



**PRACTICAL
LEARNING**
for
**INTERNATIONAL
ACTION**

**Final Report to Humanity United
Grant Agreement #PB11634/19GOS
December 2019-May 2020**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2019, CDA Collaborative Learning (CDA) received a \$50,000 unrestricted grant from Humanity United (HU) to help CDA continue its leadership at the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding “triple nexus” and facilitate organizational growth and development.

Why this funding was different

CDA and HU both appreciate the power of unrestricted funding for mission-driven organizations and the unique funding challenges of organizations that exist to make the work of others possible. The ability to demonstrate the impact of unrestricted funding is of specific interest to CDA at this point in the organization’s lifecycle. Thus, CDA took the initiative to set its own parameters for these grant funds and monitor the use and impact, with the goal of learning about the experience of monitoring unrestricted grants to catalytic, backbone organizations. This report outlines the goals and objectives that CDA established for grant monitoring and offers data on progress toward these objectives, obtained from CDA staff interviews and a survey of CDA colleagues, including relevant Board members.

What we learned

Several key themes emerged from these data-collection mechanisms, which will inform CDA’s future management of unrestricted grants. They also underline key challenges and opportunities for CDA and similar organizations moving forward:

- **Organization-level impact:** On the whole, unrestricted grant funds increased team morale, motivation, innovation capacity, programmatic risk-taking, and ability to scope new projects while simultaneously building CDA’s brand image, developing new business, forging partnerships with peer organizations, and leading important dialogues about timely topics at the triple nexus (such as localization, risk-reduction, and the intersection of climate disaster risk and Do No Harm).
- **Thought leadership impact:** The grant also facilitated opportunities for CDA to share lessons learned with peers and further develop internal protocols to strengthen organizational accountability to partner organizations and those it serves in the field.
- **Operational lessons:** The grant monitoring process also raised critical questions about how to maintain the flexibility of unrestricted funding while also planning on how to use funds, projecting for the future, and building internal transparency and accountability into fund disbursement.

Through these various lessons, CDA is now better equipped to strategize and innovate on the use of monitoring, evaluation, and learning for future flexible funds.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, CDA Collaborative Learning (CDA) received a US \$50,000 unrestricted grant from Humanity United (HU). The purpose of the grant, awarded from HU's Peacebuilding portfolio, was to help CDA continue its leadership at the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding nexus — commonly referred to as the “triple nexus”— and facilitate organizational growth and development. CDA also invested personnel and financial resources to structure and monitor the use of these unrestricted grant funds. This report is based on a series of CDA internal surveys, in-depth reflection sessions, and monitoring data and outlines reflections on key successes and challenges related to the use of grant funds through May 2020.

While HU did not require formal reporting for use of the award, CDA took the initiative to set its own parameters for these grant funds and monitor its use and impact, with the goal of learning about the experience of monitoring unrestricted grants. Through this process, CDA built on its tradition of responsible, transparent, and accountable grant stewardship and modeled a way to make more intentional use of unrestricted funds by backbone organizations. While the monitoring of unrestricted grant funding is not a widespread practice, it offers a donors and grantees an opportunity to better understand where and how funds are used and with what impact.

In addition to sharing its reflections and lessons learned with peer organizations, CDA will continue the learning process by working with HU and other donors to strategize and innovate on the use of monitoring, evaluation, and learning for future flexible funds.

Background

For 25 years, CDA has been a [catalytic, backbone organization](#) working within and across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors. By listening to diverse practitioners wherever communities experience conflict and inventing methodologies that constructively engage complexity, CDA has found a niche leading critical learning processes that shed light on the vexing questions of aid. This organizational role and approach, however, rarely fits within the parameters of competitive grant mechanisms.

For many years, CDA was fortunate to have an unrestricted funding relationship with DFID, which enabled the launch of multi-year collaborative learning processes, such as [the Corporate Engagement Project](#) and [the Listening Project](#). DFID's funding also supported core operational functions of CDA and a robust set of training offerings. Due to changes in DFID grantmaking policies, their longstanding support to CDA was terminated abruptly in 2018. This coincided with other major global funding trends and the organization's own program and personnel changes, which precipitated CDA re-envisioning its operating model as a “collaborative platform” under new Board and executive leadership in early 2019. HU funding thus came at an important and complex time for CDA, allowing the organization to institutionalize the platform model and return to its the essential learning and strategic partnering roles in the peacebuilding and development community.

