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ADDRESSING LEARNING AND EVALUATION CHALLENGES (ALEC)

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COMMON CHALLENGES IN QUALITATIVE PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

1. Site (case) selection for small-n studies
2. Respondent selection for interviews
3. Social desirability bias
4. Qualitative data capture
5. Qualitative data analysis
6. Evidentiary support for statements
7. Clarity of findings to facilitate use

OBJECTIVES

1. Develop guidance for LER III partners and other researchers to address recurring pain points.
   a. **Good practices** that studies should seek to implement when feasible.
   b. **Minimum standards** to which all studies should adhere.
2. Build consensus among key individuals and organizations involved in such studies on these minimum standards and best practices.

TEAM PRIORS

Identify the team's initial thoughts and build on the team's extensive experience.

PE REPORT REVIEW

Review 61 recent DRG PE reports produced under the LER mechanism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review academic and practitioner guidance literature, including social science literature on qualitative methodology and evaluation practitioner literature and resources.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Conduct key informant interviews with 16 evaluation and assessment commissioners, 11 experts at key evaluator and research contracting firms, and 6 past team leaders.

VALIDATION WORKSHOPS

Convene 3 workshops with 9 IP evaluation experts and past team leaders, 17 individuals from the DRG Community of Practice, and 8 USAID evaluation commissioners to review draft guidance and fill in remaining gaps.

C1: SITE (CASE) SELECTION

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C1: SITE (CASE) SELECTION CHALLENGES

- When activities have more than a handful of sites, **PEs focus on a subset of sites (or cases, units, etc.)** due to resource constraints and a desire for deep understanding of each selected site.
- **Site selection for PEs should align with evaluation questions (EQs), but this is often not clear in reports.** Just over half of relevant PE reports justify site selection, but with varying detail.

Obstacles

- Site selection often occurs too early, when evaluation teams (ETs) have limited understanding of activities.
- Selection has to be made with incomplete information about sites.
- EQs require different selection strategies.

C1: SITE (CASE) SELECTION GUIDANCE

1.1 Decide whether the PE will require selecting sites as soon as possible after having the necessary information.

1.2 Determine the number of sites that the ET can visit and, if possible, make this decision independently of actual site selection.

1.3 Determine the site selection approach and complete site selection only after developing a strong understanding of the activity and evaluation priorities.

1.4 Determine the site selection approach based on EQs and the analytical goals of the evaluation. Consider two broad types of approaches:

- Representative, including stratified random selection and typical site selection
- Purposive, including extreme site selection and intensity-based site selection.

C1: SITE (CASE) SELECTION GUIDANCE (cont.)

1.5 Do not select sites using convenience sampling; however, adjusting site selection to reflect security and accessibility considerations may be necessary.

1.6 Consult with USAID and implementing partner (IP) staff to inform the site selection strategy; however, USAID and IP staff should not determine actual site selection.

1.7 Consider whether the PE could benefit from an incremental or sequenced approach to site selection. If planning to use a sequenced approach, include the justification and process to finalize site selection in the work plan/design report.

1.8 Provide detailed information on sampling in the report, including any deviations from the original plans and their analytical implications.

C2: RESPONDENT SELECTION FOR INTERVIEWS

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C2: RESPONDENT SELECTION CHALLENGES

- **PE reports lack clarity on respondent selection for interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).** Only 31 out of 59 PEs provided explanations beyond role-based selection (e.g., chiefs of party, contracting officer's representatives). Lack of clear information on who is included/excluded can undermine confidence in findings.
- **Selecting participants/indirect beneficiaries should be done in a transparent and unbiased way**, but getting complete lists for selection and contacting and mobilizing these groups can be challenging.
  - Relying on IPs (and USAID) risks restricting selection of participants/indirect beneficiaries to those who have more positive views or are most engaged.

C2: RESPONDENT SELECTION GUIDANCE

2.1 Identify the potential population of respondents, including key informants, program participants, and indirect beneficiaries.

