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## CASE COMPETITION

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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,

# Collaborative Learning to Adapt RISE Programs to Emerging Best Practices

*Amal Redwan Mohammed, SAREL Project/Engility Corporation*

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

Sahel Resilience Learning (SAREL) is a five-year project whose purpose is to provide monitoring, evaluation, collaboration, and learning support to USAID's Resilience in the Sahel-Enhanced (RISE) initiative. RISE includes 28 USAID projects that are being implemented in the Sahel Resilience Strategy's zones of intervention in Niger and Burkina Faso, and that are jointly contributing to the achievement of the topline results outlined in the Sahel Resilience Strategy. These projects include Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel - Enhanced Resilience (REGIS-ER) and SAREL, launched in 2014, and Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel - Accelerated Growth (REGIS-AG), launched in 2015. However, most have been implementing development and humanitarian activities funded by Food for Peace (Food for Peace) and USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) since 2012.

The five objectives of the SAREL project are as follows:

1. Test, expand, and accelerate the adoption of proven resilience-enhancing technologies and innovations already underway;
2. Develop, test, and catalyze widespread adoption of new models that integrate humanitarian and development assistance;
3. Promote ownership, build the capacity of national and regional institutions, and coordinate humanitarian and development interventions in the zone of intervention;
4. Address gender issues key to resilience and growth; and
5. Create a knowledge management database that will house experiences, best practices, and lessons learned by RISE partners, and a SAREL-led baseline assessment, ongoing monitoring data, and impact evaluations for REGIS-ER and REGIS-AG.

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

The CLA tools, systems, and mechanisms which are being developed by SAREL are aimed at addressing the specific challenges of the RISE partners to *improve project-specific results and broaden impacts* in Niger and Burkina Faso. The focus is on expanding and scaling up resilience-enhancing best practices through collaborative



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learning, joint action, and coordination amongst RISE partners and other key resilience actors. The challenges and opportunities include:

1. The lack of a common resilience learning and collaboration platform among and beyond RISE partners in Niger and Burkina Faso makes it difficult, particularly for newly-started projects like REGIS-ER and REGIS-AG, to quickly and regularly: (a) be informed on and leverage the existing resilience-enhancing techniques, technologies, innovations and approaches that work or do not work in the RISE zone of intervention (ZOI); and (b) collaborate with other relevant resilience practitioners to create synergies, support joint actions, and coordinate activities to maximize investments and impacts.
2. With several FFP partners (Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps, ACDI-VOCA, FIU) implementing similar sets of resilience-enhancing practices (agriculture, livestock, micro-finance, natural resources management, governance, safety nets, health, and nutrition) in the RISE ZOI but using different approaches, there is an opportunity to compare the results and capture lessons learned from these projects so that: (a) newly launched initiatives such as REGIS-ER and REGIS-AG that contribute to the same RISE objectives in the same RISE ZOI can expand or scale-up proven best practices in collaboration with FFP projects; and (b) FFP projects can learn from each other's approaches as well as from REGIS-ER and AG's different approaches in implementing similar practices and can adapt their own programs to expand and scale-up the practices and approaches that demonstrate the most impact in sustainably building the resilience capacities of vulnerable individuals, households, communities, and systems.
3. REGIS-ER, REGIS-AG and the FFP projects (Tier 1) implement similar multi-sectorial practices in different geographical zones but lack the opportunity to learn from, collaborate with, and integrate actions with other RISE partners (Tier 2) that implement resilience-enhancing development and humanitarian activities in the same or different zones.
4. Strategic opportunities for multi-actor (beyond RISE partners) learning, collaboration, joint action, coordination in RISE and non-RISE geographical zones are missed because of the lack of a regular learning platform with non-RISE resilience actors, such as government bodies, research institutions, UN agencies, Farmers' and Women's Associations and international and local NGOs.
5. RISE partners lack a learning, collaboration and advocacy platform to showcase the resilience-enhancing techniques, technologies, innovations, and approaches which have been successfully tested in the RISE ZOI with proven results. Such a platform is needed in order to engage national and regional resilience coordinating bodies and policy-makers for the promotion, expansion, and scaling up of evidence-based best practices in various parts of Niger and Burkina Faso or other Sahel countries.

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

SAREL has adopted a **three-pronged** approach to engage the RISE partners and key resilience actors in Niger and Burkina Faso in progressively embracing USAID's collaboration, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach to improve programmatic results in building the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilience capacities of individual, households, communities, and systems in Niger and Burkina Faso.

