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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](https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition).

# USAID/Malawi's Experiment in Integration to Foster Collaboration and Improve Programmatic Decision-Making

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

USAID/Malawi is piloting a development integration experiment, born from a series of stakeholder analyses conducted for the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), in three focus districts. The pilot strategic initiative aims to test the CDCS hypothesis that targeted, integrated interventions will improve Malawians' quality of life above and beyond the traditional USAID model.

A top priority for this approach is local engagement across stakeholders, in which USAID/Malawi capitalizes on its convening authority to mobilize and integrate partners, taps into local knowledge through an innovative learning approach, focuses resources, leads development partner coordination efforts, and empowers local systems, organizations, and individual Malawians toward a more sustainable future.

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

After 50 years of development work in Malawi, it was clear that traditional development structures were failing to lift Malawians out of the poverty trap. Though substantial gains had been made across sectors, these gains were being offset by rampant population growth that outpaced the government's ability to provide basic services to Malawians. Coupled with poor natural resource management practices, a culture of rain-fed subsistence farming that employed 80 percent of the population, unpredictable shifts in climate patterns, rampant food insecurity, and high levels of malnutrition among children, the USAID realized that a change in approach was needed. If the mission changed the way it worked, could it achieve better, more sustainable results? To answer this question, the mission devised its "integration experiment" as the central innovation of its five-year strategic plan.

The mission defines integration as "Working jointly together with others on a common goal that is beyond what any person/group can accomplish alone. Integration includes joint planning, leveraging resources, evaluating outcomes together, and a holistic coordinated response that meets district development objectives."



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### **Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.**

USAID/Malawi's CLA approach is rooted in the "3 Cs" of integrated programming: **C**o-location, **C**oordination, and **C**ollaboration. Co-location is the first step toward integrated programming: all major USAID sectors operate in the same geography — the three focus districts of Balaka, Machinga, and Lilongwe Rural. Coordination reflects efforts to better share information and avoid duplication, not only among implementing partners but also across technical offices within the mission and externally with other key stakeholders. Collaboration reflects further maturation and the desired end result, when stakeholders find that joint processes such as planning, implementation, and monitoring improve development results.

To put this approach into action, the mission had to move beyond traditional business processes — including the one-team technical approach — bridge gaps internally between teams, and bring partners together externally in a process that required a fundamental shift. Along with its partners, the mission was interested in exploring the implications and complexities of implementing more robust integration across USAID programming in Malawi. To set the stage, the mission designed and awarded a complex, five-year evaluation utilizing quasi-experimental methods to determine whether integration achieved better results than traditional USAID development strategies. Focused on examining higher-level CDCS objectives, this evaluation essentially became the mission's learning platform.

In March 2014, the mission introduced 36 implementers to its new integration approach. A day-long workshop raised partner awareness and buy-in for integrated annual work planning that the mission expects will improve results and increase sustainability. The mission produced geographic information systems maps to expand partners' understanding of the overall portfolio and help identify potential partnerships. Using a "speed dating" format, partners came together with other partners in an exercise designed to get them to discuss their activities face to face and identify basic, value-added activities that could be quickly and easily implemented during the last quarter of the fiscal year. This exercise, performed in coordination and with agreement/contracting officers' representatives (AORs/CORs) and contracting officers present, permitted partners to identify "low-hanging fruit" for immediate action, forge new relationships, and bridge gaps, setting the stage for the FY 2015 work plan cycle.

Working across teams, the mission's Office of Acquisition and Assistance and Program Office developed a modified work plan template to capture integration across the portfolio. AORs/CORs received work plan templates and guidance to ensure that FY 2015 work plans included detailed planning for integration activities. Draft work plans identifying integration efforts were due in late August 2014. This was followed by USAID/Malawi's first Development Objective-level portfolio review, which examined integration progress to date, identified strengths and gaps to implementation, and established objectives to further integrate USAID/Malawi's work with local governments and development partners.

