

## Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting: Lessons for Global DRG Mechanisms

### Introduction

The USAID-funded Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) program, led by Internews, has undertaken work to increase the understanding of the drivers of closing civic and political space and to strategically respond to the growing trend of closing civic and political space. Since launching in October 2018, the INSPIRES consortium (Internews, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), DevLab at the University of Pennsylvania, PartnersGlobal, and Results for Development (R4D)) has undertaken work to contribute to three complementary objectives:

1. Develop Innovative Analysis to Deepen Understanding of Civic Space Drivers and Inform Programmatic Priorities for Civil Society (Machine Learning)
2. Test Resiliency+ Framework Interventions (ResiliencyPlus)
3. Empower Local Partners to Address Civic Space Threats Effectively (Flexible Response Funds)

To ensure this work was coordinated with others, grounded in evidence, and iteratively adapted throughout implementation, a robust Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approach was integrated within and across these three objectives. USAID defines Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting as “a set of practices – including strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management – that, when implemented throughout the program cycle, help USAID and its partners improve their development effectiveness.” For INSPIRES, this approach centered on a series of “Learning Checks” that served as touch points for consortium partners to reflect on project experiences and findings, discuss learnings for both internal and external dissemination, and develop action plans for adapting the design and implementation of INSPIRES programming. Additional CLA activities undertaken by the INSPIRES consortium are listed in Figure 1 above.

**Figure 1: Primary INSPIRES CLA activities**

- Internal Learning Checks (consortium partners only)
- External Learning Checks (consortium with USAID)
- Monitoring for learning and adaptation
- Development of learning products, sharing monitoring, evaluation, and learning findings and actionable recommendations based on the findings
- Annual work planning processes that included cross-consortium partner and USAID engagement
- Regular meetings with USAID missions and other local partners in countries where INSPIRES activities were taking place

## ***Purpose and structure of this brief***

This brief highlights key takeaways and lessons learned from implementation of this CLA approach between 2018-2023. The information presented in this brief was captured via a series of structured reflection sessions between consortium partners and USAID in the final month of the INSPIRES program. While the results are based on subjective data and thus reflect the perceptions and experiences of partners, we believe they still serve as a useful set of lessons and recommendations for future Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) global mechanisms.

The rest of this brief is organized around four sections, starting with key CLA achievements from INSPIRES (by objective and across objectives), followed by reflections on potential drivers of progress, CLA challenges faced by consortium partners, and then closing with recommendations for other global DRG mechanisms. Each section provides an overview of reflections from INSPIRES consortium partners, as well as feedback provided by USAID.



## Key CLA achievements

CLA achievements were defined as clear examples of monitoring and evaluation findings or learning activities leading to concrete program adaptations. The most notable CLA achievements within programming on each INSPIRES objective included the following:

### Objective 1: Machine Learning (ML)

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- Events held early in the INSPIRES program cycle and an [expert survey](#) led by DevLab provided useful inputs that resulted in improvements of the Machine Learning model, including adaptations to the forecast structure and visualization (e.g., adding corruption as a key event that could be especially informative in predicting future civic space activity).
- Serbia adaptation of the Machine Learning model. Specifically, input and testing from INSPIRES partners in Serbia led to changes in how data was shared and presented, making it more user-friendly and responsive to user needs.
- Findings from the expert survey mentioned above, as well as key informant interviews conducted by the R4D research team, helped inform design of the [Machine Learning for Peace Project website](#). For example, several informants shared that they were excited by the idea of the ML model but needed to better understand what went into it. DevLab addressed this feedback by adding a series of explainer videos on the website with easy-to-understand information about what was included in the model.
- Flexible response fund activities conducted in Tanzania and El Salvador provided local partner input on design and interpretation of [research undertaken with Machine Learning data](#) in response to USAID Mission interests.

### Objective 2: ResiliencyPlus (R+)

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- Based on evaluation findings and R+ participant feedback, the timeline for each cohort of R+ under INSPIRES was extended given lessons learned regarding potential implementation delays.
- Findings from an [evaluation of the second cohort of R+](#) helped inform programming decisions for the third cohort of R+ under INSPIRES. For example, R+ coaching teams dedicated more time to the ecosystem analysis activity with Cohort 3 due to the demand seen with organizations in Cohort 2. PartnersGlobal (the partner who led R+ under INSPIRES) also allocated more financial resources to in-person events during Cohort 3 given feedback from Cohort 2 organizations about Zoom fatigue.
- Lastly, the evaluation of Cohort 2 of R+ under INSPIRES provided additional insight into how consortium partners could approach measurement of organizational resilience, the primary intended outcome of Objective 2 programming.



