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# FACILITATING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY (FFS) ACTIVITY

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO ACTION  
LEARNING GROUP (ALG): LEARNING BRIEF

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FACILITATING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY (FFS) ACTIVITY: DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC OF CONGO ACTION LEARNING GROUP (ALG) LEARNING BRIEF

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## **ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ALG	Action Learning Group
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FFS	Facilitating Financial Sustainability
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
M&IE	Meals and Incidental Expenses
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo Action Learning Group (DRC ALG) is comprised of 25 civil society stakeholders from North and South Kivu, including local organizations, one local business, local government actors and an INGO. The overarching goal of the group is to “develop, share and sustain a successful financial sustainability model to change the financing process in DRC.” Primarily, the group aims to open the space for a wider conversation amongst donors, INGOs and civil society regarding funding modalities which best support the sustainability of Congolese civil society.

## BACKGROUND

The Action Learning phase of the FFS project aims to test the practical implications of the FFS research findings through convening and implementing Action Learning Groups of local stakeholders to jointly identify and address systemic barriers to financial sustainability. This group has mapped and prioritized local financial sustainability issues and drafted Action Learning Plans to address the priority issues. The group is now beginning to conduct relevant activities as outlined in its workplan.

To raise awareness of the ALG and the FFS project more broadly, two research dissemination meetings were held in Bukavu and Goma, DRC. These meetings averaged around 60 attendees each and included a wide variety of civil society stakeholders including those who participated in the background research phase of the project. The 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 DRC context, and the meetings garnered a high level of interest.

Following this, the FFS consortium began an open application process to identify and select ALG members. To support this process and the ongoing work of the ALG, the consortium identified and hired Mr. Jean-Paul Zibika to act as the DRC facilitator. This role has been both a facilitator and managerial role. His responsibilities include managing regular meetings with the group, planning agendas and activities for workshops, facilitating workshops, and managing other administrative aspects of the ALG. With the support of Jean-Paul, applicants were asked to submit an application via an online form. Additional outreach was conducted via the 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 ALG were shared online, through local newspapers and through word of mouth. Applications were assessed according to criteria defined by the FFS consortium in collaboration with the local ALG facilitators. The set criteria were as follows:

- 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? (1-5)
- 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, 25 individuals representing civil society organizations and related stakeholders were selected for inclusion in the ALG in DRC. To ensure diversity and representation, we enacted a system of positive discrimination to ensure all women and disabled applicants were allocated a place in the ALG. We also aimed to include donors/INGO actors, local businesses and local government actors in the group. Five applicants were given preference based on their belonging to these categories.

The decision to limit the group to North and South Kivu was based on the available budget for meetings. We wanted to ensure we could pay for travel and accommodation stipends for individuals based outside of the normal ALG meeting location, and for individuals outside of the main cities.

The final list of members includes 13 CSOs from Goma, North Kivu; 8 CSOs from South Kivu, including territories such as Uvira and Kalehe; two government representatives from the local offices of North and South Kivu; one local telecommunications business; and one INGO. The full list of ALG members can be found in Appendix 1. Furthermore, the group voted unanimously to develop a steering committee of four members to represent the overall group, provide additional support to the facilitator, and manage ongoing communications and regional meetings of the group. The steering committee is comprised of one man and one woman from South Kivu, and one man and one woman from North Kivu.

## ALG PROGRESS

Since the inception of the group, ALG meetings have occurred roughly every seven weeks. Meetings most often take place in Goma, North Kivu. A local organization, which is a member of the ALG, hosts the meetings to help keep the costs of the meetings low and allow for a higher frequency of meetings if necessary.

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“Develop, share and sustain a successful financial sustainability model to change the financing process in DRC.”  
- *DRC ALG Mission Statement*

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Following an initial kick-off meeting for the finalized ALG members on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, a series of meetings have taken place in order to identify and prioritize challenges to financial sustainability, and to design and begin the implementation of activities to address the challenges. These meetings have taken place according to the agreed workplan and timeline of the overall FFS consortium.

As a result of these meetings, the ALG has identified a joint mission and vision for the group, which is to “develop, share and sustain a successful financial sustainability model to change the financing process in DRC.” In essence, the ALG views the topic of financial sustainability of local civil society, and sustainability more broadly, as a hugely pressing issue for the DRC context. The ALG is currently beginning the ‘activity implementation’ phase of the project and has identified two main activities to carry out through the end of the project.

### **Activity 1: Advocacy activity to change mindsets of donors and civil society regarding key challenges to financial sustainability**

As of July 2019, the ALG has begun to conduct an advocacy activity with CSOs, donors, INGOs, government actors and other key stakeholders aimed at changing the dominant aid modalities, which remain inflexible and have limited opportunities for unrestricted funding.

