Transitioning from Face-to-Face to Remote Capacity Sharing with 15 Cohort Members in Afghanistan

Motivation for the study

Since the Taliban takeover in 2021, the adaptability and resilience of organizations working on the ground in Afghanistan has been tested immensely. The Women's Voice and Leadership in Humanitarian Settings (WHS) program, led in-country by Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF) and Afghanistan Youth National Development and Social Organization (AYNDSO), stands as a beacon of hope amidst these changes. It seeks to amplify the voices of women and ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it most. For women-led organizations (WLOs) participating in this program, emerging restrictions have posed not just operational but existential threats. These constraints have intensified the urgency to rethink traditional face-to-face program approaches, prompting a shift towards remote work on capacity sharing.

This case study documents the program's transition to remote capacity sharing – the hurdles faced, the solutions employed, and the outcomes achieved. In doing so, the study hopes to offer valuable insights, not just for Afghanistan but for any region where civil society faces restrictions that necessitate a rapid digital transformation. This work demonstrates the enduring spirit of community organizations and that, in an increasingly connected digital age, barriers can be transformed into opportunities.

Bibi Madina Maruf, HSNP Director

"Shifting our project activities online has been a journey of adaptation and resilience. It allowed us to overcome unprecedented barriers and ensured that our voice and our mission were not stifled by the limitations imposed on us."

Adaptation Strategies

Moving program implementation online involved meticulous planning and targeted interventions to ensure continuity and relevance. Specific modifications, such as issuing laptops to cohort members, were instrumental in bridging the digital divide and facilitating a smoother transition to new platforms. This decision was not limited to the provision of a new tool, but was a conscious effort to familiarize participating WLOs with this technology, enabling them to harness it in effectively achieving the program's objectives.

The use of Zoom for meetings became a pivotal adaptation, ensuring that dialogues,

and capacity sharing efforts continued unhindered. This platform was chosen for its accessibility and security, providing a conducive environment for communication. Moreover, regular phone calls replaced individual visits, allowing for personalized interactions and ensuring that individual needs and concerns were addressed. These adaptations ensured that the transition did not compromise the quality of interactions.

The impact of these adaptations extends beyond enhanced digital literacy. By institutionalizing online methods into their regular operations, WLOs can leverage diverse stakeholder relationships, fostering robust global connections and achieving broader humanitarian goals. This impact will continue beyond the program, and fits in a larger framework of resilience, ensuring that the voices of those who need to be heard will be elevated to global decision-making spaces.

Challenges

The abrupt shift to online platforms posed several challenges, including technical issues that inhibited meaningful digital interactions (such as internet connectivity issues, use of different online applications, and power outages). In response, WCLRF and AYNDSO continuously sought to refine and adapt their strategies. The initial lack of digital literacy and connectivity issues required WCLRF and AYNDSO to provide digital literacy training at flexible times, when internet connections were strongest.

Impact

The impact of the transition to online platforms has been profound. It has not only enhanced WLOs' digital literacy and networking capabilities, but also ensured that the program's momentum was maintained. As a result, WLO voices will reach humanitarian decision-makers.

Conclusion

Transitioning from traditional face-to-face engagement to remote capacity sharing in a complex environment like Afghanistan has been both enlightening and challenging. Through this case study, several key learnings have emerged.

First and foremost, the adaptability of WLOs in the face of challenging circumstances is commendable. In a scenario where external factors forced an abrupt change in operational strategies, the ability to quickly adapt to a digital approach ensured that the program's momentum was maintained.

Resilience was not just demonstrated in WLOs' ability to pivot to a new working model, but also in their tenacity to face and overcome the inherent challenges of this new model. From technological issues, to ensuring meaningful digital interactions, the journey was filled with obstacles. Yet, the commitment and effort of WLOs to refine strategies made a difference.

Continuous feedback has been the cornerstone of this transition. By actively seeking, valuing, and incorporating feedback from participating WLOs, WCLRF ensured that the remote capacity sharing interventions were not top-down directives, but were shaped by the WLOs they aimed to assist. This feedback loop both enhanced the relevance of interventions and fostered a sense of ownership among WLOs.

In sum, while humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan and other challenging contexts may be riddled with unpredictability, the success of programs like WHS hinges on the trifecta of **adaptability, resilience, and continuous feedback**. This ensures that even in the face of adversity, the voices that need to be heard don't fade into silence but resonate loud and clear.

Recommendations

- Encourage robust online infrastructure development in target areas.
- Ensure regular technological support and digital literacy trainings for WLOs.
- Advocate for flexible funding mechanisms that consider the unique challenges faced by WLOs in areas with restrictions.
- Explore replicating this model in other countries facing similar challenges.