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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).

# Operationalizing CLA in Uganda's Feed the Future Value Chain Project

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

Agriculture contributes to more than 20 percent of the country's gross domestic product and 48 percent of exports in Uganda. Roughly 70 percent of households rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. However, despite sustained economic and agriculture sector growth, Uganda still suffers from widespread poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. Undernutrition is widespread, with 36 percent of children chronically undernourished or stunted. Feed the Future aims to raise farmer incomes, create jobs, and improve the economic and nutritional status of approximately 2.4 million Ugandans in 38 focus districts over 5 years.

Uganda's Feed the Future Strategy is built on three components. The two components of agriculture and nutrition address the twin objectives of the global Feed the Future initiative. The third component, connecting nutrition to agriculture, seeks to eliminate the disconnect between improved agriculture and improved nutrition. It will take an evidence-based approach to understand and scale up what is necessary to make nutrition improve alongside agriculture, focusing on household, gender, and nutrition practices. In line with USAID Uganda's Feed the Future Multi-Year Strategy and Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), Uganda's Feed the Future Value Chain Project includes approximately 10 Activities, all designed – independently and as a collection of Activities – to contribute to the objectives of the Feed the Future initiative in Uganda. As such, there is a strong focus on ensuring strong connections across the team, with operational connectivity and integration where it is required to achieve higher level results, as well as programmatic linkages and information sharing more broadly, to support continuous learning, adaptation, and improvement.

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

USAID/Uganda's Feed the Future Value Chain Project addresses a wide range of Activities implemented by various actors (producers, traders, service providers, key policy makers, etc.) to bring the three commodities of coffee, beans, and maize through an integrated production and marketing system that enhances their economic value. The Project contributes to: i) increased agricultural productivity; ii) increased access to competitive markets; iii) improved support services; iv) strengthened farmers groups and organizations; v) improved policy environment; and vi) improved public sector institutional and human resource capacity. In addition, it will integrate specific Activities to respond to the stresses of climate change and to build partners' resilience to those stresses.



A key feature of this work is that within the ‘core’ Activities for the Feed the Future Value Chain Project, at least three Activities are implementing a market systems development approach, applying a facilitative method, rather than direct delivery of services and support. Implementing partners are primarily focused on enabling actors within the market system (in this case, agriculture) to create change within the system, which entails strengthening relationships for enhanced information sharing within the value chain, piloting behavior changes in business management to further a client-centered approach, and/or leveraging varied incentives and business models to achieve a more inclusive growth trajectory for a business, or segment of the market.

As required by USAID project design policy, the Mission developed a log frame and M&E plan as part of the Project Appraisal Document (PAD) in 2012 to guide project management and learning. These documents, however, require stronger operationalization and utilization. Activity-level M&E plans/Performance Management Plans (PMP) are in place for many of the implementing mechanisms, but there is still a need for an operational-level monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan and process to guide Project-wide definitions, targeting, measurement, and reflection on joint results. Thus, Uganda has actively sought to apply CLA to its Feed the Future Value Chain Project in order to:

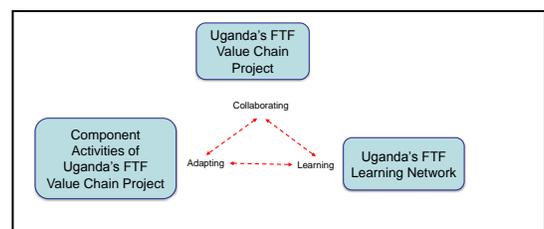
“Exploring the linkages between  
FTF initiatives”      “FTF updates”  
“Networking and opportunities  
for collaboration”  
“Strengthening Partnerships”  
“Learning ways of effectively  
operationalizing CLA”  
\*Improved coordination”

- Create better understanding of differences and linkages between the Feed the Future Value Chain Project and associated Activities;
- Capture the synergistic effects of the different Activities and how they contribute to the whole of Project results and outcomes;
- Identify ways for collaborative M&E and learning between the different Activities;
- Support the adoption of the facilitative/market system approaches and the implications on the kinds of short- and mid-term changes that the Project can achieve;
- More deeply appreciate the evolution of different Activities and the implications of closing projects and time required to start up new Activities and the overall implications on Project targets;
- Apply new Agency guidance on components of a Project MEL plan, gender integration, and technology scale-up.