2.2 Identify potential key informants following an intentional process that draws on inputs from local team members, preliminary consultations with USAID and IP staff, and a thorough review of program documentation.

2.3 Leave room for flexibility in key informant selection.

2.4 Similar to site selection, select program participants and indirect beneficiaries using representative or purposive approaches as required by the research questions.

C2: RESPONDENT SELECTION GUIDANCE (cont.)

2.5 To obtain breadth and depth, consider conducting a survey followed by random or purposive selection of respondents for more in-depth interviewing.

2.6 Upon completing respondent selection, validate the selection against the EQs and ensure that the information to be collected is sufficient to address them.

2.7 Provide detailed information on respondent selection in the report, including any deviations from original respondent selection plans and their analytical implications.

C3: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

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C3: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS CHALLENGES

- **Definition:** The tendency to underreport socially undesirable attitudes and behaviors and to overreport more desirable attributes and behaviors.
- Happens for different reasons in evaluation work:
  - Just being nice.
  - Thank you!
  - Future benefits.
- Correlated with other bias.
- Often referenced as a methods limitation (47%) but rarely elsewhere in the report (9%).

C3: SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS GUIDANCE

3.1 Recognize the difference between mitigation and resolution of social desirability bias (SDB).

3.2 Identify and use sources of data and data collection methods that are less subject to SDB.

3.3 Limit access to the data, including donor access, and communicate clearly to interviewees about how the data will be used.

3.4 In developing instruments, use indirect questioning, be thoughtful about question wording, and consider prefacing questions.

3.5 Pretest different approaches to questions subject to SDB.

3.6 During the interview itself, create a trusting atmosphere, look for cues of SDB, flag bias risks in notes, and follow up and probe.

3.7 Take SDB seriously in data analysis, report writing, and quality assurance and caveat findings accordingly.

C4: QUALITATIVE DATA CAPTURE

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C4: QUALITATIVE DATA CAPTURE CHALLENGES

- Inconsistency in the quality of data capture across evaluations/teams, subcontractors/learning partners, and location.
- Poor data capture can lead to unsubstantiated findings and doubts about the credibility of the conclusions.
- Data capture practices are opaque—little or no information is shared in evaluation materials, leading to commissioner anxiety.

Obstacles

- Varied experiences and preferences of team members.
- Risks to ET and participants if notes/transcripts/recordings are accessed by other people.
- Note-taking can be distracting during discussion, as well as time-consuming to do well.
- Recording facilitates transcription and can guard against data loss, but may not be feasible. Can also decrease the quality of discussion.

C4: QUALITATIVE DATA CAPTURE GUIDANCE

4.1 Develop and implement a data capture plan to consistently capture a verbatim or close-to-verbatim record of each qualitative event.

4.2 Right size the mix of skills on the ET.

4.3 Follow guidelines for informed consent and data protection, minimizing the collection of and access to raw or identifiable data.

4.4 Encourage teams to follow good practices for note-taking.

4.5 Absent extenuating political or security circumstances, practice the regular recording of qualitative events if consent is given and recording is unlikely to undermine frank responses.

4.6 Select Learning Partner (LP) staff should have access to all of their team's qualitative data and provide regular quality oversight.

C5: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

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C5: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS CHALLENGES

- ETs may not employ systematic analysis methods to arrive at findings, potentially biasing findings.
- Analysis methods used are not documented to an extent that allows the reader to understand how findings were derived or to facilitate replicability.

Obstacles

- Teams may lack the time, budget, or skills to devise and execute a systematic process.
- The approach may be too ambitious to be completed within evaluation constraints.
- An appropriate analysis process depends on the amount and type of data collected through the evaluation.

C5: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS GUIDANCE

5.1 Employ a documented systematic approach for arriving at findings from all data sources, including, at a minimum, structured thematic or content analysis for qualitative data.

5.2 Systematic analysis of qualitative data in PEs will most often be facilitated by first coding what was discussed into coherent categories.

5.3 Basic rapid analysis using manual thematic coding is sufficient in certain circumstances.

5.4 Some teams may want to pursue (and some Missions may request) coding using qualitative data analysis software.

C5: QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS GUIDANCE (cont.)

