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# Annual Learning Forum 2020

TECHNICAL REPORT

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# Annual Learning Forum 2020

## Technical Report

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# Executive Summary

This report reflects on the planning, preparation and support that went into organizing and producing the Annual Learning Forum (ALF) 2020. In addition, this report calls out lessons learned and good practices that should be carried forward for future ALFs and makes recommendations for improvements. Policy LINK gathered these reflections through a series of After-Action Reviews (AARs) conducted with delegates, speakers, and the organizers of the ALF.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

On April 14 and 15, 2021, the Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR) held the 3rd Annual Learning Forum (ALF 2020). The event was originally scheduled to occur in 2020, but it was delayed until April 2021 due to COVID-19 restrictions and delays. As a result, the organizers modified the event's format from a large in-person event to a smaller virtual event to stay compliant with strict COVID-19 protocols. Facilitators and speakers took part in half-day sessions divided over two days. Participants from the four partnership areas (Aweil, Torit, Wau and Yambio) attended the event in central locations within their communities to ensure consistent internet connectivity. These community-based gatherings remained small, and the organizers followed all COVID-19 protocols. All other participants and speakers attended virtually.

The PfRR Task Force in Juba provided technical oversight and played a critical role in organizing the entire process. Preparation for the ALF required regular meetings, which were chaired according to specific agendas, highly inclusive, and were focused and constructive in their tone. The organizers achieved this process by applying the four principles: do the right thing, do things right, leave the door open and forge ahead.

By following this process, the Task Force built trust, confidence and rapport: trust by always taking the high road; confidence by always standing firm, resolute and delivering on what we had to; and rapport, because that is the natural sentiment that developed within the team as people cooperated.

## After-Action Reviews

Following the ALF 2020, Policy LINK facilitated a series of After-Action Reviews (AARs) with ARG and CEC/UC members, delegates, and speakers from each of the four partnership areas, as well as the facilitators and Policy LINK staff who supported the event. A total of more than 70 people participated in the AARs held with each PA.

An AAR is an assessment conducted after a project or major activity that allows team members and leaders to learn what happened and why, reassess direction, and review both successes and challenges. The AAR reviews the tasks and goals of the activity. It evaluates whether those tasks and goals were effective after implementing the activity. Hence the AAR serves as a tool that can potentially redefine goals or future tasks. The AAR also identifies the next steps or action items towards meeting these goals after the activity has finished. It is not a critique. It does not judge success or failure. Instead, it attempts to discover why things happened. It focuses directly on the intended tasks and goals. It encourages team members to surface important lessons in the discussion. Finally, it helps ensure that lessons learned are shared and incorporated into the project or subsequent activities.

The following sections summarize the reflections and lessons learned from the AARs and provide recommendations for future ALFs.

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<sup>1</sup> The organizers of the ALF included primary funders: the South Sudan NGO Forum and the UN Resident Coordinators Office (RCO); other funders: The Feed the Future Policy Leadership, Interactions, Networks, and Knowledge (Policy LINK) project; and organizing partners: the Task Force, chaired by the Dutch Embassy; the Organizing Committee; the RCO, the CECs, and ARGs.

# Reflections and Lessons Learned

## Pre-planning and Preparation

The organizers of the ALF put significant thought and effort toward pre-ALF planning and preparation. Coordination through a focal point with Aweil began in January. During the Aweil After-Action Review (AAR), participants noted that the steps leading to the ALF, such as community mapping, the town hall sense-making exercise, and face-to-face workshops, as well as the delegates' orientation workshop, were all well organized and contributed to the overall success of the ALF.

During the delegates' orientation, the organizers prepared the delegates from each Partnership Area (PA) to present their resilience stories and their community's priorities. This orientation was held over two days and included intensive rehearsal sessions for the delegates. The orientation and preparation helped empower the delegates and built their confidence for participation in the ALF 2020. (Wau) Although the delegates' orientation was an important preparatory step, The Wau AAR participants noted that the orientation was hectic and took two full working days, which affected the office work of the government officials and CSO staff, including private-sector workers.

Participants in the Aweil AAR also noted that the process and selection of the community delegates were transparent. The pre-ALF workshop helped prepare the community keynote speakers and the community delegates.

The pre-ALF sessions were a good practice and helped the PAs to prepare better. However, the Torit AAR participants mentioned that many abrupt meetings were scheduled along the process, which was an inconvenience for some.

