members or volunteers and not codified. Adaptations based on learning have led to better outcomes, but these are often not fully documented or shared.

As one interviewee pointed out to us: “We should not be asking what learning means in Liberia; but rather: what can be learned from Liberia?” Despite the challenges, there are a variety of learning tools being used in Liberia that have broader relevance for advocacy and the development field.

### Best Practice Tools for Learning in Liberia

For most organizations in Liberia, organizational learning is nascent and challenging. Several (usually Monrovia based) groups are much more familiar with both the concepts and practices. The following are some of the tools organizations in Liberia are using to learn and adapt:

i) **Short monthly summaries** - of successes, surprises, disappointments and key quantitative data, to provide a snapshot of impact and learning, shared across the organization;

ii) **Contextualized surveys** - on Saturdays, when program participants are at home and have time to speak, for example; and orally in local dialects rather than English to allow for ease of communication;

iii) **Video interviews** - to allow for honest, qualitative feedback from program participants, avoid mistakes in transcription and facilitate online sharing;

iv) **Low touch tools** - to share information, including Whatsapp groups of project participants and Facebook groups to share photos, progress and ideas;

v) **Failure files** - several of the more forward-thinking Liberian organizations keep hard copy “failure files” alongside reporting files with explanations of project failures;

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\(^{15}\) These correspond with the “List of 9 Learning Purposes” detailed in the Overseas Development Institute report *Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach: A Guide to Policy Engagement and Influence* which also includes: readjusting strategy, strengthen capacity, deepen understanding, building and sustaining trust, lobbying and advocacy and sensitizing for action.
| vi) | **Quarterly learning calls** - analogous to quarterly impact calls, through which the public can dial-in to a free discussion about organizational learning, and the challenges and successes of that process on a quarterly basis; |
| vii) | **Strategic refresh processes** - on a periodic basis, based on information gathered through programming to ensure that operations match goals; |
| viii) | **Use of new technologies** - including smart phones and apps that can collect, geotag and synthesize data and link photos as evidence of progress; |
| ix) | **Creative outreach techniques** - including infographics, dissemination of information through radio shows, dramas, and town criers. |
| x) | **Public acknowledgment** - recognition among peers is a powerful motivator, and a number of groups use this (with certificates or prizes) as a means to incentivize feedback. If people care about giving feedback, they are more likely to provide it; |
| xi) | **Learning exchanges** - for example between agencies in Monrovia and their counterparts in other cities around specific programs, with follow-up from Monrovia to provide support to implementation; |
| xii) | **Portal development** - one Liberian organization even created their own data collection portal for all program related information and feedback. |

**From Learning to Adapting**

Real adaptive learning in Liberia will require making efforts to address the power dynamics inherent in the process so that it is truly perceived and implemented as a collaborative effort. Learning has to be made central and relevant to advocacy and development, sanctioned from the top-down and understood from the bottom-up. This means efforts to:

i) **Prioritize learning** - with donor and other organizations building learning into the program design process, so that it is embedded from the outset. Project log-frames should allow for changes in activities based on learning-through-doing. This also means incentivizing learning by linking it to performance indicators for projects, staff and partners and budgeting sufficiently for learning and adapting in program budgets.

ii) **Continually analyze context** - knowledge on policy change and advocacy is always localized-cookie-cutter approaches tend to fall short of intended outcomes. Our interviewees mentioned a wide variety of continually evolving dynamics within projects ranging from the political- such as lack of support from government ministries; to logistical- such as lack of electricity; to
funding- cashflow and banking challenges. As a result, context analysis should not be a static process but an ongoing activity within programming, especially advocacy programming, for all organizations hoping to learn and adapt effectively.

iii) Move quickly when opportunities arise- in any context there are “learning windows”- or opportunities where room may open up for the development and uptake of new ideas. Continual efforts to understand relationships, incentives and local dynamics in Liberia will allow advocacy and actors to better take advantage of these windows- which can both open and close quickly. A clear understanding of when this might happen and how to build coalitions for change at the right moment means finding ways to ensure flexibility in approaches and programming.

iv) Take the time to learn qualitatively- through capitalizing on all possible learning touch points. This means approaching interactions with a learning mindset, even informal- we have found that much of the best understanding comes from rides in shared taxis in Liberia, for example, not always from formal feedback sessions. Where possible, organizations should also create the space for learning in everyday activities, such as holding reflections sessions right after trainings or as a component of staff meetings. Organizations should also allow for in-depth conversations with stakeholders to understand where challenges lie and where learning can take place. Some of the best practice tools outlined above are instructive.