*Firstly, SAREL identifies and maps* proven successful techniques, technologies, innovations and approaches, particularly from RISE partners, that contribute to building the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of highly vulnerable individuals, households, communities, and institutions in facing, recovering from, and adapting to shocks and stresses related to climate change, economic and financial crises, or social and political instability.

*Secondly, SAREL establishes and facilitates* CLA mechanisms and events (Community of Practice, CLA workshops, knowledge forums, e-discussions, community radio call-ins, web-based portal, etc.) at the strategic, technical, and community levels in Niger and Burkina Faso to:

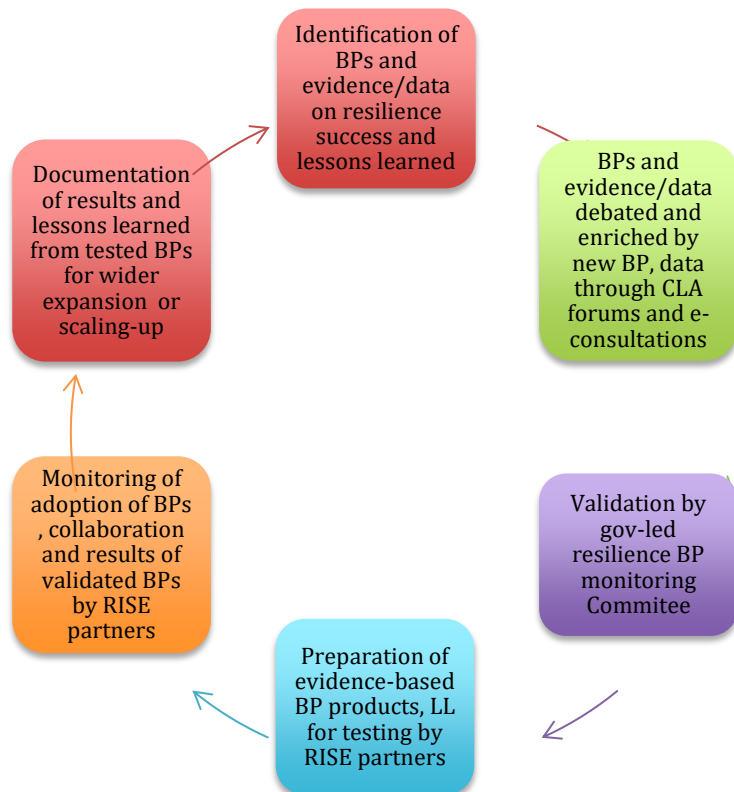


- *enrich and validate* the identified best practices and evidence-base with additional experiences, best practices, and lessons learned from the Sahel Resilience Community of Practice (SR CoP), a network of resilience practitioners from USAID, RISE, non-RISE actors (government bodies, regional institutions, local and international NGOs, CSOs, farmers' and women associations, research institutions, UN agencies, etc.);
- create avenues to establish multi-sectorial and multi-actor collaborations to create synergies, implement joint actions by integrating humanitarian and development interventions in the same or different zones of intervention;
- review and validate with a government-led consultative committee (also members of the SR CoP) resilience best practices and evidence base enriched through the SR CoP to ensure they are relevant, in line with the national resilience priorities, and that they present enough evidence to be expanded or scaled up within and outside the RISE zone of intervention.

Thirdly, SAREL continuously captures, produces, stores, and disseminates through the web-based Resilience Learning Platform technical knowledge products on resilience-enhancing best practices and lessons learned reviewed and validated by the SR CoP to build a strong evidence database of both M&E data (baseline studies, practice evaluations, mid-term and final evaluations) and the experiences, best practices, and lessons learned compiled through the various CLA events to support evidence-based decision-making to invest in the adoption, expansion, or scaling-up of proven best practices.

SAREL continues to identify, document, and share new resilience-enhancing best practices and lessons learned by: (a) monitoring emerging evidence resulting from the adoption and implementation of the best practices validated by the CoP in collaboration with RISE and/or non-RISE actors, and (b) monitoring project results that improved by systematically applying M&E and CLA tools, systems, and mechanisms.