## Community Engagement and Participation

One of the recommendations that came out of the ALF 2019 was to incorporate more voices from the community. The organizers took this advice to heart and worked closely with the communities throughout the planning, preparation, and implementation of the ALF 2020.

The Wau participants credited the ALF with enabling delegates from the four PAs to interact and share their challenges/shocks and understand the respective main priorities of each community. In so doing, it led to a realization that although there are some differences, almost all the four PAs face similar challenges like economic crises, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, SGBV, etc.

The Yambio AAR participants noted the engagement of the community allowed for genuine grassroots-led dialogues in the lead up to and during the ALF.

As the Aweil AAR participants noted, the selection of the community delegates was transparent and well-conceived. Furthermore, the Wau AAR participants pointed out that the selected community delegates represented the four corners of the community, which led to diversity and inclusive analysis, and choice of priorities that have cross-cutting impacts on the community. In addition, the Aweil participants commended the organizers for achieving gender sensitivity and inclusivity, with 40% of the delegates being female. (Aweil)

It was also notable that the Governor of Western Bahr El Ghazal State participated in the ALF. According to the Wau participants, this boosted morale and demonstrated convergence between the PfRR and the Government. In addition, the Governor's office secretary participated in the pre-planning events, which helped keep the Governor informed and demonstrated the Government's commitment to the PfRR.

Wau participants also noted that the inclusion of the private sector in all the activities from the start, including the town halls, face-to-face sessions, delegates' orientation, and the ALF itself, was the first of its kind and acknowledged the private sector's role in the community.

According to the Policy LINK team, the ALF highlighted that community members are also contributors to change—the commitments made by the community during the ALF made it clear that they are willing to



work on things within their reach. Therefore, it is important to change the narrative that the communities are only recipients.

Although the facilitation team took measures to ensure participation from the communities during the ALF (such as utilizing the chatbox, setting up designated times for participant discussion, keeping the meeting open for an hour after the event each day, distributing an evaluation survey, and posting a feedback form on the ALF website), time constraints limited some active participation from the field.

## The Partnership

During the planning of this ALF, the organizers worked especially hard to engage with the Area Reference Groups (ARGs) across the four PAs. The Policy LINK Area Program Manager (APM) assumed the lead role in each PA to help coordinate all aspects of the plan. The ARGs fully supported and provided critical feedback. At times, APMs and ARGs made decisions together. The relationship between the ARGs and the APMs in the field is a key area of learning to root and ground future ALFs if they too are to be community-driven like the ALF 2020.

Wau AAR participants credited the engagement with key stakeholders and efforts to ensure stakeholder inclusiveness with better overall buy-in. There was collaboration and cooperation between the ARG, Policy LINK, CEC-UCs and the delegates throughout the planning and implementation of the delegates' orientation, rehearsals and the ALF event. (Wau) The participants of the Yambio AAR noted that the involvement of the ARG representative in the event planning allowed for increased representation. Furthermore, they noted that the teamwork, commitment, collaboration, and cooperation of the Yambio ARG, especially the leads, allowed for synergies that contributed to the successful hosting of the event. (Yambio)

The Torit AAR participants noted that coordination with Juba was improved with this year's ALF. They appreciated that the ALF program was shared in good time, and participants knew in advance what their role would be and what questions they needed to prepare for. Likewise, the Aweil AAR participants felt that Information sharing among the PfRR partners was well done.

Although coordination was improved and information was shared among the PfRR partners, the Policy LINK team noted that only DFID and USAID donors were visible while the European donors did not have a significant presence in the event. Despite early preparations for the event, there was not adequate time to ensure that everyone was on board.

## Event Logistics

COVID-19 restrictions posed a challenge to the planning and implementation of the ALF 2020. The restrictions prevented wider community participation and delayed the preparation and implementation of the ALF event. After multiple delays, the Task Force decided to shift from an in-person to a hybrid virtual format. Although most participants joined from their computers in their office or home, the community delegates and representatives from each PA gathered in one location per PA to participate via a computer with internet access. In most cases, the partners procured a hotel meeting space for this purpose. The event took place over two days, with sessions limited to three hours per day and held in the afternoon. Participants from the Wau AAR felt that the three hours per day allocated for the ALF event was not enough for the presentations, panel discussions and analysis by the participants. They suggested that at least two full days would have made a big difference.

