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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.

Learning with the Community to Improve an Intervention Approach

Benjamin Aisya, FHI 360

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

This is a case story about using collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) to improve a community-level intervention within the Community Connector (CC) project in Uganda. CC is a USAID Feed the Future project operating in 15 districts in North and South Western Uganda. The project provides a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to poverty, food insecurity, and undernutrition.

USAID/Uganda explicitly built CLA into the design of this mechanism/activity (a phased and modular design) and has provided an enabling environment through listening and learning from the project. This case story is one example of an ever-evolving, multi-faceted approach to CLA.

Over the past 4 years, CC has used the CLA approach in many different ways to continuously engage stakeholders and collect/use information to improve implementation, coverage, cost-effectiveness, and timeliness of activities. This is done to consequently enhance the project's impact and sustainability.

In this story, CC collaborated and learned with community groups and local government actors on why and how to adapt and improve group members' saving practice, specifically in using their savings to improve their livelihoods.

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

CC promotes Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) for every group, because studies show that VSLAs are good for building group cohesion, improving access to financial services for the rural women, and, when savings are used for investments, can increase the value of household production assets and household income. In most of the CC targeted communities, VSLAs were already prevalent. Therefore CC focused on strengthening the practice of VSLA and using it as a good springboard for other CC interventions to these groups.

During the project's first year, CC registered 1,269 community groups, of which approximately 40 percent were already participating in VSLA largely due to previous government and/or donor-funded efforts that have since ended.



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Such a large amount of existing practice provided CC with a learning opportunity. As part of their monitoring activities, CC sub-county project staff began exploring the actual savings practices of these groups. While the goal of VSLA is almost always to increase the members' ability to acquire production assets and/or other inputs for business or entrepreneurial ventures, project staff found that a number of households were spending the funds primarily to celebrate the December holidays. That is, the funds were not benefitting the household for the long-term.

CC holds monthly review and planning meetings at its regional CC offices as an avenue through which CC is operationalizing CLA. These meetings provide an opportunity for those working directly with communities to have frank discussions regarding what is working and what is not, and to channel feedback up to program decision makers and other stakeholders. Through these meetings, staff began sharing the challenges they were seeing in the village saving association mechanism. Although project staff had the literature about the need for VSLA group members to target their saving (use of funds) and pick an appropriate time of distribution of funds from the savings (outside the festive season), this was not known to the community. What development professionals learned long ago about best practice for VSLA was either not transferred to these groups or they had been taught it and decided to do something different. Either way, the groups clearly had their own preferences and norms for how to manage savings.

To make savings more effective, CC would need to find ways to change these practices and avoid them in groups new to VSLA. For both, this would require changing the groups' preferences and norms around savings. It was clear to CC that making these changes would require working with communities and local leaders (collaboration) to understand how CC should change the way it packages and promotes savings to ensure it would change preferences and norms and achieve CCs objectives for savings (learning and adaptation).

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

As a result of issues being identified by field staff, the M&E team and technical heads designed a targeted participatory assessment [a mapping exercise] to examine the saving and spending patterns of association members. This assessment mainly used household interviews and focus group discussions with savings association members to document their views and experiences. The M&E team also conducted a desk review of external literature evaluating village saving and loan mechanisms. CC shared the findings from the supported communities with USAID and other implementers to hear their ideas/experiences with similar issues. Through these consultations, it was clear that the project had to work with the communities to change the behavior. Halfway through year two, the project presented the comprehensive report of this assessment at a couple of meetings with local government staff. The purpose was to share the findings, as part of the collaborative mechanism, but more importantly to learn, discuss, and develop an adaptive solution together. There were also consultations at the community level. CC did not come to the meetings with proposed solutions. The adaptive process was iterative, using ideas proposed/discussed in one meeting as a starting point for the discussions in the next meeting. All ideas were generated at the meetings. CC's role was to use the available literature to guide the discussions to logical conclusions.

Through these consultations, a new approach, termed "Saving with a Purpose" (SWAP), was developed by the CC partners and rolled-out to all CC districts.