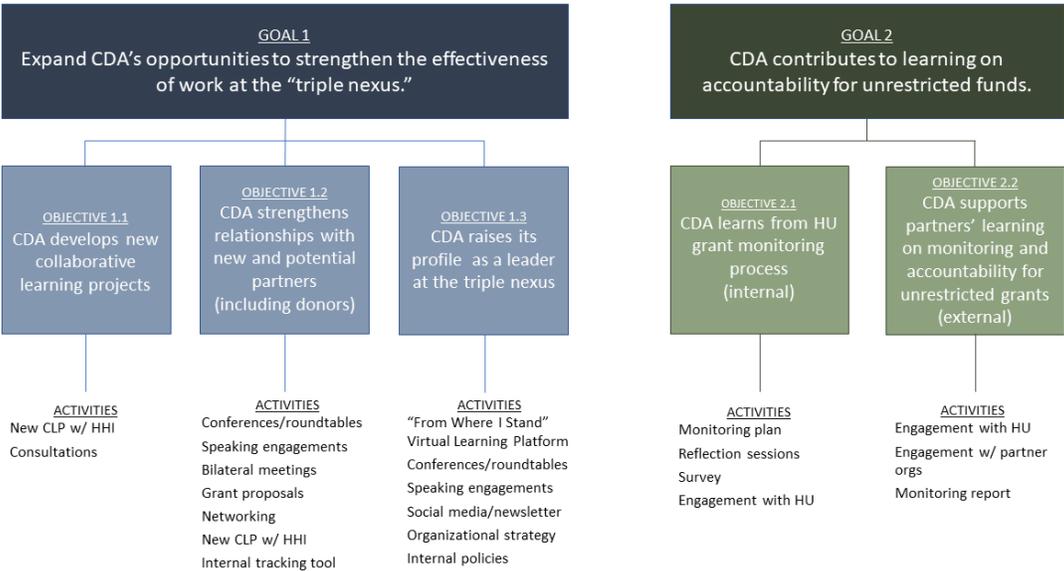
MONITORING AND EVALUATING FLEXIBLE FUNDS: REFLECTIONS ON LESSONS AND IMPACT

Building a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan

Upon receiving the HU grant, CDA committed to developing a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan in order to capture and share key learnings from the use of the grant and demonstrate accountable grant stewardship. The monitoring team initially developed a traditional logical framework with several objectives and sub-objectives in addition to activity and outcome-level indicators. Yet the necessary flexibility of these unrestricted funds made such a model too rigid for the purposes of this grant. The logical framework was thus pared down into a **simplified logic model** which includes two overarching goals (one more externally facing (Goal 1) and the other more internally facing (Goal 2)), which were determined through multiple iterative consultations with organizational leadership, including the Board of Directors (see Figure 1).

The key lesson learned through this process is **the need for additional thinking and innovation on how to tailor current MEL tools and approaches to unrestricted funds**, in a way that provides structure for measurement and accountability but sufficient flexibility to responding to evolving organizational needs and priorities.