The coordination of resources was identified as a challenge as well. The AAR participants from Aweil, Torit and Yambio, who joined the ALF from a hotel location, mentioned the delayed arrival of banners and visibility materials. In most cases, these materials arrived the day after the event. In Torit, the items were flown to the State, but no one was informed. The items were dropped at the airport, and no one was responsible for picking them up. In addition, the Yambio AAR participants noted that the procurement for the event space was only completed the day before the event, and there were still unsettled allowances at the time the AAR was conducted.

In the future, the partners will need to have a greater appreciation of and improved planning around the individual procurement, financial, administrative, and logistical processes of each partner committing support to the event.

The Yambio participants also noted that the photos in the orientation materials used during the delegates' orientation did not reflect the community. In the future, advocacy materials should include photos that reflect the target audience. The use of location-specific photos allows members to see themselves in ALF materials.

## Event Technology and Production

Policy LINK successfully deployed a technology platform to support a virtual meeting as a digital overlay to four physical meetings in South Sudan, bringing a global audience interface with local communities. The technical overlay required the production team to share responsibilities and focus on key performance areas that, if mastered, represent the ideal technique for Policy LINK support to such events. By learning about the technical details involved, we can push the technical bar higher each year.

When it comes to production quality, Zoom served the purpose. However, it is worthwhile to have a Zoom account that includes the webinar feature so that not all participants are seen at once, and so that people can focus on those panelists who are talking, because that became such an important emerging feature of the agenda design.

With the transition to a mostly virtual-based platform, the participants and the event facilitators experienced several challenges.

Some of the challenges were related to language and translation. In Yambio, non-English speaking delegates found it difficult to follow the presentations and discussions due to challenges with understanding speakers with "heavy western" accents and the delays in translation. In Aweil, the language barrier was also a challenge, specifically to Dinka and Lou speakers. Aweil participants also noted that the variation of accents posed a challenge for many participants, including those who speak English but are not familiar with different accents, such as British accents. The organizers had intended to translate the discussion into the local language (Arabic). However, the organizers decided not to use translators because of worries about poor internet connectivity affecting the quality of the translation and not having enough time to accommodate the additional time necessary for translation.

The participants in Yambio and Aweil also noted challenges with poor audio. For example, questions that the facilitator verbally posed to the delegates in Yambio were not audibly clear during the moderated sessions. In Aweil, the ICT infrastructure at the hotel was of low capacity, which created moments when it was hard to hear the speakers. In addition, the quality of the audio equipment was poor, and it created an echo in the hall, which negatively impacted effective participation and listening.

In Torit, due to the last-minute internet solutions, the PA ended up connecting via mobile hotspot, which brought additional connection challenges. As a result, it affected the PA's participation during the forum, especially on day two when the connection was very unstable.

The production team experienced IT challenges as well, including slow internet. The mute function was centralized to control external noise. Centralization of the mute function meant that there was sometimes a delay in unmuting speakers, which interrupted the flow of the discussion.

The pre-recording of the panel participants session was a good practice, especially with the connection challenges some PAs faced, such as Torit. However, although the pre-recorded sessions were noted as a best practice, some recordings were of lower audio quality, which distorted the sound during the playback.

Despite these technology challenges, the virtual ALF was considered a success. The successful implementation of the ALF proves that partners can conduct virtual meetings without coming together in person. The Aweil AAR participants noted that online meetings could be cost-effective and have the potential of scaling up participation and minimizing the time lost during travel to and from meeting locations.

## Forum Management and Content

In reflecting on the content and management of the forum, the Policy LINK team noted that too many speakers were allocated for the opening session. The Policy LINK team also noted that the session on Cost-Benefit Analysis was not customized for community participants and was too technical for the broad audience.

The Torit AAR participants felt that engagement with the PAs and the content presented during the forum was a challenge due to time constraints. The PAs sent questions in the chat; however, most of them were not addressed due to time constraints. In addition, the Torit PA felt left out, especially during the Reinforcing Resilience Capacity through Community-led Programming session. Questions during this session were only directed to Yambio, Aweil and Wau. The moderator did not engage the Torit PA on this topic.

Nearly all of the AAR participants noted that the forum ended with a lot of ambiguity on the next steps post-ALF. The forum finished lacking the commitment from donors, partners and delegates. There was no clear messaging to motivate the taking up of the Partnership. While the PAs will have their own action points following the forum, it was still vital to have an overall sense of direction from the Juba level as the forum ended. Most of the participants were keen to be informed on donor commitment or an advocacy plan for resource mobilization towards the priorities identified for each of the PAs. However, there was no major statement in terms of donor commitment made by the donor community.