In particular, support for operationalizing CLA across the Activities of the Feed the Future Value Chain Project is USAID/Uganda’s Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Program (the Learning Contract). This contract has played a crucial role in convening the various stakeholders, shaping the dialogue where learning can emerge, and in supporting the ongoing cultivation of this group of implementing partners as a CLA network.

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

CLA has been intentionally integrated as a core component of the Feed the Future Value Chain Project. In fact, CLA is the ‘thread’ that stitches together the elements of the Project’s tapestry, because CLA exists as a built-in approach across both the management structure and interaction processes of the component activities. For example, CLA has been written into all awards that comprise the Project, and there is a clearly aligned project management team whose members are recognized as CLA champions. Regular forums for collaborative problem analysis, solution-setting, and coordinated work planning have taken place over the last 24 months and have included Chief of Party meetings, joint portfolio reviews and site visits, Feed the Future learning and networking events, and participatory workshops designed to unpack and integrate innovative monitoring and evaluation approaches. A Project-centered learning agenda fuels collective inquiry and knowledge sharing. The Project has also utilized an online space on Agrilinks to share resources and provide policy and practice updates. A critical expression and operationalization of CLA in the Feed the





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Future Value Chain Project is the development of its monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plan that includes a facilitative, market systems lens. This MEL plan positions CLA as a core operating principle and articulates:

- how intervention-based data and agriculture market systems information will be gathered and analyzed from the various Activity perspectives to generate a ‘big picture’ view of how the problem is being addressed and/or how it is evolving (collaborating);
- which knowledge gaps are being filled and what new practices are recommended (learning);
- where tweaks in market engagement strategies or shifts in technology applications for improving agricultural production should be undertaken (adapting).

What is exciting about this opportunity with Feed the Future Value Chain Project is that it is a work in progress with lots of room for collaborating, learning and adapting. This is key as the Project seeks to connect actors and catalyze new behaviors that, cumulatively, will transform the nature of relationships in the agricultural sector. Through improved coordination and collaboration, better information can be shared more reliably among those who can act to strengthen the system. The Project is – at large – facilitating collaboration and learning in the agricultural sector in Uganda.

Novel approaches to the application of CLA in the Project include the design and use of ‘CLA moments’. These moments have included networking events where staff from component Activities of the Value Chain Project have come together to informally interact and get to know each other and to learn about their respective intervention modalities. In more formal networking spaces, staff have sat together and co-designed learning events; structured joint site visits; and developed, validated, and agreed on a learning agenda. Creative knowledge capture tools have been deployed, including the use of knowledge capture templates, that help teams intentionally and systematically document what they observe and would like to share with others, the production of engaging audio/video segments to help the CLA experience come “alive,” and the use of mind maps during learning events to help visualize learning linkages.

Operationalizing CLA in Uganda’s Feed the Future Value Chain Project has been nimble, iterative, participatory, and integrated. This approach helps keep CLA fresh and responsive to the Project’s needs.

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

Implementing CLA across Uganda’s Feed the Future Value Chain Project is not a one-off or single-modality approach. Rather, it is an ongoing process of reflecting on experience, connecting with peers and partners, and selecting new project implementation approaches. It is a process that has required intentionality in our vision, staff time and technical expertise, and a willingness to experiment based upon a “work in progress” attitude. The various Activities within the Project have their own ways of applying CLA, and the USAID Mission is still developing its understanding of what works and what does not within the individual Activity context. Defining and redefining at different points along the way has been helpful.

Special considerations to help make this work successful include careful thought about where joint, field-based learning activities could take place. Context helps to crystalize learning. Setting the scene and situating the reflection, analysis, and knowledge transfer where the problem exists and where evidence of progress is visible, is key to a successful on the ground CLA moment. Another important consideration for operationalizing CLA in Uganda’s Feed the Future Value Chain Project involves an appreciation of cultural learning styles and the incorporation of adult learning approaches. Learning moments have been primarily experiential – less PowerPoint presentation, more immersive –, highly interactive with ample face-to-face time, and with a supportive facilitation tone where challenges or failure can be difficult to discuss.

