Collaborating, Learning and Adapting at USAID

WHY CLA?

Collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) is USAID’s approach to becoming a more effective development organization by becoming a more effective learning organization. CLA acts as a force multiplier, making the Agency’s work better coordinated and more efficient. USAID’s Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) leads the initiative to operationalize CLA across the Agency.

Collaborating, learning and adapting:

➢ reduces duplication through coordinating efforts and sharing knowledge with other development actors
➢ improves the effectiveness of USAID’s development programs by grounding them in evidence and proven or promising practices
➢ enables adaptive course corrections during implementation to shorten the path to our goals and improve overall effectiveness
➢ facilitates country-led development and local investment in development initiatives

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Check us out at youtube.com/USAIDLearningLab

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UNDERSTANDING THE CLA FRAMEWORK

Although collaborating, learning and adapting are not new to USAID, they often do not happen systematically or intentionally, and are often not sufficiently resourced. The CLA Framework (below) identifies what approach to CLA might best be tailored to your organizational or project context. The Framework recognizes the diversity of what CLA can look like in various settings while also giving CLA structure, clarity and coherence. The two key dimensions of CLA are:

- **CLA in the Program Cycle**: How CLA is incorporated throughout USAID’s Program Cycle processes, including strategy, project, and activity design and implementation; and

- **Enabling Conditions**: How an organization’s culture, business processes and resource allocation support CLA integration.

Organizations need both programmatic and enabling CLA practices to be effective at managing adaptively. The Framework stresses the holistic and integrated nature of the various components of CLA to reinforce the principle that CLA is not a separate work stream—it should be integrated into existing processes to strengthen the discipline of development and improve aid effectiveness.

See the next page for examples of how USAID missions, operating units and implementing partners use a CLA approach.
CLA IN PRACTICE

Based on mission priorities, partner capacity, country contexts and other factors, USAID missions, operating units and implementing partners have developed a wide range of methods to strengthen their programs and operations through CLA practices. In September 2016, USAID updated its operational policy to require CLA in its programs, thereby solidifying its role in the Agency’s work. Prior to this, over 50 missions integrated CLA into their programming as an optional approach to their work. Below are examples of what CLA looks like in practice. Note that each case involves multiple components of the CLA Framework, but corresponds to the component that is most prominently featured.

**COLLABORATING:** USAID/Guatemala used a Broad Agency Announcement to identify opportunities for youth in Guatemala. By the end of a three-day workshop that brought together partners from seven different private sector companies and non-governmental organizations to discuss their ideas, the group developed a set of concept notes to propose to the USAID mission. The involvement of local organizations ensured the concepts are locally relevant. The mission will choose one to develop and implement.

**LEARNING:** USAID/Pakistan’s implementing partners experienced many common performance management problems and made various efforts to solve them; however, a lack of knowledge sharing among the partners led to duplicated efforts and wasted mission resources. After identifying this problem, the mission formed a learning platform which convened partners’ monitoring and evaluation staff quarterly to share experiences and ideas. The meetings were designed as an opportunity for knowledge sharing, and partners now see each other as a resource and do not rely on the mission only.

**ADAPTING:** When The Pragma Corporation, a USAID implementing partner, recognized early on that their Business Reform and Competitiveness Project in Tunisia was not going to have the intended impact on economic growth by focusing only on the number of job placements, they worked with their contracting officer to shift the project’s focus from the supply side to helping enterprises access existing market demand to achieve their project’s goal. As a result of this, the project generated roughly 10,000 jobs—more than doubling their initial target.

**CULTURE:** USAID/Uganda invested in an ever-evolving approach to developing the enabling environment for CLA at the mission and beyond. Through a series of inter-related, multi-format activities, the mission focused on individual, team and organizational effectiveness, specifically introducing methods to overcome the various counter-incentives to CLA, including organizational culture, incentives and capacity gaps. While it is still a work in progress, USAID/Uganda’s Mission of Leaders initiative has shown some important indicators of progress in enabling behaviors and practices that can serve to underscore, reinforce and otherwise support the Agency’s highest priority in operationalizing CLA: enhancing development outcomes.

**PROCESSES:** USAID’s Office of Food for Peace recognized a need to improve their requirements and guidance to facilitate stronger designs and more effective implementation by partners. To do this, they held a series of consultations with the implementing partner community to examine their annual request for development awards. The result was a Refine and Implement approach, piloted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which allows implementing partners to refine their theories of change and implementation planning to better respond to the opportunities and challenges in the local context.

**RESOURCES:** As part of their efforts to encourage a culture of experimentation and learning, the Development Innovations project managed by DAI Global, a USAID implementing partner, launched a “Second Chance Fund.” Seeking to capture important lessons that have been learned from failed information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) projects in Cambodia this grants fund was developed to provide applicants the opportunity to utilize the lessons they have learned from an unsuccessful ICT4D project or tool to develop a new approach to the same development problem.
CLA SUPPORT & RESOURCES

Policy Guidance

Building on existing practices throughout the Agency, USAID is integrating CLA into existing work processes and the operational culture. CLA is required throughout the Program Cycle—per the Automated Directives System (ADS) Chapter 201—but it is highly customizable to support priority programmatic needs and operational context, as each mission sees fit. And while the requirements are few, many missions go beyond them to develop a more holistic approach to CLA to improve their organizational effectiveness and development results.

CAPACITY BUILDING RESOURCES

CLA Self-Assessment & Action Planning Facilitation: PPL is available to facilitate the CLA Maturity Tool Self-Assessment and Action Planning process. This facilitated, participatory process using the CLA Framework helps teams identify priority aspects of their programs where better results can be achieved through more intentional, systematic, and properly resourced collaborating, learning and adapting.