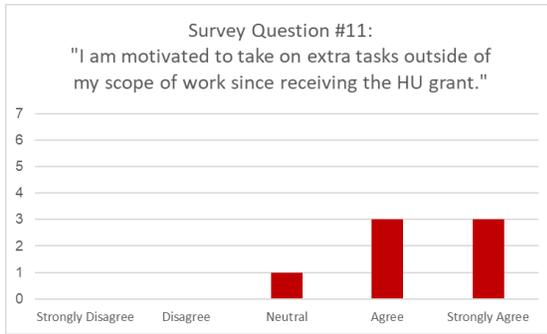
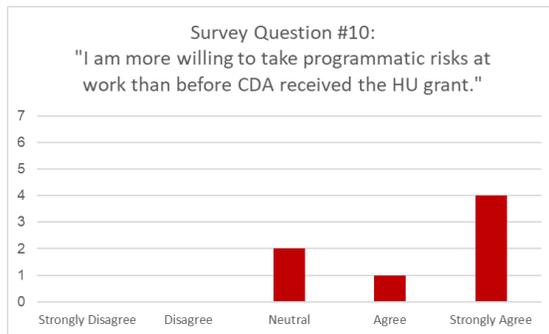
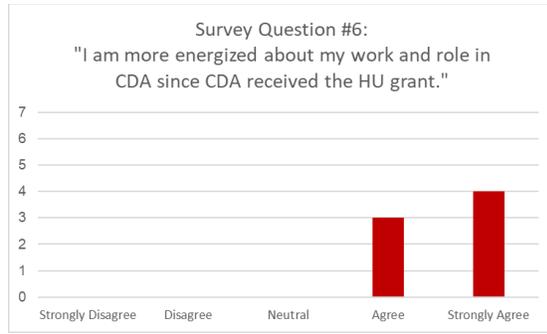
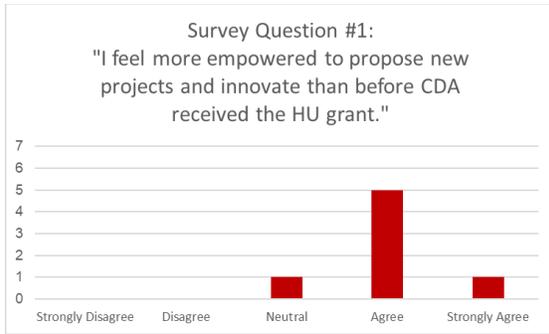
Figure 1 - Logic Model for HU Unrestricted Grant



Supporting programmatic goals and leadership at the triple nexus

CDA utilized HU funds to amplify its ongoing program work at the triple nexus and consolidate its role as a backbone organization. The grant gave CDA the space needed to “step back, reflect, and process” critical issues at the triple nexus. By allowing “breathing room” to develop new business and think creatively about new projects, HU funding **re-energized staff, improved overall morale, and allowed CDA to recommit to innovation** (see, for example, survey results on the next page).¹

¹ Improvement of staff morale was an unexpected result of this monitoring process. After finding that some CDA staff and leadership perceived an observed increase in staff morale (i.e., HU funding lifted staff morale by allowing more room for creativity and programming flexibility), the monitoring plan was expanded to include a survey to measure work satisfaction among staff as well as two board members from the Resources and Sustainability board committee.



Notable outcomes from this renewed program flexibility included the launch of a **new collaborative learning project (CLP)** and a **virtual learning platform** (see *Featured Projects*). Through these projects, CDA deepened its commitment to pursuing need-based, community-driven learning projects and bringing more diverse voices into conversations on critical issues like localization across the triple nexus.

FEATURED PROJECT: "FROM WHERE I STAND" VIRTUAL LEARNING FORUM

For nearly two decades there has been energetic discussion across the humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development sectors about local leadership. The growing consensus is that organizations closest to people in need are to be trusted, respected, and supported as core to effective peace and development efforts. While much has been written about the localization agenda and gaps in its application and conceptual grounding, there is not a body of evidence by local actors and practitioners about the lived experiences, observable gaps, and practical solutions they are actively creating. In April 2020, CDA launched the virtual learning forum [From Where I Stand: unpacking "local" in aid](#) (in part funded by the HU grant) as a way to bring forward often overlooked perspectives about the challenges and successes of fostering greater local leadership and what is required to effectively ["localize"](#) aid.

For this series, partners and colleagues are asked to reflect on what works, what does not, what questions need to be asked, and what changes does the broader triple nexus community, need to make? Taken together, their responses can expand our collective thinking and understanding about what "localization" actually looks like in practice, no matter how messy it may be. Through this collaborative learning effort CDA hopes to answer the question: What if the evidence-base for local leadership, aid policy, and INGO practice was based on the diverse experiences and ideas of those leading humanitarian, aid, and peacebuilding efforts in their contexts?

The virtual learning platform has featured perspectives from a range of contexts including Nigeria, Argentina, Nepal, India, and the UK, touching on a wide variety of questions, challenges, and opportunities. CDA has begun to synthesize some of the emerging themes (see [Meeting Complexity with Creativity: Five themes in unpacking "local" in aid](#)) and will continue to facilitate learning as the forum evolves. Through *From Where I Stand*, CDA has the numbers are similar-- CDA has reached 3,590 users, posted on 82 occasions, and received 1,613 "likes."

