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FACILITATING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY (FFS) ACTIVITY

COLOMBIA ACTION LEARNING GROUP (ALG):
LEARNING BRIEF

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ACTION LEARNING GROUP (ALG) LEARNING BRIEF

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ALG	Action Learning Group
CSO	Civil Society Organization
COL	Colombia
FFS	Facilitating Financial Sustainability
M&IE	Meals and Incidental Expenses
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

The Colombia Action Learning Group (ALG) is comprised of 16 rural and small community-based local civil society stakeholders from the Montes de Maria, a subregion in the Colombian Caribbean coast. The overarching goals of the group are to address capacity and knowledge gaps, build strategic alliances for resource mobilization, and understand their own local financial sustainability context. Primarily, the group aims to strengthen the capacities and knowledge of local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) so they can effectively drive local development policies and strategies.

BACKGROUND

The Action Learning phase of the Facilitating Financial Sustainability (FFS) project aims to test the practical implications of the FFS research findings by convening and implementing “Action Learning Groups” of local stakeholders in three countries (DRC, Uganda and Colombia) to jointly identify and address systemic barriers to financial sustainability. The FFS team has successfully worked with each ALG to map and prioritize local financial sustainability issues and draft Action Learning Plans. The groups are now beginning to conduct relevant activities as outlined in their respective workplans.

To raise awareness of the ALG and the FFS project more broadly in Colombia, the team held two open introductory meetings in Carmen de Bolivar in September 2018. These meetings averaged around 35 attendees each and included a wide variety of civil society stakeholders working in the Montes de Maria region. The FFS research was presented to attendees, and the concept of the ALG was communicated as an opportunity to ‘challenge and address the systemic factors inhibiting the financial sustainability of local organizations.’ Attendees noted that this topic was highly relevant and pressing for the Montes de Maria context, and the meetings garnered a high level of interest.

To support this process and the ongoing work of the ALG, the consortium identified and hired Ms. Clara Romero to act as the local Colombia facilitator. Her responsibilities have included managing regular meetings with the group, planning agendas and activities for workshops, facilitating workshops, and managing other administrative aspects of the ALG. To support Ms. Romero, both technically and logistically, the consortium also hired Ms. Natalia Rodriguez as a consultant on the project and a “thought partner” to Ms. Romero. Ms. Rodriguez’s intimate familiarity with the project (due to her involvement during the FFS research phase) allowed her to support in-country project planning, logistics and the execution of the ALG scope and objectives.

In September 2018, the consortium also identified a local anchor organization to help support the goals and objectives of the ALG. Conversations with *Sembrando Paz*, a non-profit Colombian community organization dedicated to facilitating the culture of peace in the region, proved that they had the interest in and commitment to improve the financial sustainability of CSOs working in the region. The non-profit’s well-respected image in the region and large database of stakeholders, further contributed to this decision.

Following this, the FFS consortium began an open application process to identify and select ALG members. Stakeholders that attended the introductory meetings in September, were asked

to apply via an online form. Additional outreach was conducted via phone and in-person to ensure applicants without access to internet, particularly those in rural locations, could also partake in the process. Advertisements for the Colombia ALG were shared primarily through *Sembrando Paz*'s newsletters to members and via word of mouth.

Applications were assessed according to criteria defined by the FFS consortium in collaboration with the local ALG facilitators. Below please find the selection criteria which was ranked from most important (5) to least important (1):

- Does the applicant demonstrate strong knowledge/skills to make a meaningful contribution?
- Does the applicant demonstrate a strong commitment to participation in the group?
- Does the applicant demonstrate a sufficient time commitment?
- Does the applicant have a comparative value-add for the group?
- Does the organization propose a staff member with a stable and influential position?

Based on this template, the consortium selected and fully onboarded 16 institutions in November 2018. The full list of ALG members can be found in Appendix 1.

Concerned that it might promote an uneven power dynamic among the newly selected group, the consortium decided not to form an ALG steering committee in Colombia. Based on recommendation from the local facilitator, the decision was also made to not initially provide travel and accommodation stipends for individuals based outside of the normal ALG meeting locations of Sincelejo and Carmen de Bolivar.

ALG PROGRESS

Since the inception of the group, ALG meetings have occurred on a regular, monthly basis. To minimize members' travel costs and time, central locations such as Sincelejo and Carmen de Bolivar have been prioritized. However, a consistent location or meeting space has yet to be identified. To minimize costs, *Sembrando Paz* and member organizations have at times offered to host meetings at their headquarters.

“Produces community knowledge and strengthen local capacities to empower the financial sustainability of CSOs working in Montes de Maria”

- *COL ALG Mission Statement*

Following the initial kick-off meeting on October 17, 2018, a series of issue mapping and prioritization meetings took place to identify local financial sustainability challenges that the group wanted to collectively address. These meetings have taken place according to the agreed workplan and time of the overall FFS consortium submitted to USAID in May 2019.