In September 2014, the Mission convened stakeholders to discuss the results of the Development Objective portfolio review and peer-review FY 2015 integrated work plans that had been shared with partners and USAID staff. The mission developed a set of work plan review criteria for determining whether work plans met a specific standard of integration, included the following:

- **Does the work plan realize cross-sectoral opportunities?**  
*including leveraging the technical expertise and/or interventions of USAID partners to create synergies in multiple technical areas*
- **Does the work plan lead to added value and results?**  
*including the ability to reach a greater number of beneficiaries and realizing opportunities to provide cost savings*
- **Does the work plan reflect a shared purpose?**  
*including sharing a stake in the process and outcome and accessing a skill or technology not possessed by the implementer*



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- **Does the work plan reflect actions to operationalize integration?**  
*including joint planning, identifying clear roles and responsibilities, and facilitating formal and informal frequent communications during the planning and implementation phases*
- **Does the work plan support district development goals?**  
*including using and strengthening local systems, identifying gaps, challenges, opportunities and aligning activities to district implementation plans/district development plans*

These workshops provided a real-time collaboration and learning environment where partners shared portfolio progress, challenges to implementing their approaches, and successes to date.

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

Special considerations abound and can greatly delay the realization of any CLA approach. USAID/Malawi's approach required a cultural shift in how the mission wanted to do business, learn and apply evidence to its portfolio, and adapt. This takes time, requires a well-thought-out process, and needs to be slowly and comprehensively disseminated to the teams to digest, provide feedback, and build their buy-in. For example, it took the mission well over a year to agree on a definition of integration. It then took the teams quite some time to realize that what the front office wanted was not additional work, but a change in *how* they worked. This evolution of change will take some time before teams see the approach as the "new normal." Other considerations that need to be addressed to make CLA or (in this case) integration real include needing to be deliberate in how a mission thinks about an approach before trying to make it operational; ensuring front office buy-in and understanding of the scope and level of effort; getting teams on board; getting partners on board; developing the plan, approach, and logical steps for rolling out this process; and designating the team to take on implementation of the approach outside their normal job duties — the human resource factor.

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

The September 2014 portfolio review brought out frank, tough questions on integration that helped the mission identify the key steps to move forward and create a compelling vision for district-level leadership to ensure integrated programming sustainability. Takeaways from a stakeholder panel, held during the same workshop, included the need to demonstrate clear alignment of mission activities with district development plans, the need to ensure strong links between district goals and mission activities, the need to create ownership at the community level, and the need to leverage local resources.

In March 2015, the mission presented the baseline findings of the CDCS evaluation to partners. Discussions centered on points of learning. These included questions on *access to* versus *use of* services, where USAID's approaches primarily emphasize access as the main barrier, but findings and stakeholder interviews found the opposite: access was not a barrier, but use of services was not happening for various reasons. For example, one implementing partner reported the following:

"Through the USAID-funded Care Groups, women are being told to seek antenatal care at least four times throughout their pregnancies, and also to take their children to clinics when ill or malnourished. The women told us [the implementing partner] that they now go to the clinics/hospitals, but they are almost always out of stock of the medications they need, and they often do not actually receive the service that they are seeking."

In terms of nutrition, USAID-funded programs primarily focus on understanding what good nutrition is and how it should be incorporated into beneficiaries' lives. However, baseline results indicated that people already understand what good nutrition is and how to incorporate it, but they cannot afford to purchase nutritious foods or grow them for home consumption. So, the questions arises: Is this less of a behavior change issue and more of an economic growth issue? If so, how do we deal with it and what do we do moving forward as a mission?



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### **What were the most important lessons learned?**

- If partners are provided with a logical structure to follow and are engaged as a larger USAID “family,” they are willing to do what needs to be done to affect better development results. A case in point: USAID contracts and awards say nothing about integration, yet all partners participated and eventually embraced integration to the point that they were starting to implement integration concepts outside the focus districts.
- Partners want to be engaged with in a collaborative and meaningful manner, in which they feel respected and dealt with as contributors to the mission’s greater objectives. Engaging with them in this manner can yield unexpected positive results.
- Developing ideas on paper and implementing them are two very different concepts. A plan for putting them into operation and more detailed forethought on how to roll out integration to partners and district governments would have been very useful to have before approval of the CDCS.
- You cannot expect partners to do what USAID is unwilling to do (e.g., cross-sectoral boundaries).