### SAREL's CLA Approach





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

The main challenges are:

- A small SAREL team of 3 technical staff to direct and implement the CLA strategy in two countries covering both technical (developing templates and mapping practices, documenting best practices, developing electronic or web-based systems, facilitation of CLA workshops, etc.) and strategic (collaboration and adaptation, mobilizing and consulting all RISE partners, compiling and mapping sectorial and multi-sectorial evidence-based best practices, facilitating collaboration and coordination among RISE partners and host government, etc.) aspects of CLA.
- The quick buy-in by the host governments of SAREL's CLA approach helped project activities to progress, but it proved difficult within one year to set up the government-led consultative committee that SAREL included in the CLA strategy to validate the relevance and evidence base of the compiled resilience best practices before their adoption and expansion by RISE partners.
- Since resilience strategies and activities are recently initiated and evolving with new learning, it is challenging to find a consensus among RISE partners and other development and humanitarian actors on a common vision and understanding of: (1) what constitutes the criteria or evidence base to qualify a technique, a technology or an approach as a "resilience best practice", and (2) the appropriate tools to measure the successful impact of a "resilience best practice" in strengthening the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of individuals, communities, and systems.

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

In the past 15 months, the SAREL team has successfully:

- Developed the RISE Resilience Mapping Database with data collected from 14 RISE projects on who-is-doing what-where, which helped identify: (1) promising practices implemented in different communes and learning needs, and (2) opportunities for learning and collaboration to expand best practices and implement joint integrated humanitarian and development interventions
- Co-organized CLA workshops in Niger and Burkina Faso with host government resilience coordinating structures, which brought together representatives from the government; USAID's RISE partners; UN agencies, research institutions, farmers and women associations, and other non-RISE-funded local and international NGOs
- Compiled over 300 promising resilience-enhancing techniques, technologies, and innovations in the Sahel
- Documented 22 project experiences and practices shared by RISE and non-RISE participants at the CLA workshops, including sectorial, multi-sectorial, integrated and/or multi-actor strategies and approaches, success factors, and remaining challenges
- Launched the Sahel Resilience Community of Practice, which reached 381 members in August 2015 with members from government and non-government institutions in Niger, Burkina Faso, and beyond.
- Facilitated two electronic discussions (crowdsourcing) on promising practices implemented by RISE partners and received 26 and 15 contributions respectively from the SR CoP members
- Organized a CLA Training for RISE partners in Niger and Burkina Faso and shared a set of CLA tools, systems, and mechanisms to support systematic capturing, documentation and sharing of the best practices and lessons learned
- Organized and facilitated a RISE Partners Collaboration Workshop with the close guidance of USAID/Senegal, during which more than 30 collaboration opportunities were identified and agreed upon by RISE partners to adopt and expand successful practices tested by RISE projects
- Secured the buy-in of the Government of Niger and Burkina Faso to use CLA to strengthen their coordination role by systematically identifying, validating, and scaling-up proven best practices of resilience practices and programs.



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## What were the most important lessons learned?

### Lessons learned

- To accelerate collaboration and best practice adoption rates, it is preferable to organize more frequent, but logistically-simple half-day CLA events such as Knowledge Exchange Forums among RISE and non-RISE partners to review and debate promising best practices and their evidence base than it is to organize longer (2-3 day) CLA workshops that take considerable time to prepare
- 2-to-3 day CLA workshops should be organized for both a closed RISE group and a more open RISE and non-RISE group to facilitate specific group exercises that will lead to technical and strategic collaboration and coordination towards identifying opportunities and making decisions to invest resources or reorient strategies and activities to adopt, expand, scale-up best practices.
- Frequent questions that arise in CLA events when discussing a “resilience best practice” is how we measure the result(s) against a set of resilience indicators that prove that the “best” practice is contributing simultaneously to several results, such as food security, income generation, asset production, health and nutrition, natural resources preservation, etc.
- Given cost and sustainability challenges with resilience programming, it is important to develop new CLA tools that help document successful approaches in *introducing* proven resilience techniques and technologies and *promoting and supporting their adoption and sustainable use*. This includes strategies for building local capacities to provide extension, input supply, and financial services, etc. that can build local ownership and enable expansion of best practices at lower cost. The proper application of these “soft technologies” plays a critical role in determining whether good techniques and technologies are actually adopted.
- It is important to start familiarizing the practitioners with email-based simple systems that helps them continue exchanges started at a face-to-face workshop to increase their confidence and active participation in the e-discussions before transitioning to the web-based portal.