## Key CLA achievements

### Objective 3: Flexible Response Funds (FRFs)

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- INSPIRES consortium partners led several multi-partner FRFs that deliberately embedded cross-partner collaboration and learning to offer more holistic support to program recipients. For example, PartnersGlobal and ICNL collaborated on two FRFs in Zimbabwe and Georgia to provide legal support for local civil society organizations.
- In countries including [Yemen](#), Paraguay, and [Bolivia](#), partners also led follow-on FRFs within the same country that leveraged relationships with local partners and built on learnings from the previous FRFs' activities.
- Finally, learning from several FRFs informed longer-term programs led by ICNL or Internews, either in the same country or elsewhere. For example, in Paraguay, ICNL's local partners were able to serve as experts for another regional program working on similar issues given the support they received from INSPIRES. And in multiple countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Internews adapted a smaller intervention into a larger one.

### Cross-objective achievements

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In addition to achievements within objective-specific programming, there were also several notable CLA achievements across INSPIRES objectives, including:

- **Facilitation of regular quarterly Learning Checks among consortium partners and USAID**, which provided information and learning across objective-specific programming and informed overall work planning decisions. Learning Checks also served as a valuable space for consortium members to better understand USAID preferences and adapt programming accordingly.
- **Deeper partner collaboration in Serbia**, which led to more effective adaptation and response when a major civic space threat ("the List incident") arose. In July 2020, the Serbia Administration for the Prevention of Money Laundering used an existing law on the prevention of money laundering and financing of terrorism to secretly request information from all commercial banks concerning the accounts of dozens of civil society organizations, independent media organizations, and individuals in Serbia. While INSPIRES was not initially designed to address a shock like "the List", the project swiftly adapted with the support of USAID to ensure that project resources were being dedicated to help civil society – including INSPIRES Serbian partners on "the List" – to respond. [Learn more here.](#)
- **The consortium's collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic**, in which partners took immediate action to collaborate and adapt programming. This included: shifting partner convenings online, re-focusing FRF support to COVID-related civic space threats, and providing wellbeing support to partners dealing with stress/stigma of the pandemic.



## Potential drivers of progress

Consortium partners identified several enabling factors that may have contributed to the achievements mentioned above, such as:

- ❖ **A flexible and responsive program design.** From the beginning, INSPIRES was designed to be a flexible program that could adapt quickly given local partner needs. One clear example of this was the ability partners had to conduct follow-on FRFs or change the scope of FRF activities midstream.
- ❖ **Regular pre-planned reflection moments that engaged a variety of partners and USAID.** As mentioned above, these Learning Checks offered a structured way for consortium partners to share and reflect together. They also provided regular moments for thought partnership around the design and implementation of INSPIRES activities.
- ❖ **Partner mindsets and orientation toward collaboration and adaptation.** From the outset, all INSPIRES consortium partners were open and motivated to collaborate. They appreciated the different strengths that each partner brought to the consortium and valued feedback. Throughout implementation of INSPIRES activities, partners were also consistent about regularly sharing back research and learning with each other, as well as with other local stakeholders with whom they were working.
- ❖ **Close relationships between consortium partners and stakeholders working in program countries.** For example, ICNL had a regional partner, the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) with whom they worked closely to implement FRF activities, and PartnersGlobal was in close communication with country-based R+ coaching teams throughout the implementation of R+ programming. Individual partners, and the consortium as a whole, could adapt quicker because they were able to get real-time feedback from people close to the ground.
- ❖ **In-person events.** For example, the R+ launch event held in-person in Belgrade, Serbia helped partners learn more about what others were working on and identify synergies, which led to greater collaboration and adaptation across INSPIRES activities.
- ❖ **Expanded funding.** For example, a formal “buy-in” from the USAID Mission in Serbia helped support deeper collaboration across partners working on activities there.