## Recommendations

### Pre-planning and Preparation

All AAR participants agreed that the pre-planning process was a great benefit to the ALF and should be continued. Participants shared suggestions to improve the process for the next ALF further:

- The delegates' orientation, in particular, was seen as an important step and should be continued for future ALFs.
- Actual interaction with presenters should start earlier to provide the opportunity for more interaction.
- Presentations with technical content should be presented as part of the Pre-ALF activities.
- A dry run with all the presenters should be held to ensure they are well versed in the virtual platform.
- There is a need to ensure that future PfRR events in the State consider gender representation seriously, including the deliberate targeting of people living with a disability.
- Start the planning and engagement process earlier (stakeholder engagement takes time, as do resource commitments).
- Consideration should be given for standard operating procedures (SOP) to be developed for the yearly ALF. This would ensure efficiency in preparations for all partnership areas and better coordination with Juba.

### Community Engagement and Participation

Although some key Government directorates participated in the ALF event, the Wau participants recommended that the Partnership invite more Government line ministries in the future, as the Government plays an important role in leading resilience and recovery initiatives in the State.

The Wau participants also suggested that the PfRR create a database for maintaining a participants' list for PfRR activities in the State, including the names, contacts and institutions so that it would be easier to reach out to the participants.



## Support to PAs for Follow-up and Next Steps

AAR participants noted a need for ongoing support from the Partnership to help the PAs with follow-up activities and next steps to achieve the community priorities highlighted during the forum. In addition, the Yambio participants suggested establishing a feedback mechanism to help community delegates report back to their communities.

The Yambio AAR participants suggested the following:

- Radio shows with clear messaging on what to expect after the PfRR, as well as current and past activities on recovery and resilience building;
- Community-based engagements on the PfRR with partners;
- Advocacy for partners to identify the recovery and resilience projects, so communities are aware that these activities are taking place.

The Aweil AAR participants also proposed using community radio—in coordination with the State Government—as a platform through which the partners can communicate ALF and PfRR activity feedback. Using live radio talk shows (such as Warbey, Akol Yam and Nhomlou community radios) for community feedback will be crucial to support and to get wider community buy-in.

The Aweil participants also noted that the community delegates need to be empowered to give feedback to the community on the ALF recommendations and the role of the community in the PfRR. In addition, all PfRR stakeholders should think of ways to support the community delegates to take the message back to their communities.

## The Partnership

The AAR participants from the PAs shared many suggestions related to the Partnership and the next steps the Partners can take to support the communities.

Wau participants recommended jointly developing the work plan for PfRR in the State to keep the ALF momentum going. However, before that, all the sector heads from both UN Agencies and INGOs need to be sensitized on convergence and the need for collaboration moving forward.

Yambio participants suggested identifying priority activities to ride on the momentum generated by the event, manage expectations and improve the Partnership. Some of those suggested activities include:

- Map recovery and resilience activities vis-à-vis community priorities as well as identify convergence points.
- Revival of the Partners' Forum as a platform to seamlessly bridge humanitarian-development activities.
- Orientation session of new ministers, director generals and commissioners on the PfRR.
- Capacity building- soft and technical skills and resource-wise- of local level structures such as CDCs.

Aweil participants also suggested specific activities the Partnership can take to continue the momentum built during the ALF:

- Formation of Inclusive Champions Groups (ICG) is needed to complement the PfRR in the State.
- Formation of the State PfRR Coordination Office (SCO).
- Formation of the Community Development Committees (CDCs) at the county, Payam and Boma levels.

The Wau participants also noted that Policy LINK demonstrated their technical capacity to support the ARGs and the community in moving the PfRR agenda forward in the State. Therefore, they recommend that Policy LINK continue engaging with the ARG in upcoming PfRR activities in the State. In addition, Aweil participants recommended that regular Area Reference Group (ARG) meetings take place in the future.

## Event Logistics

Given the challenges with event materials, the Aweil and Torit participants recommend organizing resources and procuring visibility materials well in advance to ensure they arrive early before any PfRR activities are held and prevent the stress experienced on the ground.

The Yambio participants also request that the advocacy and visibility materials are tailored to the local settings, i.e., ensuring ethnic and cultural representation of PAs in the visual materials.

While travel and convening might still be difficult due to the current COVID-19 circumstances, the Torit PA recommends that a smaller group of participants (even if just three people) physically convene to represent the states during the next ALF while the rest participate virtually. This will allow for the PAs to be better represented and engaged. Furthermore, it will allow the different PAs to network and share experiences, which was not possible during the virtual ALF.