As a result of these meetings, the ALG has identified a joint mission and vision for the group, which is to “produce community knowledge and strengthen local capacities to empower the financial sustainability of CSOs working in the Montes de Maria.” To this end, the Colombia ALG has identified several goals for the group to prioritize including capacity building, resource mobilization, and understanding the local context. The ALG is currently beginning the ‘activity implementation’ phase of the project and has identified three main activities to carry out through the end of the project. The following details group’s objectives and goals:

Activity 1 Addressing Capacity and Knowledge Gaps

The Colombia ALG members have identified an overall lack of capacity within local organizations working in the Montes de Maria region in understanding rules and policies related to taxation, administration and accounting as a barrier to CSO financial sustainability. ALG members consider the Colombia's new fiscal legislation and regulation complex and they struggle to understand and adequately comply with rules and requirements.

As of May 2019, the ALG group has begun preparations to conduct a training workshop for ALG members and other stakeholders that would address capacity and knowledge gaps related to local fiscal policies and regulations that affect CSOs. Given the technical expertise required, a consulting firm has been identified and contracted to help lead a day and half training in early September 2019. To support these trainings, the members have also hired a local logistics coordinator and notetaker/learning consultant. Additional information regarding these trainings will be provided to USAID in the next Semi-Annual report expected in October 2019.

These trainings are the current focus of ALG planning efforts. The group aims to get the training activity started prior to implementing other activities. Below are additional priorities and activities identified by the team that will be implemented if time and budget permit.

Activity 2 Resource Mobilization and Donor Engagement

Support in identifying, formalizing and managing strategic alliances, both financial and non-financial, was also prioritized by the ALG members. The ALG members identified the pressing need for CSOs to build a structured approach to sustainability by diversifying funding and decreasing their reliance and dependence on one type of funding stream. To address this issue, the group plans to conduct a mapping exercise to identify local, national, and international donors currently working in the region, followed by a mapping of local CSOs and a "matchmaking" interface between the mapped donors and CSOs. This activity has yet to be undertaken and is currently expected to take place between September and November 2019.

Activity 3 Understanding Local Context

ALG members have noted that there is not an easily accessible, local platform that houses existing research and studies on financial sustainability. The ALG members have identified the need to develop a "digital library" that provides a systemic review and meta-analysis of existing research on the main factors that contribute to financial sustainability of CSOs. As members of this ALG did not participate in the Phase 1 of the FFS research, many are interested in understanding how financial sustainability "works" in the context of Montes de Maria. To this end, the group has planned to identify and consolidate existing research and studies on financial sustainability, specially focusing on the topic of social capital, volunteerism, internal financial management, resource management, and resource mobilization. This would include creation of an online platform/ library where research can be housed and easily accessed by the members of the ALG, as well as the general CSO community. This activity is yet to be undertaken and is currently expected to take place between October and December 2019.

LESSONS LEARNED

Participation and Engagement

Overall, the level of engagement of ALG members at regular meetings has been high, with members attending at an average rate of 85%. Despite not providing transportation stipends initially¹ to members, even to those that travel from as far as Cartagena (approximately 4 hours) to attend ALG events in Carmen de Bolivar, commitment has remained high. Members have been actively engaged in meetings and generally participating at an equal level. Early in the process, members agreed that for this ALG to effectively function, all members must be present at each meeting, to the greatest extent possible. To date, no member has missed more than two meetings and no organizations have dropped out of the ALG.

The biggest challenge for participation and engagement has been the long and often unsafe distances that a large portion of the ALG members travel to attend meetings. Given the violence associated with Colombia's internal armed conflict, travel in the Montes de Maria region, once a stronghold of the FARC stronghold, remains difficult and often unsafe, especially late at night. Road conditions are also quite poor, further complicating and prolonging travel times. In planning for ALG events, the team has ensured that participants, especially those traveling from Cartagena, are given sufficient time to travel to and from meetings and are allowed to leave before dusk to ensure their safe return home.

Additionally, frustrations from the group were brought to the facilitator's attention that despite the significant time commitment and dedication that members have put into the ALG they are not financially compensated for their work. The consortium has addressed these frustrations by explaining from the beginning that the FFS program has only limited resources to fund modest initiatives that emerge out of the issue prioritization and planning process and that participation in the ALG is largely a voluntary effort. The team has underlined the unprecedented opportunity that the ALG has in autonomously driving local action and change. This argument has generally quelled frustrations from group members.