### Further reflections from USAID on CLA successes and drivers of progress

- Joint work between consortium members (e.g., cross-partner FRFs in Georgia and Zimbabwe).
- Integrating CLA into the design of the project (e.g., via quarterly learning checks with consortium partners and USAID) and having the commitment of partners to implement it from the outset.
- Regular engagement with USAID missions and local stakeholders (e.g., via the ML expert survey) to ensure INSPIRES activities were relevant to their needs.
- Reserving funds for flexible response activities that allowed programming to adapt to both pre-planned needs and those that came up last minute.
- Having a dedicated consortium member to focus on CLA activities.



## CLA challenges and barriers

Despite the CLA achievements mentioned above, there were a few factors that may have hindered the effectiveness of partners' efforts to integrate CLA practices within and across INSPIRES programming. They included the following:

- **Evaluation data took time to collect**, which limited adaptation within objective-specific programming.
- **Breadth versus depth challenge with data for learning**. As a global mechanism working across numerous countries and regions, partners' faced tradeoffs between their ability to generate a wide range of evidence on protecting civic space versus deeply exploring specific topics and contexts.
- **Some learning did not come with obvious solutions**. For example, COVID-19 was a major challenge, but consortium partners sometimes had limited control over how to address it.
- **Partners were challenged at times to integrate all donor input, and bureaucratic processes sometimes caused delays**. Especially at the start of the program, the amount of feedback from multiple stakeholders may have limited adaptation in part because it was not always clear which changes needed to be prioritized. An example of a challenging process was donor approval for the MLPeace.org website, which took over a year to secure.
- **Differing timelines and priorities of objective-specific programming** often made it challenging to integrate learning across objectives.

### Helping or Hindering?

While differing partner timelines and priorities were noted as a challenge, these differences may have also provided value to INSPIRES. For example, one of the unique features of the INSPIRES consortium was that every partner brought a clear comparative advantage to the work they led. ICNL brought expertise on the legal enabling environment, Internews on issues in the information space, and PartnersGlobal on capacity strengthening for civil society. These unique strengths helped partners work more seamlessly together.

### Further reflections from USAID on CLA challenges

- Partners faced some challenges in implementing program adaptations that had been identified due to resource constraints, differing timelines and priorities, and certain donor sensitivities.
- Adapting the evaluation approach for each INSPIRES objective provided value to the project in that it offered the most relevant, timely feedback for partner decisions. However, this may have also limited some learning and adaptation opportunities across objectives.





## Recommendations for future programs

Based on the helping and hindering factors mentioned above, INSPIRES consortium partners and USAID recommend the following considerations for design and delivery of future DRG global mechanisms.

- ☐ **Build flexibility into program design**, to ensure program activities remain responsive to learning and feedback from program participants and other local stakeholders. For example, integrate a flexible response option with a dedicated pool of funds and technical assistance that can easily be deployed to address sudden or unexpected needs of local actors. This is particularly important when working with partners in rapidly changing civic space environments. Or design a monitoring and evaluation plan that includes adaptive learning approaches to generate rapid, ongoing feedback on what is working and what is not. Learn more about adaptive learning approaches [here](#).
- ☐ **Create space for regular, direct engagement between all consortium members and USAID**. This could include regular “Learning Checks” or “Pause and Reflect” moments where program stakeholders come together to better understand priorities and constraints, discuss learning, and plan for potential adaptations to programming. It could also include regular engagement with USAID Missions to get their buy-in and help encourage greater uptake of learning that comes out of the program. Set up time and space for this engagement from the start of the program, not only when challenges arise. For more information on how to facilitate Learning Checks and other related reflection moments, [see USAID’s CLA Toolkit here](#).
- ☐ If substantive collaboration and integration of learning across consortium partners and programming is the goal, **establish formal processes to support this from the beginning**. For example, align activity and data collection timelines to ensure information collected from one partner’s activities can feed into the design of another partner’s activities. Or set aside dedicated funding for consortium partners to engage in collaborative activities with each other.
- ☐ **Ensure there is at least one member of the consortium dedicated to leading CLA activities**. Consider assigning this role to a partner who is not responsible for leading other technical activities within the program, which can help ensure objectivity.

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