### **Activity 2: Emergency Resource Mobilization Pilot Activity**

The ALG plans to pilot a series of emergency fundraising approaches for local civil society which would provide immediate financial relief for those local organizations working on acute issues (e.g. Ebola; Beni massacre; etc.). The goal of this activity is to identify which financial mobilization activities are best suited to emergency appeals, primarily related to raising funds from local sources such as community members or the private sector. This activity is expected to take place between August and October 2019.

### **Activity 3: Develop Formal CSO Network**

Finally, the group has registered with the Congolese government as a formal CSO network to establish itself as a key source of information and support regarding issues of CSO financial sustainability in the context for various stakeholders. As a part of this, the ALG has created a network website where they are able to share resources such as research and tools on financial sustainability, offer specialized support on financial sustainability to donors, partner organizations and local groups, and advertise public networks events.

The website address is: [www.DRCsustainabilitynetwork.org](http://www.DRCsustainabilitynetwork.org)

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### *Participation and Engagement*

Overall, the level of engagement of ALG members at regular meetings has been extremely high, with an average rate of 95% attendance of members, with absent members being replaced by staff within their respective organizations. The steering committee has consistently organized and managed smaller regional meetings of North and South Kivu members in the interim periods between the larger ALG meetings, and these have been essential to ensuring the group operates in a cohesive and collaborative manner. The group has overall had very high levels of commitment amongst all members, and we have received no information regarding unequal or disproportionate contributions between members. However, the steering committee does put more time and effort towards the group, which has at times resulted in frustrations regarding the lack of financial compensation for their work. However, the collaborative and supportive nature of the group, and the open and transparent relationship that the steering committee has with Peace Direct, has allowed for these concerns to be addressed to a sufficient degree.

The biggest challenge for participation and engagement has been ensuring INGO presence at meetings and contribution towards the overall project. Initially the ALG included three INGO members (DAI, Freedom House, and Counterpart International). The attendance of staff from DAI and Freedom house ended after the second official ALG meeting. Counterpart International has attended meetings on an irregular basis, though they are still official members of the group. Counterpart International have informed us that their reduced participation is due primarily to the limited time and availability of their field staff. We have been unable to receive further

information from Freedom House or DAI, despite a number of attempts to engage with them and seek clarity regarding their absence. We assume the lack of attendance is due to a mixture of limited staff availability for the project and a lack of direct relevance of the project on the programmatic outputs of the INGOs.

The USAID mission in Kinshasa has continued to be supportive and keenly interested in the project, and are currently in the process of developing a plan for ongoing collaboration with the ALG. This show of respect and support from USAID has provided the ALG members with continued confidence that their work is both recognized and valuable.

### *Group Dynamics*

The ALG members have shown consistently high levels of healthy collaboration and coordination throughout the duration of the project to date. This is evidenced by positive communication on the WhatsApp group, decisions being made by consensus, and regular communication of any updates. As mentioned above, this has been in large part due to the successful management of the group by both the facilitator and the steering committee. This dynamic has also been attributed to the fact that all members feel highly passionate and committed to the subject of financial sustainability and feel that they and their organizations have a personal stake in the success or failure of the initiative, as does the broader civil society community. Additionally, members have stated that the ALG has provided them with a platform to regularly meet, interact and exchange knowledge with CSOs which they had previously been unable to connect with. The ALG has been described by members as a “family”, and members have shown high levels of respect for one another and for the project’s goals overall. As a whole, the group has a strongly proactive and ‘volunteer’ dynamic regarding the planning and implementation of both ALG meetings and activities.

### *Group Management*

At the start of the project, the facilitator was provided with a ‘Facilitation Guide’, which had been prepared by the FFS consortium prior to the start of the ALG phase. This guide provided the facilitator with the timelines for outputs and tools for meeting the expected milestones with the group. While the facilitation guide was useful, learnings from this stage have indicated that the guide can be improved for future use. For instance, the goal was to create a rough document which the facilitator could adapt to the needs of the ALG based on each context. However, the structure of the document appeared to provide a strict approach to carrying out the work, which may have resulted in the lower level of ownership by the facilitator over the early stages of the process. The facilitator did not appear to feel comfortable adapting the approaches cited in the guide, and regularly felt there was a level of pressure to adhere strictly to the guide as it was set by the FFS team. This misunderstanding is also likely related to historical dynamics between international funders and local actors, whereby there tends to be a norm of donors setting all project requirements and local actors implementing this with little autonomy. Furthermore, the example tools provided in the guidance were weaker for the second half of the project timeline due to the FFS team’s lack of clarity on how the ALG’s would progress, which led to a few challenges when the ALG’s progressed to this point. This included a number of tools which no longer fit the needs of the group, and some confusion with the facilitator thinking these tools had to be used. However, the facilitator was still able to use the guide to inform the progression of the project, and this challenge was not detrimental to the project overall.

