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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.

USAID/Colombia Introduces Political Economy Analysis to Better Adapt Programming to Local Contexts

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

Although the USAID mission in Colombia has a solid understanding of national-level issues, each of the country's regions has a distinct context and list of influential actors. Without this regional knowledge, the mission felt it was at risk of erroneously applying national assumptions to localized contexts, or of missing opportunities to have greater programmatic impact. To provide staff with a systematic way of filling critical knowledge gaps that would better inform policy decisions, the mission began conducting political economy analysis (PEA) in seven high-priority regions.

Of particular importance, the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are in their third year of negotiating a peace agreement. USAID works (and conducts PEAs) in rural areas of Colombia that have been historically affected by the conflict. Taking place in Havana, Cuba, the negotiations have been a polarizing issue within the government and public opinion.

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

In general, regional actors and implementing partners are the holders of the richest knowledge. However, before PEAs, there was no standard way for the USAID mission to capture this tacit knowledge from its office in Bogota. The PEA process provided a way to more comprehensively engage these stakeholders and collect actionable information, better positioning the mission to learn from on-the-ground conditions and adapt programming to better reflect the complex realities that each region faced. In addition, the PEA enabled USAID to gain comprehensive, firsthand knowledge of the region, as opposed to information passing through implementing partners, whose view is usually limited to the scope of their contracts or agreements.

Finally, USAID hoped to get a better understanding of program gaps and coordination needs through the PEAs, in order to have a more comprehensive and meaningful impact in specific regions.



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Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

Introduced to the mission by USAID/Washington, the PEA is a structured process whereby mission staff members are able to learn about local contexts through face-to-face interviews and joint analysis with partners. Specifically, implementing partners suggest an initial list of informants for each of their regions, and the mission narrows that to a final list of interviews. Over two days, a four-person team (split into two pairs) from the mission interviews key informants and then reconvenes to discuss their findings and analysis. The interviews focus on identifying the key actors in the region, what incentivizes and dis-incentivizes those actors, and how the region views the signing of a peace agreement, among other topics. Upon returning to Bogota, the team writes a report synthesizing the findings so they can be shared across the mission. The findings are then used to adapt activities to better reflect the local context.

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

Only 60 percent of key informants provided information that was considered to be useful — a percentage the team is trying to improve. Related to this, the team conducting the PEAs found that mid- to lower-level key informants tended to be the most valuable, as they are well-informed and more willing to share their knowledge (compared with senior-level informants).

In general, mission staff members have limited time to carry out hefty mandates, and conducting a thorough PEA can be a time-intensive process (although well worth the investment). Upon returning to the time-dependent demands of the office, many PEA participants have had difficulty completing the field report.

In addition, key informants from rural areas were invited to the capital cities, since security constraints limited the mobility of USAID staff. This allowed the team to conduct more interviews in a shorter period.

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

The mission gained a much deeper knowledge base as a result of the PEA process. Specifically, the mission now has a much better understanding of the motivations behind and power dynamics between regional actors, including legal actors (e.g., the state, producers associations, and community groups) and illegal actors (the FARC, the National Liberation Army, and Criminal Bands). This knowledge has informed key activities, such as providing more resources and support to local government and community leaders where their leverage is weak.

In addition, as the primary holders of regionally specific knowledge, implementing partners are often the ones making strategic changes to activity implementation. With the PEAs improving the mission's understanding of local context, USAID staff improved their capacity to engage in dialogue with implementing partners on adaptive management with a regional perspective.

As a next step, the mission hopes to have representatives from each of the Development Objective teams jointly participate on the PEAs in order to strengthen coordination and engagement on regional issues.

What were the most important lessons learned?

To the extent possible, it is crucial to have interviews from a broad range of society (including public sector, private sector, organized ethnic groups, and nongovernmental institutions) to triangulate perceptions and ensure an accurate assessment on the region. It is also important to conduct each regional PEA separately to allow each region's PEA to develop on its own merit, rather than applying unconfirmed generalities based on previous PEAs.

The PEA process was initiated by the Office of Democracy, Governance and Human Rights. As the Program Office becomes more involved, strategic efforts are being made to include other Development Objective teams, to facilitate greater coordination across Development Objective teams in targeted regions. The team considers this a lesson learned that could significantly increase coordination within the mission.

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.