FEATURED PROJECT: LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Of the megatrends for this decade, the increasing severity of natural hazards due to climate change and the evolving nature of conflict pose a dual threat to communities across the globe. There is a growing body of evidence from scientific research and through the work of local and international civil society organizations about how countries and communities are experiencing both challenges. ***Yet little is known about which factors support and which impede local capacities for adaptation and response in contexts characterized by both climate-related natural hazards and conflict.***

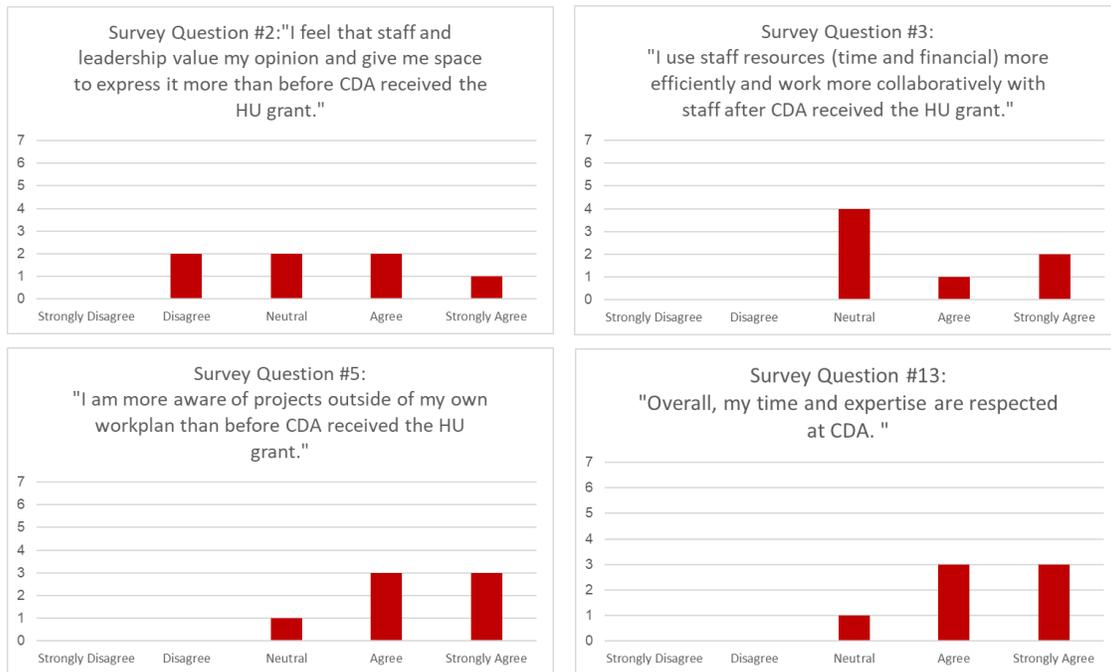
Through a consultative process with humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding practitioners, CDA identified the intersection of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and conflict sensitivity as an area of interest and used HU funds to scope a new collaborative learning project (CLP) in partnership with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI). The “Local Capacities for Resilient Communities” CLP seeks to (1) better understand the factors that contribute to or impede community resilience in contexts affected by both climate-related natural hazards and conflict, and (2) enhance collaboration, coordination, and agile responses across the DRR and peacebuilding sectors. Using a mixed methods approach, the project will expand the evidence base about patterns of community resilience and develop a diverse set of global case studies to better understand both local patterns of resilience as well as the coordination among actors involved in responding to climate-induced disasters. The hope of this project is to identify patterns and salient trends across these contexts in order to capture key lessons learned. Based on those lessons, CDA and HHI will review and determine gaps in practical guidance for local, national, and international actors to improve their effectiveness. This support will seek to build upon community strengths, address gaps, and avoid undermining effective features of community resilience.

The HU grant funded **scoping fieldwork in Mindanao, Philippines** (location of a potential pilot project) with dozens of key informant interviews and focus group discussions with local, national, and international actors, including members of affected populations. Mindanao was selected in view of its high-level climate-related disasters, propensity for latent and overt conflict, enduring peacebuilding initiatives. Secondly, CDA has a vast network and experience working in Mindanao in addition to HHI’s ongoing research on disaster risk reduction and community resiliency across the Philippines. The scoping mission served as a helpful proof of concept for the CLP and garnered significant interest from donors and potential partners. CDA and HHI identified possible case studies and localities for the research. This fieldwork would not have been feasible without HU grant support.

