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CASE COMPETITION

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) have long been a part of USAID's work. USAID staff and implementing partners have always sought ways to better understand the development process and USAID's contribution to it, to collaborate in order to speed and deepen results, to share the successes and lessons of USAID's initiatives, and to institute improvements to programs and operations. Through this case competition, USAID and its LEARN mechanism seek to capture and share the stories of those efforts. To learn more about the CLA Case Competition, visit the USAID Learning Lab at usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition.

Putting Communities at the Heart of Learning and Adapting

Emily Janoch, CARE

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

The Participatory Performance Tracker was initially used in the context of dairy value chains in rural Bangladesh, where we were struggling to measure and understand adoption rates and practices among groups of milk producers. With populations that were extremely rural, spread out, and illiterate, it was difficult for us to have any systematic, up-to-date sense of the problems facing producers or to monitor the progress and performance of tens of thousands of farmers. The Participatory Performance Tracker focuses on working with groups of producers to track the adoption rates of key practices in a value chain system. Key stakeholders include CARE staff, partner NGOs in the field, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USAID and its implementing partners, and beneficiary groups.

The Participatory Performance Tracker was developed in 2009 for the Strengthening the Dairy Value Chain project in Bangladesh, where it was used with 35,000 women working in the dairy sector to double their dairy-related income. Ultimately, CARE Bangladesh applied the tool with more than 1,200 producer groups under that project. It has since been adapted, supporting CARE's work in 7 countries and across more than 3,000 groups. In 2012, CARE's six-country Pathways to Secure Livelihoods program adopted the tracker to reach 50,000 women in agriculture, beyond the dairy sector. Finally, the Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development Project in Ethiopia adopted the tracker to support 65,000 participant households with measuring their success in increasing food security. To date, the tool has been used in 8 countries across Africa and Asia and applied in 16 value chains.

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

Much of our work — especially our food and nutrition security work — depends on behavior change at the community level. We work with groups (for example, producer groups, water committees, and mothers' groups) to teach improved practices that will achieve better yields, health, or income. These activities are only successful and sustainable if people and groups adopt the promoted practices and behaviors, but it is often extremely difficult to monitor behavior change over the life of a project in a way that allows us to understand and adapt to the constraints that communities face in adopting the behaviors we promote. Although impact depends on this, we do



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not often measure whether the process itself is functioning. The Participatory Performance Tracker address three key pain points for our work:

- **Too much confused data:** With hundreds or thousands of producer groups spread across communities or even countries, and separate facilitators working with each group, it becomes very difficult to have an overarching sense of what is working, what we are struggling with, and what problems are recurring across the project that require a more systematic view of where management or advocacy strategies can improve success. This slows data collection, makes analysis difficult, and often makes the effort of collecting data a waste because no one examines the results. If we collect too much data, we can't act on most of it.
- **Data collection is too infrequent to fix problems:** Endline survey data may give us adoption rates, but the data do not allow us to make midstream course corrections, nor do they allow us to understand **why** communities are picking particular behaviors over others. We needed to be able to collect data in a timely fashion, and in a way that allowed us to both address problems at the level of each community and aggregate to look at project-wide problems so we could make changes.
- **Communities are uninvolved in data collection, so they are not motivated to act on our training, or the evidence:** Much of our evaluation work is driven by external consultants who come in at the end of a project and say what impact the project had. They tend to parachute in, administer surveys, and leave the community without ever reporting back. This kind of endline survey rarely promotes the community's participation in the process, so the communities and groups **themselves** understand what is working or what is not, and how they might make changes to get to better impacts. Generally, communities do not even see the survey data we collect at the end of a project. When communities understand the barriers they face, they can see both where they need to change their own behaviors and where they need to ask for external help. This requires tools that communities can use and understand.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

The Participatory Performance Tracker is a management and outcome monitoring tool that allows for evaluation of group dynamics and performance, with the support of group leaders and field facilitator coordinators. To effectively use the tracker, groups must hold regular meetings to foster dialogue around the adoption of key behaviors and practices and capture data on individual and group performance. The data can be aggregated at the district, regional, national, or global level in order to analyze how groups progress over time, and may be analyzed at different times throughout the year to facilitate course corrections. Cohorts can be compared in order to learn what is working in the field and where there may be gaps in program implementation. Data from the Participatory Performance Tracker can be analyzed by practice area — agriculture, financial inclusion, or nutrition — to allow for the identification of high and low performing groups. This way, CARE may identify group-specific gaps in implementation. The tool may also inform management decision-making so managers can allocate staff and resources to struggling groups. Ultimately, the Participatory Performance Tracker provides groups with a means to assess their own progress to empower them and create within-group transparency. Individuals as well as groups are able to identify their performance gaps to create momentum and pressure to improve. The tool can be tailored to capture information on common group activities and particular factors of importance, such as gender inclusivity, savings, and broader financial inclusion.