CLA Technical Assistance: PPL also facilitates other CLA processes such as Scenario Planning, Mid-Course CDCS Stocktaking and CLA planning for Country and Regional Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS/RDCS) development, project and activity designs, performance monitoring plans (PMPs) and more.

CLA Toolkit: Accessible from both USAID Learning Lab and ProgramNet, the CLA Toolkit is a collection of curated tools, examples and other resources to help you plan and implement key Program Cycle activities related to CLA.

- Tools are clustered around topics such as: understanding CLA, engaging with stakeholders, planning for CLA, monitoring & evaluation for learning, learning agendas and CDCS stocktaking
- Searchable by the components of the USAID Program Cycle or the CLA Framework

The CLA Maturity Tool includes one key concept card and five stage cards for each subcomponent in the CLA Framework. The stage cards describe a spectrum of practice from Not Yet Present to Institutionalized.
ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

**USAID Learning Lab** is an interactive community where you can access and contribute to a growing repository of tools and resources on integrating CLA throughout the USAID Program Cycle. The platform is open to everyone, but its content is tailored to organizational learning and knowledge management enthusiasts, USAID staff and implementing partners, and development practitioners interested in maximizing development outcomes. To learn more, visit usaidlearninglab.org.

**ProgramNet** is USAID’s internal, interactive online community devoted to sharing knowledge and promoting learning on implementing the Program Cycle. It provides a platform for peer-to-peer and mission-to-Washington dialogue to support collaboration and facilitate more effective implementation of the Program Cycle. To learn more, visit programnet.usaid.gov. Note: ProgramNet is only accessible to USAID staff.

The **CLA Community of Practice** is a space for mission staff to support one another in planning, implementing and building colleagues’ capacity in CLA. Peer exchange is at the heart of this community, which focuses on sharing concrete lessons and methods. USAID staff can join the CLA Community of Practice on ProgramNet.

**CLA Training:** Offered through USAID University, this weeklong in-person training equips USAID staff to work with their teams to plan for and operationalize CLA. The training allows participants to engage with CLA case studies, hear from seasoned development practitioners about their experience implementing CLA and reflect on opportunities to integrate CLA into their own work.

**CLA Case Competition:** The annual CLA Case Competition sources examples from USAID staff and implementing partners. More than 100 stories showcasing CLA in practice are available on USAID Learning Lab and can be searched by sector and region. They are also analyzed to study the impact of CLA on organizational effectiveness and development outcomes (see Tracking the Impact of CLA on page 6). Visit usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition to learn more.
TRACKING THE IMPACT OF CLA

What do we know about how CLA affects organizational effectiveness and development results?

As part of a broader effort to improve the effectiveness of development assistance through organizational learning and adaptive management, USAID/PPL has initiated a number of activities to build the Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) by answering these key questions: Does a systematic, intentional and resourced approach to collaborating, learning and adapting contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes? If so, how and under what conditions? How do we measure the contribution?

This EB4CLA work addresses these questions through literature reviews, internal and external learning networks, case analysis and additional studies.

**What the Literature Says:** Research on the impact of strategic collaboration, organizational learning and adaptive management approaches to international development is relatively scarce, scattered and disparate. While methodological challenges have made it difficult to identify solid evidence, and in many cases, have prevented researchers and practitioners from even attempting to collect it, some studies provide promising indications of a link between CLA and better development outcomes. A review of academic and gray literature revealed a variety of relevant studies on specific aspects of CLA that begin to build an evidence base. Key findings include these in the graphic below.

The full literature review and additional citations are available on [USAID Learning Lab](https://www.usaidlearninglab.org).

**Leadership** plays a critical role in creating a learning culture, the foundation of learning organizations; and recruiting employees who have “growth mindsets” and empathy improves an organization’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

**Effective collaboration** within and between organizations has significant benefits such as: building trust, improving knowledge pooling, boosting creativity and innovation, and increasing both employee and organizational performance.

**Taking time to pause and reflect** is critical to learning and improved performance.

**Adaptive management** contributes to sustainable development particularly when it has leadership support, public support, and adequate time investments.

**Monitoring and evaluation efforts** are positively and significantly associated with achieving development outcomes when they are incorporated into program management, and designed to support learning and decision-making.
Case Study Evidence from USAID Programming: In line with academic and practitioner research, an analysis of 32 CLA case studies from the annual Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Case Competition revealed five patterns about how CLA approaches contribute to specific organizational or development outcomes:

• **Collaboration leverages resources for collective benefit.** Cases demonstrate how collaboration helps development actors identify their respective comparative advantages and jointly achieve mutual, targeted outcomes.

• **Local engagement leads to local ownership and, ultimately, improved development outcomes.** The cases illustrated how local stakeholders become more empowered and motivated to achieve the desired development outcomes when invited by implementing partners to participate actively in development processes.

• **Intentional knowledge management generates promising practices for broader application.** CLA cases underscored how capturing and sharing knowledge about best practices can contribute to improvements at the organizational level.

• **Feedback loops increase the likelihood that evidence will inform decision-making.** CLA cases provided numerous examples of how specific tools and processes for creating feedback loops provided continuous learning to inform decision making.

• **CLA begets CLA and sometimes leads to scale-up.** The cases highlighted how either experiencing a CLA approach or seeing the benefits of CLA activities used by others can lead to increased CLA uptake within an organization and greater scale-up of project outcomes.
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