The next phase of the project will include a CDA and HHI internal consultation process to test project questions, approach, and analysis, accompanied by continued fundraising and donor cultivation. An initial **review of funding opportunities** suggests that there is appetite among bilateral donors and private foundations for this type of project, particularly at the intersection of climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. CDA may also explore institutional partnerships with INGOs and NGOs/CSOs in the region.

During the grant period, CDA attended and convened conferences, talks, events, roundtables, working groups, and communities of practice. CDA also pursued a variety of **business development opportunities**, including submission of or contribution to nine grant proposals with a range of new and existing partners. This has resulted in affording more visibility to CDA at a critical organizational juncture, as noted in the background above, while also allowing CDA staff and leadership to more strategically **cultivate future partnerships and collaborative learning opportunities** through iterative, deliberate relationship-building. These efforts have already led to numerous discussions of joint research interests, such as a possible CLP with [Impact:Peace](#) to tackle a widely shared question about uptake in the peace and development field: “What will it take to do what we know?” CDA and Impact:Peace see potential interest or alignment with two funders and are continuing to discuss options.

In addition, CDA invested in **professionalizing and standardizing its internal processes** to enable staff to work more effectively, efficiently, and across programs. The HU funds helped in part to facilitate reflection on organizational structure and internal workflows as well as development of an organizational strategy and tools for cultivating new business development. The survey results suggest that while efforts to engage staff have largely been received positively, additional work is needed (see related survey questions below). CDA staff have remained deeply engaged in these processes, resulting in staff feeling more heard and seen in the development of medium- to long-term organizational strategies.



Maintaining Accountability for Unrestricted Funds

As with all CDA projects, this process has been iterative, responsive to lessons learned and not without unique challenges and opportunities to innovate. Yet, a central challenge remains: how to remain accountable without sacrificing the flexibility of unrestricted funding? This experience has also revealed the need for a deeper conversation about **whether, and how, to standardize MEL approaches for unrestricted grants and how much staff time, training, and financial resources should be dedicated those processes**. The solution may be to create a new system based on general MEL best practices without adhering strictly to indicator-based monitoring. For example, CDA used reflection sessions as a monitoring tool, which proved useful for this grant.

As part of broader conversations about internal workflow and decision-making in the new platform model, the monitoring process also raised important questions about **transparency and accountability to staff**. With HU funds, some staff members expressed uncertainty with how funds were allocated and how these decisions were made, but reiterated their trust in leadership to make the appropriate decisions about grant use given the organizational strategic vision being developed collaboratively with staff. This underscores the importance of ongoing internal discussions about communication and decision-making channels more broadly.

Partner and peer organizations have expressed interest in CDA's MEL approach. CDA has provide peer advising to organizations such as Refuge Point, Global Integrity, and Conflict Dynamics International about

structured use of and accountability for unrestricted funds in the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding space. CDA has also raised the idea with HU about convening all of their backbone or catalyst organization grantees to share lessons with each other and further inform HU and their donor networks. CDA is also in close coordination with the leadership of New England International Donors, as they design outreach to an emerging international philanthropy community in the region. Through these conversations, CDA has been encouraged to write about its motivations, experience, and recommendations relevant to funding backbone organizations. This may become an activity made possible by future unrestricted funds.

CONCLUSION

The HU grant came at a critical time for CDA and helped the organization overcome uncertainty and transition. The grant freed staff to think big, innovate, and propose new projects and approaches. It offered a significant morale boost when staff needed it most and opened the floodgates for brainstorming and productive risk-taking that have put CDA back at the cutting-edge of the triple nexus. Critical to this success was the openness of key contacts at HU, which promoted CDA at every turn and allowed important initiatives and projects to emerge from unrestricted funding that can only be seen as a friendly vote of confidence. Throughout the process, HU acted as a partner, more than a funder.

Moving forward, CDA remains committed to acting as a good steward and will apply learning from this MEL process to inform the follow on FY 2020-2021 grant. With help from HU, CDA will continue to be a backbone organization at the triple nexus and encouraging its partners to think outside of the box, challenge norms, seek better evidence, and embrace collaboration as the cornerstone of all programs.