As expressed throughout this learning brief, the DRC ALG has benefitted from exceptional management by the local facilitator and the steering committee. The steering committee is in regular contact with the facilitator and acts as a two-way conduit of information between the facilitator and the other ALG members. During periods where ALG deadlines have been pressing, the regional steering committee members (North and South Kivu) have successfully organized additional meetings for group members to ensure deadlines are met. This arrangement of shared responsibility has allowed the group to feel autonomous throughout the analysis and planning phases of the project and has allowed for organized and timely management of group priorities. The success of this arrangement is most likely linked to the development of the steering committee and allocation of responsibilities to group members during the early stages of the ALG development. As the steering committee was established at the first ALG meeting, members have been provided with a clear understanding of their expectations, roles, responsibilities from the earliest phases of the project.

### *Communication*

Communication for the ALG has been managed primarily through a specific ALG WhatsApp group chat, as well as through a separate WhatsApp group chat between the steering committee, the facilitator and Peace Direct. This has allowed for a structured and quick flow of information between the various levels of management. Communication has also occurred via email, but this has experienced a lesser degree of success due to the limited access to reliable internet for many ALG members, whereas WhatsApp tends to be a far more accessible and popular platform in the country. Furthermore, a ‘network website’ was developed at the early stages of the project to provide a platform for ALG members to communicate with one another, share resources, and communicate with members of the Uganda and Colombia ALGs. However, this platform never materialized in any meaningful way, most likely due to continued challenges around internet access and usage in the DRC. Moreover, language continues to pose a significant challenge when it comes to communication between ALGs, preventing members from engaging with one another.

### *Funding*

Two overall themes have emerged around the challenges related to funding and financial support. First, the short timeframe of the FFS activity has created a need for ALG members to spend more time working with the group and on ALG activities than initial expectations. The second is related to the flow of resources to ALG activities through consortium members and slow movement of those resources, primarily a result of the internal financial controls required to meet fiscal responsibilities as stewards of American taxpayer money.

The ALG has expressed frustrations with the level of work expected from them for the project, despite not being paid their time. While this has not impacted the actual contributions or willingness of the group to continue work, there has been a consistent need for Peace Direct to hold open discussions with the group about this topic and to quell frustrations. The members have at times experienced reduced morale due to the feeling that they are putting a lot of their time towards the project (e.g., ALG meetings requiring some members to be absent from their communities for up to 5 days due to travel difficulties), whilst not being compensated for this as they would expect to be in a standard development project. Peace Direct has continuously

acknowledged this fact and has worked with the group to develop plans for appropriate resourcing support as the group moves forward in their work (e.g., establishing members as consultants on financial sustainability). Furthermore, we have found that re-framing this concern as a direct lesson emerging from the project, tied to the larger systemic challenges for financial sustainability, has enabled the group to ‘look past’ their frustrations and work towards a shared goal of enacting change in this regard. The group has shown exceptional commitment to ensuring compensation for work and has built this learning experience into their advocacy work to ensure donors develop projects like this with an understanding of the time and effort requirements of volunteers such as ALG members.

The management of ALG funds by Peace Direct and LINC, in particular the speed of access to funding, has impacted the morale and functioning of the ALG. Due to the fairly complex and time-intensive process for disbursing ALG funds in a manner consistent with internal financial controls, the ALG members have faced significant delays for project implementation. For instance, the ALG had prepared to begin their advocacy activity in late April/early May, however funding delays meant that the advocacy work was delayed to mid-July. This is partially a result of the formal procurement processes required by USAID, and the legal requirements of the prime and sub-awardee relationship. These delays combined with misaligned expectations from the ALG members have caused considerable frustrations within the group, who have also reported that they felt that their efforts towards keeping the project on track were futile as a result.

This has also resulted in an overall reduced level of trust in the FFS consortium partners, and members have felt that their commitment has not been matched by a timely or respectful management of the activity funding. Peace Direct has worked to ensure these frustrations are addressed and that group members feel respected by providing space for reflection, voicing concerns, and for asking questions at past ALG meetings. This has, to a large extent, settled frustrations within the group. To address this further, the consortium adapted its approach for funding disbursement to have Peace Direct directly provide resources for group activities, thus providing a more direct line of responsibility between the ALG and Peace Direct as their primary point of contact within the FFS project.

#### *Timeline, Planning and Activity Implementation*

The group has also shared concerns regarding the timeline for finishing ALG activities. The group has had less than two years to form, acquire the skills required to carry out activities, and implement desired activities. This tight timeline has been further reduced as a result of slow funds disbursements. As a result, the group has expressed concern that the time remaining may not be adequate for what is required to effectively implement all of their desired projects.