Group Dynamics

Regardless of the significant diversity in size, capacity or sectoral focus of the CSO members, the Colombia ALG has continuously maintained proper meeting decorum. According to Ms. Romero, members share high respect for one another, and any issues and frustrations are typically addressed during ALG meetings. This has been in large part due to the excellent job that the local facilitator has done in managing complex social dynamics while simultaneously managing a process that supports the members to invest in and commit to the ALG's common goal.

Additionally, members have stated that the ALG has provided them with a platform to regularly meet, interact and exchange knowledge. Despite the diversity of the social objectives that they work on and the territorial coverage that they cover, many of the CSOs that make up the ALG already know of one another and respect each other's work. Given the grassroots nature of these

¹ Transportation stipends were not initially provided to ensure actual interest and commitment to the ALG mission and objective.

CSOs, many are intimately acquainted with territorial dynamics and the financial sustainability issues affecting civil society in Montes de Maria. Given their close ties to their local community and their constituents, the Colombia ALG members are vested in the ALG and its planned activities.

Group Management

The facilitator serves in two capacities. One is as a facilitator to the overall ALG process. The second is as a project manager providing on the ground management support for the overall FFS. Given the lack of physical presence of both LINC and Peace Direct in Colombia, the consortium was fortunate to identify and contract Ms. Romero as the Colombia local facilitator. Ms. Romero has extensive management and facilitation experience and deep knowledge of the civil society and post-conflict context in the Montes de Maria. This experience allowed her to not only quickly understand the FFS initiative and vision for the ALGs, but also the expectation of the facilitator's role and responsibilities. Additionally, her knowledge of the local context and vast professional network in the region made her an excellent "face of the initiative." Her previous donor experience and engagements with civil society allowed for quick selection of a respected and reliable anchor organization and smooth selection of committed ALG members.

Unlike the experience in Uganda and DRC, Ms. Romero has found the "facilitation guide," that was provided to local facilitators to outline the actional learning concept and the stages of the ALG process, helpful. This can be attributed to her previous facilitation experience and ability to work well within ambiguity. She has remained creative and nimble in helping the consortium figuring out how to best implement the ALG process in Colombia, fully taking on the task of adjusting the guide and proposed activities as necessary to the local context and group dynamics.

A recent feedback survey shows that Ms. Romero has earned the trust and respect of the ALG members. Members perceive her to be an effective facilitator and leader who is able to command the members' attention, create an inclusive environment and guide the group through the designed process. According to feedback survey, the majority of the AGL members have evaluated Ms. Romero's ALG management and facilitation skills as "very good"².

While initially it was necessary to have FFS representatives present in-person at the ALG meetings to ensure facilitation ability of Ms. Romero and keep the group was on track, this is no longer the case. Ms. Romero has been independently leading ALG meeting, without LINC's in-person presence, since March 2019.

Communication

Communication for the ALG has been managed by Ms. Romero primarily through email and a dedicated ALG WhatsApp group chat. The local facilitator has relied on the WhatsApp group for a quick and efficient way to alert members of important emails that have been send out and remind them of upcoming deadlines, updates or any last-minute logistical changes. All formal notifications and requirements have been communicated through email. This dual notification system has worked effectively in Colombia to date.

² The feedback survey was administered by Program Manager, Kati Chilikova in March 29. The survey was distributed to 13 attendees. Survey options included the following scale: "very good" "good" "acceptable" and "poor".

While a “network website” was developed at the early stages of the project to provide a platform for ALG members from Uganda, DRC and Colombia to communicate with one another and share resources, this platform never materialized in a meaningful way. In Colombia, this was particularly due to the reality of language barriers. The majority of the Colombia ALG members do not speak English or French. While many of the members have expressed strong interest in learning about the progress and challenges faced by the other ALGs, difference in language has prevented them from fully engaging with other ALGs through the online platform. Experiences and lessons learned from the other ALGs were primarily shared verbally with members during regular ALG meetings.

Funding

As mentioned previously, per the local facilitator’s recommendation, the consortium decided to initially not offer transportation stipends to members. This was done to garner genuine interest and commitment to the ALG mission and objective. However, given the actual time commitment requested for the members (more than expected) and the long distance they have to travel to attend meetings, the group expressed their frustration with the policy and the consortium decided to begin distributing a small transportation stipend to offset costs in early January 2019. This presented some additional challenges. Without a physical and fiscal presence in Colombia, LINC had to find a suitable and appropriate intermediary for distributing the stipends. LINC decided to wire all necessary funds for realizing ALG meetings to our local anchor organization, Sembrando Paz. To meet LINC’s internal financial control processes (which are based on USG regulations), the administrative process for wiring funding has required significant time. Due to this, on several occasions Sembrando Paz has had to advance the money for the ALG event and be compensated after the event. The LINC team has acknowledged this issue and is actively working with Sembrando Paz and the local facilitator to streamline this process while still maintaining our fiscal responsibility.