The Participatory Performance Tracker consists of two parts, which allow for the monitoring of the adoption of key practices at individual and group levels. The Individual Tracking Sheet documents the performance of each group member in relation to the individual performance areas laid out by program staff and group leaders. An example of an individual practice that could be included on the Individual Tracking Sheet is adoption of an improved seed variety. The Group Maturity Sheet tracks the performance of the group as a whole and documents how the group is working together on topics such as leadership, recordkeeping, and gender equity. An example of a group capacity that could be included on the Group Maturity Sheet is the practice of gender equitable governance. Evaluating a combination of individual practice adoption and group capacities allows for a more comprehensive picture of what is happening, at both levels, as a result of the program. However, a program might focus on only



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one dimension of key practice adoption of the two (Individual Tracking Sheet and the Group Maturity Sheet), based on the requirements.

We apply the Participatory Performance Tracker once every six months and share the results with communities and with our staff, partners, and donors to plan and implement any needed changes. We have also begun adapting as an internal tool to track our own management and behaviors, to continuously pursue excellence as an organization.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

Some of our particular success factors are our well-trained and invested facilitators at the community level. They are really the linchpin for doing this work in a way that gets communities to participate in the self-assessment process and getting them motivated to act, beyond giving the project management team the information they need to improve the work. The tool needs to be simple and brief enough for community facilitators to apply. Facilitators need to have excellent training and focus on working with communities to have these conversations in a way that will generate discussion on adoption of practices and useful data without seeming judgmental or punitive.

Another success factor is the size and scope of the teams at CARE. A practice that worked successfully in one country office is now scaled up to eight countries and thousands of community groups because of the connections between groups and offices here. We are able to share and adapt best practices globally, and we use annual learning events and key knowledge management platforms to achieve that linkage and scale. The tool itself needed to be flexible enough to adapt in many different value chains and circumstances. Having tested it in so many places, we are now able to go to events such as InterAction workshops and present to other partners with evidence that it works.

We have also developed an electronic version of the Participatory Performance Tracker, which streamlines data collection and analysis at the central level even further, giving management teams data in real time. It is important to be careful to continue to promote the participatory nature of the exercise, and not let control over the technology equal control over the process. Often, community groups still need to see the paper versions of the work as part of the group exercise of discussing the issues at hand.

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

Using this approach, we have been able to scale up to more than 5,000 groups across 8 countries. We have also seen adoption rates for key practices we promote rising to 60 or 70 percent; the strength of groups goes up dramatically as they assess themselves, identify gaps, and chalk out plans of action to address the gaps. It has improved our management skills as well as our impact. It has also deepened our relationship with the communities and helped create more sustainable interventions, since communities now examine their own behavior and pressure each other to use improved practices. Collaboration between beneficiaries and project implementers has increased substantially since we started using the Participatory Performance Tracker, and we are using the tracker as a way to measure these changes.

Some examples of internal learning:

“For me, the PPT is a tool which allows all level actors to understand what went well, what went not well, the opportunities missed, and indicates the remedy to move the gap. As a whole the PPT is a tool which meets the basic rationale for monitoring and evaluation: accountability, learning and improvement, and communication.”

—Teferra, learning, design and measurement manager, CARE Ethiopia



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“The PPT tool is one of the effective tools CARE is using in Pathways to determine the progress of the groups which serves as guide to the project team and helps locating the groups that are progressing well and the ones still struggling. The tool creates healthy competition among members of a group and also between groups. As an M&E tool, PPT helps in strengthening the implementation process.”

—Issahaku Hardi, Pathways project officer, Ghana

“PPT enhances group cohesion as farmers happen to know what is happening in other farmers’ field. Personal testimonies and experiences that farmers share while administering PPT of how good or bad a practice was, reinforces better understanding of promoted practices. This minimizes trial and error for farmers who were slow to adopt.”

—Lilian A. Mpama, M&E coordinator, Pathways, Malawi

What were the most important lessons learned?

To ensure adoption and use, the Participatory Performance Tracker requires intensive end-user engagement to define system requirements and throughout the development process.

This could become a de facto outcome monitoring tool for CARE’s work with producer groups, enabling global analysis and portfolio management from anywhere, at any time. The Participatory Performance Tracker could be scaled CARE-wide as it evolves. More broadly, adopting the tracker and with this, the participatory approach for monitoring and data generation across all new projects, CARE would become a data-driven organization.

We have developed a simple guide on how to replicate the Participatory Performance Tracker and a CARE Technical Pack on the tool (materials available through CARE’s Food and Nutrition Security Resource Hub), both of which provide more clarity on what the Participatory Performance Tracker is, how it has been or could be used, and what resources are available to support adaptation and adoption in any new project within and outside CARE.

Leadership buy-in, especially at the project level, is crucial for the Participatory Performance Tracker’s success. Managers need to be ready to commit to changing practices when the tracker highlights higher-level issues. They also need to build regular space for reflection and data analysis into staff time and project decision-making processes. Similarly, donors need to have the flexibility, in program design, to make necessary midstream changes.