5.5 LPs and team leads should provide leadership and oversight throughout the evaluation to ensure that the analysis plan is carried out faithfully.

5.6 Evaluations should be adequately budgeted and staffed to support systematic analysis.

5.7 AI is an emerging tool that, with caution, could be used to speed up the coding process or help uncover hidden themes.

5.8 Combine systematic analysis of qualitative data with other sources (e.g., desk review, surveys, activity monitoring, evaluation and learning plan data, and other secondary data) to triangulate findings.

C6: EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT FOR STATEMENTS

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C6: EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT CHALLENGES

- Appears anecdotal and unconvincing.
- Failure to convey how common or generalizable a presented sentiment is.
- Vague statements like "Interviews suggest."
- Findings not clearly linked to data sources.

Obstacles

- Lack of consensus on what is acceptable.
- Users with a preference for quantified qualitative data.
- Problematic evaluation questions.

C6: EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT GUIDANCE

6.1 Quantify qualitative data only when using highly structured instruments on a large sample.

6.2 The source of evidence should be cited in a way that provides basic information about the source while still maintaining confidentiality.

6.3 Findings must be based on multiple data points.

6.4 Organize reports by findings—not by data source.

6.5 Discuss expectations about the extent and style of evidentiary support early in the evaluation process—don't wait until after submitting a draft.

C6: EVIDENTIARY SUPPORT GUIDANCE cont.

6.6 Take additional steps to proactively build user confidence in the study findings and ensure their utility.

6.7 Be transparent in the level of confidence in findings.

Finding 1.1 Commissioners often want to know the answers to EQs that cannot be answered effectively through a traditional PE

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C7: CLARITY OF FINDINGS TO FACILITATE USE

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C7: CLARITY OF FINDINGS CHALLENGES

- Long, dense, text-heavy, and complex reports.
- Reports are not well read.
- Writing does not facilitate action/use.

Obstacles

- Broad scopes and questions.
- Academically inspired rather than management consultant inspired.
- Incentives to include everything.

C7: CLARITY OF FINDINGS GUIDANCE

7.1 Provide a summary of the question response at the outset.

7.2 Use bolded topic sentences summarizing findings followed by supporting evidence.

7.3 Use visualizations to summarize qualitative information.

FIGURE: RESEARCH DESIGN

Desk Review

Review of key documents including CM quarterly and annual reports, performance monitoring plans, and data gathered by CM.

Quantitative Approach

Computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) administered in 66 LPAs with 361 total responses.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs with LPA staff from 16 LPAs, USAID staff, IREX staff, other donor organizations working in local governance, and GoM. 55 interviews completed.

