Introductory Meeting with Counterpart International

20 May 2016, Niamey

Participants

Lisa Mueller, Macalester College

Krista Desgranges, USAID

Abdourahamane Hassane, USAID

Mary Margaret Dineen, CI

Ousmane Camara, CI

Lucie Amadou, CI

Bachirou Ayouba Tinni, University of Niamey

Agenda: Introductions, sharing of work plan ideas, observation of Bachir for field coordinator position

Minutes

* USAID awarded a contract to CI on 25 February. So far, CI has established offices near the U.S. Embassy and begun hiring approximately 23 staff members. Mary Margaret and Ousmane are the only Niger-based staff for the time being. Lucie (who is originally from Niger) is visiting for two weeks from CI’s Arlington office.
* There is a deadline of 15 June for CI to deliver a work plan to USAID. CI in Niamey will write this in collaboration with the E-learning team at CI in Arlington. The work plan may be revised after the deadline, although CI aims to roll out the project ASAP this summer. CI has already prepared a “rapid work plan” (which I interpreted as a preliminary draft) but is not able to share it until receiving USAID’s feedback. USAID will be in Dakar next week, which has slowed that process.
* CI initially hoped interventions would happen before the presidential and legislative elections, but delays in finalizing CI’s contract prevented that. The local elections, originally scheduled for 9 May, have been pushed back to 8 January. This presents the opportunity to study elections, after all. The timeline is still very short, however, given the limited progress on the work plan.
* Outcomes of interest—as specified in the Project Description that CI shared with us on 31 March—include the following: 1) elections and political party platforms are more responsive to priority public needs; 2) informed multistakeholder contribution to specific elements of reform implementation for targeted citizen priorities (i.e. accountability); and 3) increased capacity of key actors to promote collective action. CI says they are open to adding other priorities.
* CI will collaborate very closely with PRG-PP (the Political Parties team). It sounds like we should consider them equal partners in all operations. I met with PRG-PP in January and will try to do so again next week, although that may be difficult with key USAID personnel out of town.
* The Project Description is extremely complicated, involving proposed activities ranging from government report cards to SMS campaigns to participatory theatre. I was therefore interested in ascertaining CI’s primary activities. CI emphasized community dialogues “at either the commune or town level.” I pressed them on which level is more likely, as this will have implications for our design. They said they are not sure. I view this ambiguity as an opportunity for us, but we would need to communicate our preferences ASAP given the 15 June work plan deadline. I also wonder whether it is worth trying to randomize any of the other activities mentioned in the Project Description.
* A mapping exercise is underway to determine who is currently involved in decision making, where there are blockages in communication between citizens and government, and who are the champions and allies with whom CI can partner. CI also mentioned that USAID is eager to target marginalized regions. This prompted me to ask whether CI plans to target dialogues at only allies or marginalized regions. They said they are not sure yet but are open to selection criteria that include “some mix of promise and need.”
* CI is sensitive to security risks, which may limit the enumeration areas. I had a separate meeting with an analyst from International Crisis Group, who offered to connect me with people who are tuned into security risks.
* Abdourahamane, who has a background in statistics and seems to understand and support our emphasis on randomization, interjected several times to back me up. This was helpful, because I was afraid of sounding like a broken record each time I raised a question about targeting interventions. I learned that Krista is leaving the Niger mission for Mali next year, making Abdourahamane our main contact at USAID. I think Abdourahamane’s leadership will aid the success of an RCT. I held off on making technical recommendations for lotteries, delayed rollout, etc. until after Tuesday’s mini-course on experiments. I think such a conversation will be more fruitful once everyone has a common working vocabulary.
* Other aspects of the project that CI highlighted include: 1) helping local actors translate their specific needs into priorities that resonate at the national level (although CI said they want to stress health and education); 2) eventually “working their way up” to the national level, which I understood to involve training members of government on how to be responsive. In other words, CI’s long-term targets will be on both the demand side and supply side of accountability. Despite starting at the local level, CI plans to immediately initiate meetings with national-level actors. There is also talk of inviting national media to cover community dialogues, which raises concerns about spillover.
* I re-read the Project Description, and the number of moving parts is overwhelming. I am struggling to envision how the project will unfold and hope that the work plan will clarify. It sounds like CI is open to our input on the work plan.
* Here is what CI requests from us:
  + Write a supplement to our old PD outlining specifics of randomization that have arisen in recent discussions, e.g. screening, lotteries, and delayed rollout. I believe it is important to produce this supplement before Friday when I will meet with CI for the last time during this trip. By then, CI will have had a mini course on experiments and will understand our jargon.
  + Define the roles for CI and the field coordinator. How will they work together?
  + Specify the indicators and measurement tools interest us. Please refer to the Project Description. Proposed indicators included “50% of party platforms in local elections reflect the priorities identified in the citizen dialogues” and “75% of survey respondents report perception that they are promoting collective action.” There were several others. I am not sure how CI decided on specific percentages, but changing those benchmarks would presumably not change the survey instruments.
  + Clarify how often we hope to collect data, and how this will involve the NORC-affiliated survey firm. CI is uncertain about how long they will work with each CSO. What will be our evaluation plan if CI ends a partnership with a CSO after six months? Will we still be able to collect useful data? Can we write contingency plans into the work plan to collect data at time intervals that adapt to CI’s operations? Sounds messy. Please advise.
  + Schedule future check-ins. USAID and CI ask: When will Ariel and Phil visit Niger? Can AidData join a Skype meeting on Tuesday or Friday?

Assessment of Bachir

* Strengths
  + Bachir performed well at the meeting. He did not hesitate to interrupt when he was lost during discussions in English. This signaled that he cared about understanding the details of the meeting; it would have been easier for him to pretend that he understood and then BS later. We switched to French, which allowed Bachir to participate fully. He volunteered his relevant experience. For example, CI is eager to help local actors communicate needs to national-level actors. Bachir connected this goal to his efforts with Handicap International to translate the needs of school children with disabilities into a national campaign to retrofit schools for accessibility.
  + I have read Bachir’s summary of the meeting (attached), which essentially echoes mine (minus the notes about randomization).
  + Bachir seemed at ease and professional. He did not participate constantly, but his comments were insightful when he made them.
  + I vaguely recall someone at the meeting mentioning that CI does not have experience in Diffa and that Bachir could facilitate work there as a Nigerien native. I maintain that Bachir’s ability to speak local languages and fluent French are advantages that we should not overlook.
  + Bachir lives in Niamey, so we would not have to pay to relocate him. I could train him next week and involve him in upcoming meetings with CI.
  + I had somehow missed that Bachir has published three articles based on his earlier field research. I am attaching one of those articles, which includes an abstract in English.
* Weaknesses
  + Bachir speaks very little English. However, the whole operation here is in French, so the only hurdle would be communicating with AidData. I welcome thoughts on how serious that hurdle is.
  + Bachir does not have a background in experiments, so I have not yet observed him “going to bat” for our interests. He was perfectly confident at the meeting, but people tend to be less confident when talking about technical subjects that are unfamiliar to them.
  + It would be extra work for me to train Bachir in experimental methods in French, but that is probably something I should force myself to do sooner or later.