The group experienced minor difficulties in ensuring the timely planning of activities due to a series of discussions between the group, Peace Direct and LINC – with Peace Direct unfortunately put in the position of interlocutor between the ALG and LINC – regarding the overall ALG activity workplan and budget. This was primarily linked to a general misunderstanding of the type of activities that the group could carry out with the allocated funding, and a lack of understanding of what type of advocacy activity would be best suited both to the DRC context and to the topic of financial sustainability. In particular, the ALG members originally proposed conducting advocacy on the topic outside of DRC because they felt donors

and INGOs in the DRC context were not able to affect systemic change in any substantial way. The group proposed conducting advocacy in African capitals where donor and INGO regional office were based, such as Nairobi and Addis Ababa, which would have consumed the majority of the ALG budget on travel costs alone, and would have provided the group with limited opportunities for follow up on their advocacy work. Peace Direct expressed significant concern around this activity, and the facilitator and steering committee met to discuss the concerns, develop new ideas and propose an alternative advocacy approach to the ALG. The concerns were taken on board by the ALG, and a new advocacy approach focused on donors and INGOs present in the local contexts of DRC was developed. A significant challenge which developed out of this process was the fact that the ALG felt that the FFS consortium had potentially played too large of a role in determining the activity, and as such the group felt reduced level of autonomy. This reflects a general mismatch in the expectations between local organizations and international partners regarding what type of activities should be prioritized and how these should be developed. However, the group did acknowledge the concerns and agreed that the advocacy work could be more impactful by starting local first.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

Key learnings and recommendations:

- Any guidance provided for setting up an ALG (e.g. the facilitation guide) should be thoroughly reviewed in collaboration with a local partner to ensure it is flexible and supportive of project needs and allows for group autonomy and ownership of the project from the outset.
- Clear roles, responsibilities and management structures should be developed and agreed upon at the onset of the development of an Action Learning Group.
- Open, consistent and thoughtful communication between an ALG and consortium partner (e.g. Peace Direct) is essential for ensuring members feel respected and committed to their work, and for addressing challenges.
- Transparency around funding structures, consistency in funding disbursements, and accuracy in funding timelines is essential to ensuring ALG members feel respected as leaders of the project. Funding has the potential to significantly reduce feelings of ‘ownership’ and autonomy for ALG members and should be addressed early on to ensure processes and timelines are understood and respected.

### *Next steps:*

The DRC ALG will continue to implement their planned activities for the duration of the project (July – January 2019). The group intends to develop their own internal learning report regarding the impact and operations of the ALG, as well as a number of reports to support larger civil society on issues of financial sustainability. These will be based jointly on the ALG advocacy activity outputs and the results of the emergency resource mobilization pilot activities. Peace Direct attended a meeting in August to get a debrief on the advocacy work to date, help prepare the sustainability plan for the group, present on outcome harvesting, help plan pilot activities and organize a session around USAID collaboration with the group. Additional information regarding these meetings and debriefs will be provided to USAID in the next Semi-Annual report expected in October 2019. Beyond this, Peace Direct will conduct surveys to get feedback from the group on various topics as listed in the Lessons Learned section.

## APPENDIX 1: ALG MEMBERS

### *North Kivu CSOs*

1. Union des Juristes Engagés pour les Opprimés, la Paix et le Développement
2. Class - DRC
3. Sowers of New Hope
4. Coalition des Volontaires pour la Paix et le Développement
5. Jeune Chambre Internationale
6. Le Comité d'Appui à l'Auto-Promotion - Tujitegemee
7. Vision Des Femmes Pour Le Developpement Endogene
8. Fondation point de vue des jeunes africains pour le développement
9. Virunga Yetu
10. La Communauté pour le Développement et la Reintégration Sociale
11. Fondation d'Appui aux Initiatives de Developpement à travers l'Agriculture
12. Mafubo EST-RDC
13. Actions Solidaires et Multisectorielles pour le Développement Endogène/Relief

### *South Kivu CSOs*

14. Centre d'études sur le Leadership et la Promotion des Droits Humains
15. Research Initiatives for Social Development
16. Synergie d'Initiatives pour les Grands-Lacs
17. Fondation Chirezi
18. Organisation pour la Paix et le Développement
19. Institut Supérieur des Techniques de Développement de Kalehe
20. Jeunesse à L'oeuvre de la Charité et du Développement
21. Forum d'Appui a l'Autopromotion des Familles en Détresse

### *Local Government*

22. Division Provinciale des Affaires Sociales, N Kivu
23. Division Provinciale du Plan, S Kivu

### *Local Business*

24. Elite Networks (Goma)

### *Funders/INGOs*

25. Counterpart International

**APPENDIX 2: ALG PHOTOS**