The timing of the development of Project Design Guidance, Uganda’s Feed the Future Strategy, and USAID/Uganda’s CDCS has been an enabling factor for operationalizing CLA. Strong leadership and the championing of CLA across the team has continued to reinforce Uganda’s commitment to setting a new standard



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for learning at the Project and Activity levels. The use of market systems and facilitation approaches help to reinforce coherence, and tapping into newly available tools and resources (MIRADI, SenseMaker, spatial analysis using geographic information systems, and social network analysis) helps stimulate fresh ways of managing, analyzing, and using data. Training and other capacity development approaches in the use of these and other MEL tools is an important consideration in making CLA work.

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

The application of CLA across the Feed the Future Value Chain Project is a work in progress. One important result of our work-to-date has been an increase in cross-Activity collaboration and collective problem-solving. This is an important first step in setting the stage for more intentional and timely information sharing and for component activities to test each other's assumptions. Another outcome of our continued CLA efforts is that individual Activities have become much more proactive in adopting integrated monitoring, evaluation, and learning as a new way of doing business. An example of this is evident where there is an explicit call to bring field-based and performance data into the room, with the aid of the Learning Contract, to complement the experiential learning that occurs in small group discussions.

A significant investment in tracking the contribution of the Feed the Future Value Chain Project towards addressing the agriculture and nutrition needs in Uganda is through the development of the Project-wide MEL plan. Moreover, this MEL plan shall be a primary expression of how CLA will have been operationalized, what has been learned, how course corrections were made, and show how CLA had contributed to better development results.

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

Learning takes time and an investment of USAID staff time and intentionality in assisting in the development of cross-Activity collaboration and in working with partners to be on the learning journey together. Shifts in organizational systems that build in 'CLA moments' take practice and patience.

Reporting, contract management, and systems and incentives for achieving performance expectations can overly emphasize targets and pay less attention to the process of attaining those good results. The proposed value-add of a 'Project' requires a lot of socialization and is even harder to measure; ownership of 'my Activity' has been hard to shift. Language (nomenclature) can be an obstacle. Initial guidance was focused primarily on design, whereas management seems to be the hard, but crucially necessary, part.

What has worked less well is the use of technology to support and stimulate online spaces for learning. Technology provides a great opportunity to connect between in-person events. However, the Learning Contract has learned that online spaces are best used to provide a 'ready reference' to materials and tools and are utilized less for remote (virtual) discussions and Q&A sessions. Connectivity challenges, and a cultural preference for more personal ways to share information, have meant that the use of online hubs for network strengthening had to be repurposed. This remains an area for further exploration and customization as the Learning Contract, together with the USAID Mission in Uganda, work to discover the best mix of CLA connective tissue that will contribute to development results.

### **Any other critical information you'd like to share?**

Other takeaways from our experience operationalizing CLA in the Feed the Future Value Chain Project are that there is an appetite for learning in Uganda. Staff members have a keen sense of curiosity and are eager to explore and confirm the impact of their work. In fact, some have told us that they participate in learning activities because they simply enjoy learning. Secondly, there is a pull by Activities and the wider Feed the Future Value Chain Project for creative ways to tell our story. Narrative expression through case-studies, data visualization, and storytelling through photography and video are emerging as eye-catching ways in which we are documenting what we are learning. The lesson here is that encouraging the use of a variety of capture and communication tools helps keep learning interesting and accessible in different formats. Third is the importance of conducting a



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strong problem analysis, taking time to collaboratively unpack the Project's theory of change, and clearly defining and mapping what integration look like. We were intentional in holding a series of 2-day workshops with component activities to provide space for cross-team dialogue, consultation, and agreement on what changes were anticipated and how they would be tracked. This time set aside for Project-wide MEL planning has been critical in advancing our collective understanding of the Project and our operationalization of CLA.