v) Build and engage learning communities- through allowing for failure, encouraging collective or peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing and making connections between those organizations learning and adapting in meaningful ways. Tailored knowledge-building programs can also help to ensure that organizations are asking the right questions to gather the information they need to learn and improve. Building learning communities also means creating closer links with academic institutions in Liberia and investing in local Liberian think-tanks to bolster ME&L knowledge and move away from expensive external support mechanisms.

vi) Divide labor- both among and within organizations. Learning and adaptation need not just be embedded in, but driven by local NGOs and CBOs, with donors and other international organizations acting as knowledge brokers and translating learning in a way that can inform the larger field. Internally, organizations can work to make sure responsibilities for the various elements of learning are clear (data collection, synthesis, adaptation) without creating siloes that hinder the step that needs to be taken between information collection and decision-making. Learning tasks should be delegated to staff in ways that make sense and are relevant to their job descriptions and to programming.

vii) Support organizational branding and development- some civil society and advocacy organizations in Liberia are known more for the individuals who lead them than for the work they do as a whole. This undermines sustainability and means learning can become key-person dependent. This can be addressed through simple changes such as efforts to make sure there are always two team members in meetings, and that opportunities are given to more junior staff (such as speaking at events, on the radio etc). This can ensure both institutionalization of learning and build a sense of team.
The Role of USAID LAVI and iCampus

In collaboration, USAID LAVI and iCampus aim to support learning and adapting within advocacy and development initiatives in Liberia by finding tangible ways to address each of the points above both within our own organizations and more broadly. Since June 2017, we have begun this process through designing a variety of activities which have included:

- The learning mapping exercise that produced this report;
- Liberia’s first “Fail Faire” event at which leading CSO and business leaders publicly shared their failures and discussed lessons learned;
- A public learning call (which we will host quarterly) with the USAID LAVI Natural Resource Management Coalition on lessons learned from their advocacy work;
- Training and mentoring sessions for organizations on integrating learning and adapting best practices into their work,
- Community-building and knowledge-sharing through online platforms, such as the USAID LAVI Learning Lab website, a hub of Liberian and international data and resources to inform advocacy initiatives and improve organizational learning.

At iCampus we are also working to create a learning environment in which all team members feel able to ask questions, admit failure, seek support for new ideas and adapt their work to achieve shared goals.

The larger objective is to support efforts to overcome the challenges to learning and adapting outlined above and build a community of organizations in Liberia that are using this thinking to improve advocacy in particular and development as a whole. This will be a long-term process—changing mindsets, incentives and relationships is not easy. It will also be collaborative—collective learning gets more difficult the larger the number of organizations involved, particularly when each comes from a different starting point and basis of understanding of these issues.

In keeping with our adaptive learning approach, we welcome feedback, ideas and commentary on this report—please email us at: blair@accountabilitylab.org or luther@icampus.io and find us on social media (@icampusLIB) to further these conversations.
Annex I - List of organizations interviewed

Carter Center
Citizens United to Promote Peace and Democracy in Liberia (CUPPADL)
Development Education Network-Liberia (DEN-L)
Dorcas Women Empowerment
Embassy of Sweden
European Union Mission in Liberia (EU)
Forest Development Authority (FDA), Government of Liberia
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
Institution for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD)
USAID Land Governance Support Activity (LSGA)
Liberia Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative (LEITI)
Liberia Media Center (LMC)
USAID Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency (LEGIT)
USAID Liberia Strategic Analysis (LSA)
Ministry of Youth and Sports
National Democratic Institute (NDI)
National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections (NAYMOTE)
Platform for Development and Peace (P4DP)
Public Procurement and Concessions Commission (PPCC), Government of Liberia
Rural Human Right Activist Program (RHRAP)
SMART Liberia
Sustainable Development Initiative (SDI)
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Volunteers Hub Liberia
Vote Liberia
Young Liberians for Liberty
Youth Initiative Liberia
Annex 2- Summary learning survey responses

To what extent is your organization successful at what it does, specifically around advocacy activities?

To what extent do you think your organization is good at measuring what it does, specifically around advocacy activities?
To what extent does your organization use the information it collects to adjust its advocacy strategy or activities?

What are the biggest challenges you face to admitting lack of success or failure in your program?

- Colleague pressure
- Donor pressure
- Job security
- No incentive to change
- No opportunity to discuss failure
- Other
Who in your organization leads efforts to find and use lessons-learned to improve programming, specifically advocacy activities?

- M&E Officer: 25%
- Communications Officer: 30%
- Executive Director: 27%
- Program Manager: 50%
- Strategic Committee: 3%
- No Program: 3%

Percentage of respondents

Would you be willing to share how your organization has learned from mistakes or failures in programming?

- Yes - publicly: 45.8%
- Yes - with a specific group: 16.7%
- Yes - anonymously: 8.3%
- No: 29.2%
Annex 3- Works Cited