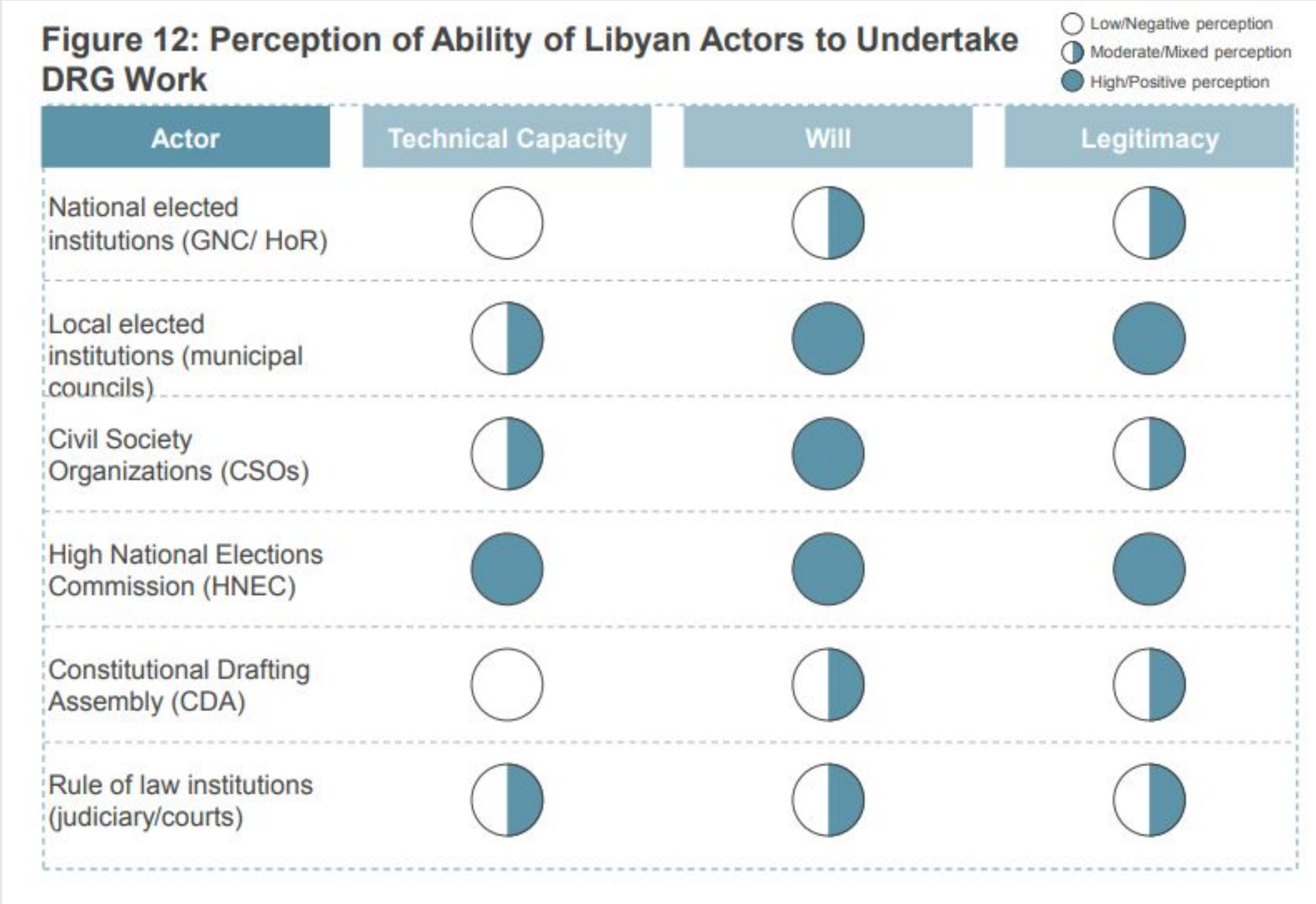
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

10 FGDs with CSOs or community groups and 30 with active and non-active citizens selected from 15 LPAs (six LPAs from Cohort 1, five LPAs from Cohort 2, and four LPAs from Cohort 3.)

CISC Observational Data

Observational data collected at 6 Citizen Information Service Centers (CISCs) using a user survey, observation checklist, and CISC operator questions.

Source: Nayyar-Stone et al. (2022) *Comunitatea Mea Mid-Term Performance Evaluation*. USAID.



Wichmann et al. (2016) Mid-Term Evaluation of DRG Programming in Libya and Results from a National and Urban DRG Survey. USAID.

C7: CLARITY OF FINDINGS GUIDANCE

7.4 Shift much of the methodology explanation to an annex.

7.5 Conclusions sections should identify implications for decision-making and where actions need to be taken.

7.6 Implement processes to ensure a well-written report, including a robust internal review process aided by a checklist.

7.7 Develop complementary products that go beyond the report, including targeted briefs, infographics, slides, presentations, videos, or podcasts.

GUIDANCE FOR STUDY COMMISSIONERS

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- Plan, plan, plan
- Compile information ahead of time
- Use scopes of work to require or encourage guidance
- Get your questions right

GUIDANCE FOR STUDY COMMISSIONERS

Check your biases

Don’t expect raw data to be shared

Discuss expectations around the final report

Plan for dissemination and utilization

THANK YOU!

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