While the foundational principle that ALG funds will not be managed by any individual ALG member or used to fund activities carried out by specific ALG members or any of their affiliated organizations has been addressed by the team since the beginning of this activity, it has continued to be a matter of discussion at every ALG meeting. This principle has had to be restated continuously and specifically underlined when LINC decided to work through Sembrando Paz to administer necessary supplies and transportation stipends for participants. The team has had to assure the members that Sembrando Paz, even as our anchor organization, was in no way financially benefitting from this arrangement.

Timeline, Planning and Activity Implementation

Like the DRC and Uganda ALGs, the Colombia ALG took longer than anticipated to develop a concrete action plan. The group had difficulty moving from brainstorming initiatives to concrete planning, likely due to the heterogeneous skill and experience of the ALG members themselves. However, unlike the other ALGs, the Colombia ALG benefitted significantly from the learning generated from the DRC and Uganda experiences. Given that the Colombia ALG tracked one to two months behind the other two ALGs, the team was able to change the way it approached the design of the activity planning and budgeting session in Colombia. To that effect, the team provided the local facilitator with a more hands-on process and provided templates and activities to assist in the development of a concrete action plan. Additionally, the team encouraged the

group to extend the days dedicated to planning and budgeting from the initially planned two days to four days. Learning from the experience in Uganda, the team also worked very closely with the local facilitator when it came to the actual budgeting for activities to ensure that the projected costs were legitimate and reflected the actual goals of the proposed activities.

The group has shared their concern that the activity planning process has taken too long and that they will not have a sufficient amount of time to implement their proposed activities by December 2019. The current timeline as proposed by the Colombia ALG is aggressive and does not contain a buffer for potential delays. As planned activities are taking longer to implement than expected, Ms. Romero warns that there is a risk of the group losing interest in the ALG. Ms. Romero continues to monitor the group's morale and work with LINC to ensure the activities proceed as smoothly as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Key Learnings and Recommendations

- A strong, dedicated facilitator, such as Ms. Romero, who has extensive experience with management and facilitation is a necessity. The team strongly believes that the success of this initiative is built on her deep knowledge of the post-conflict civil society context in Montes de Maria and ability to lead without significant guidance from the consortium.
- Member selection process should not be rushed. It is very important to consider the types of stakeholders that should make up a collection action learning process. Organizations with strong reputation and footprint in the local community may be more receptive to the idea of working towards benefitting local communities, constituents, and the sector as whole.
- Practical considerations regarding activity financing are also necessary, especially in countries in which implementing organizations do not have physical or fiscal in-country presence.
- The initially planned timeline of the ALG process is aggressive and should be reconsidered. One year is not a sufficient amount of time to plan, implement and measure ALG results. A longer period with a longer, more intensive activity planning workshop, at the beginning, would be more efficient in maintaining the attention and interest of ALG members while ensuring that activities are implemented as planned.

Next Steps

The Colombia ALG will continue to implement their planned activities through December 2019. With the support of a newly engaged local learning consultant, the group intends to develop their own internal learning report regarding the impact and operations of the ALG. While there are no immediate plans for LINC to attend a future meeting, LINC will continue to closely monitor progress and provide guidance and support virtually. Beyond this, LINC will continue to administer feedback surveys to the ALG and the local facilitator and support staff to gauge the pulse of the activity.

APPENDIX 1: ALG MEMBERS

1. Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos Anuc-Sucre
2. Asociación de Luchadores por la Verdad y Justicia de los Guaimaros
3. Asociación para la Vida Digna y Solidaria as Vidas - Zambrano
4. Camara de Comercio de Cartagena
5. Corporacion Universitaria del Caribe - CECAR
6. Corporacion Desarrollo Solidario
7. Corporacion la Regional Centro Integral de Gestion del Desarrollo de los Montes de Maria
8. Fundacion Evolución Caribe
9. Fundacion Civico Social Pro-Cartagena - FUNCICAR
10. Fundacion Paz Verde Montes de Maria
11. Fundacion RED de Desarrollo y Paz de los Montes de Maria
12. Mutual Chocoro Creativo
13. Corporacion Nuevo Arco Iris
14. Corporacion para el Desarrollo Participative y Sostenible de los Pequeños Productores Rurales – Corporacion PBA
15. Asociación Sembrando Semillas de Paz – Sembrando Paz
16. Fundacion Hijos de la Sierra Flor

APPENDIX 2: ALG PHOTOS



Colombia ALG Group takes part in two-day Tax Workshop.



Colombia ALG Group facilitator.



Colombia ALG Group during a Systems Mapping Meeting.



The Colombian ALG breaks into groups to brainstorm.