The SWAP, which replaced the previous savings and loan approach, generally features the following:

- 1) Group members are required to come up with saving goals for which they must sign a commitment card or a book that the group has access to. Their commitment, or the "saving with a purpose" plan, will encourage group members to hold one accountable for how funds are spent. This spreads the responsibility. The saving goals can be broad depending on the community. However, the project encourages groups to adopt goals that improve their livelihoods, such as saving towards the purchase of a household productive asset, or for a business investment.
- 2) For most groups, time for disbursements of funds [or share out] to members now coincides with planting seasons and/or the commencement of the school year [for purchase of agriculture inputs and/or school fees respectively].



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In order to change behavior while rolling out the SWAP, the project used case stories of persons within the communities that were already saving with a pre-determined purpose to show the group members that it was not something new but a behavior change that would benefit their households. These case stories, which were integrated into the VSLA/SWAP training, convinced groups that having SWAP, which isn't tied to a calendar year, is a better way to go.

CC also re-designed the interventions through which it would introduce SWAP to new groups to account for these preferences from the start. In addition, the project had to incur additional costs in printing new training materials that specifically addressed the process.

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

The critical factors that contributed: community involvement—the project needed to let the community lead the adaptation process; staff needed to have participatory assessment skills; and there was a need to set aside project time and resources to accomplish this assessment and change.

A special consideration in the change process from VSLA to VSLA/SWAP was managing the cost of the change. There was a cost to the project in terms of time lost in the back and forth for consultations. The project had to manage relationships. In the instances where VSLA was already established in the communities, some of these groups were not happy that CC was trying to 'mess up' how they had learned to do things. Finally, the project had to re-allocate its resources. CC had to reprint some of the training materials to enable the field-level staff to pass on the same message in the communities.

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

After almost two years of implementing SWAP, the monitoring information indicates that most of the groups are effectively adopting the improvements to the approach. Currently, 78 percent of the 3,325 CC groups have members who are saving with pre-determined purposes. The approach has received varying degrees of adaptation amongst the groups. Having seen the danger in the December share-out, many groups are now even taking the initiative to make further adjustments/adaptations to their saving and disbursement practices to address their needs better. For instance, instead of waiting a whole year to receive their money, some of the groups allow members to receive their savings as soon as they have hit a particular amount that they had in mind to fulfill their purpose.

This particular CLA activity informed, evolved, and solidified CC's ongoing CLA approaches. CC partners became more systematic in asserting our project logic models, asking challenges questions about why and how we should implement the activities in order to get the best possible outcomes.

What were the most important lessons learned?

CC has used this experience to highlight the need for implementers and communities to learn together. This is the essence of collaborating in CLA.

CC is often misunderstood because in reports, the project states that "we have learnt..." even with respect to topics that have been previously understood in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, the outside world does not understand that by using "we," it is not just CC or its partners that we refer to. This "we" includes the collaboration between the project implementers and the community groups who are the custodians of the learning and for whom the project needed to learn.

The basic step of CLA depicted in this story is what Anderson, Brown & Jean (2012) write about in their book, *Time to Listen*. It was about listening *with* the people, hearing the beneficiary perspective, and doing something about it together.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

CC has used three main avenues to derive learning:

- 1) Programmatic: The project goes through the standard project reports to identify the various lessons and use this to change project implementation based on what is appropriate for the ground. For example, if the indicator is not performing well, then perhaps we ought to shift/tweak a few things to make it in line. However, CC experience is that this by nature/design may not be sufficient because it has one side—the implementer perspective.
- 2) Development hypothesis testing: All projects work with assumptions or logic models. Oftentimes, we find that some assumptions cannot hold as the project evolves. Even if they do, sometimes improving them gives us better outcomes. During CC implementation, we learnt that constantly seeking improvement is key to success of the project. Nevertheless, frequently changing the project also affects implementation intensity and ultimate success.
- 3) Promising practices: At CC, there are practices that either the project brings to the community or the community brings to the project. Two cases stand out for CC in this aspect: i) first, the one just above concerning VSLA to SWAP (it still functions entirely like the VSLA BUT with the aspect of pre-determined purpose of savings and with communal/group accountability); and ii) second is about water harvesting technology in one village that was moved to other villages.

However, we sometimes derive ad-hoc lessons that we may or may not fit into any of the three avenues above.