## Event Technology and Production

To reduce the challenges with internet connectivity, the Aweil participants suggested using partners' ICT resources and meeting spaces, such as UNMISS meeting spaces, for the next ALF if it will be virtual again.

The Torit participants, who experienced internet connectivity problems during the ALF, suggested that support be rendered with service providers like MTN to ensure good connection and participation from the PAs at the next ALF.

Another suggestion to improve the PAs' ability to participate was the idea of projecting questions on the screen for all to see during moderated discussions. Visually displaying the questions would help with clarity.

The organizers should consider real-time translation services that can integrate with the webinar platform through closed captions. This would enable more community members to participate in the discussion sessions.

Control of the mute function can make or break the audience experience. Short delays in unmuting create unnecessary anxieties within the audience, who may be wondering, "what is going on?" While it is good practice not to allow random participants to mute and unmute, speakers should be able to unmute themselves easily. It was also recommended that a script be provided to the production team beforehand to ensure that speakers are not on mute during their presentation.

Troubleshooting with the facilitation team is a dedicated function and needs to be specifically assigned. For example, what happens when there are uncomfortable pauses, somebody needs to be unmuted, or we can no longer make out what a contributor is saying due to bandwidth problems? Someone must decide how to proceed with the agenda, wait, clarify to the audience what is happening, use this channel or that channel, or give an instruction—these are all troubleshooting functions. WhatsApp groups were a successful tool to support the back-end support infrastructure and production team, and other functions.

The slide deck is the central public-facing interface that connects everybody during a virtual event, including facilitators, presenters, moderators, panelists and the audience. Therefore, it is essential to ensure the slide deck is synced, every single slide is impeccable with no mistakes, and slides change smoothly if the agenda is changed.

The pre-recording of contributions was a key innovation that should be maintained and used when appropriate. Seamless transition between the speakers and the live sessions, and the effective use of pre-recorded video, is a dedicated function that links to the slide deck. All pieces should come together as many days in advance as possible so that the technical production team has time to do quality checks and controls.

The panel discussions allowed for maximum community and IP participation from the field and Juba. All four corners of the community in all four areas and a diversity of international partners, all with equal voice given, had the opportunity to contribute. The panel format is key, and within that, the function of the moderator. The moderator has to be keen, fluent, eloquent and conversant in the issues. Back-end support channels for the moderators are necessary, and for this, Google Docs and WhatsApp worked well.

Dedicated back-end support functions include:

- Monitoring the chat
- Copying and pasting into the Google Doc
- Separating the comments and the questions
- Editing and prioritizing the questions.
- Summarizing the comments for different purposes, and
- Passing the relevant questions to the moderators.

## Forum Management and Content

Concerning the content and program, the Policy LINK team proposed that more time be allocated for moderated discussions so that more community voices can be heard instead of having only the elected presenters talk.

For future ALFs, clear next steps need to be identified and elaborated before the event closes to ensure participants and the PAs leave with a sense of direction and momentum is sustained.

## Conclusion

The unique virtual format of the ALF 2020 provided a lot of room for learning. Although there were some challenges due to this format, there were also benefits, such as increased participation due to the flexible format and lack of travel required. However, given the continuing challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unlikely that COVID-19 travel and gathering restrictions will be lifted in time for the ALF 2021. For this reason, it would be wise to plan for another virtual ALF.

In planning for another virtual event, the organizers should ensure that appropriate technology platforms are available. For instance, the organizers should obtain a Zoom Webinar license instead of a basic Zoom meeting license. The Zoom webinar option provides a much smoother production experience, allowing for easy muting and unmuting of participants and speakers. The organizers should also plan for real-time translation into the local language. Incorporating translation will require hiring translators, enabling translation through closed captioning, and building additional time into the agenda to accommodate translated discussions. To accommodate more time for discussion, the organizers could hold the event in longer blocks (four to five hours) each day, or the event could be split up over three to four days with shorter sessions each day. In addition, to support the participation of community members, the organizers should secure event space with reliable internet connectivity for local delegates and speakers. One recommendation was to utilize partners' offices and meeting spaces, which tend to have reliable technology and internet.

Lastly, if the Partnership desires to have an ALF in 2021, it must immediately start planning as there are less than six months left in 2021. As the planning for ALF 2020 demonstrated, having pre-ALF meetings and events is critical to community inclusion and overall success, but this takes time. Future ALF planning should duplicate the pre-ALF process, including the delegates' orientation and pre-ALF meetings with the communities.