This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Encouraging a CLA Culture
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Engility

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

Presentation during a CLA event, April 2015. *Courtney Calvin.*

Rural areas of the Sahel suffer from many hardships, including poverty, lack of infrastructure, poor governance, and gender inequality. These factors dampen community resilience, leaving households prone to socioeconomic shocks. Population growth, climate change, and a growing dependency on food markets are adding to the vulnerability of the Sahelian population, making even relatively small shocks potentially very harmful. A range of actors are working to improve resiliency in rural regions of the Sahel, including national governments, regional organizations, donors, development and humanitarian NGOs, and local civil society. USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) initiative includes 28 USAID projects that are being implemented in the Sahel Resilience Strategy's zones of intervention in Niger and Burkina Faso and jointly contributing to the achievement of the topline results outlined in the strategy.

The five-year Sahel Resilience Learning (SAREL) project's purpose is to provide monitoring, evaluation, collaboration, and learning support to the RISE initiative. SAREL works to strengthen the capacity of RISE and other key stakeholders in Niger and Burkina Faso, including government entities and local and international NGOs, to engage in adaptive, evidence-based learning through documenting promising practices and lessons learned and promoting dialogue and discussion among RISE implementing partners and other stakeholders. The objective is to promote the adoption of methods and innovations that best enhance resilience in the region.

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

Thirty-three implementing partners work in the RISE-supported communities in Niger and Burkina Faso. Project coverage often overlaps, and although informal information exchange does happen, there has been no systematic sharing about interventions, successes, challenges, and outright failures. This means that although one project may have carried out a successful intervention in a particular commune or department, there was no active, deliberate effort to share that information with projects tacking similar challenges in the same area. Similarly, if a project found that an intervention was not appropriate for a particular area, there was no information exchange to prevent another project from trying the same inappropriate intervention. Moreover, lack of coordination between projects resulted in duplication with the same populations; similar research was conducted in the same geographic area for different USAID projects, with lost opportunities for synergy.

In addition to the U.S. government implementing partners, non-RISE actors also work in the same geographic areas, including the host-government resilience coordinating bodies — Les Nigériens nourissent les Nigériens (Nigeriens Feeding Nigeriens) in Niger and Secrétariat Permanent de Coordination des Politiques Sectorielles Agricoles (Permanent Secretariat for the Coordination of Sectoral Agriculture Policies) in Burkina Faso — and local and international NGOs, which also conduct their activities with little systematic information sharing. Although the setting was rich with undocumented lessons learned and a high potential for implementers to learn from and with each other, there was no space in the different organizations' work plans for reflection and information sharing with other projects.

The opportunities we have been addressing include:
- Sharing knowledge about which interventions work and which do not
- Documenting and sharing promising practices
- Identifying interventions that could be scaled up
- Helping projects and interventions identify synergies to increase their effectiveness and reach
- Supporting the RISE initiative to increase resilience in Niger and Burkina Faso

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

Taking a participatory approach to co-designing collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) activities, the SAREL team consulted with nearly all of the 33 implementing partners, the host-government resilience coordinating bodies, and USAID to have a deeper understanding in five areas:
- The concept of resilience in the Nigerien and Burkinabe context
- The vision of the RISE initiative at strategic, technical, and community levels
- The experiences, best practices, and measurable successes achieved so far and expected to be achieved by the end of the RISE initiative, to ensure that vulnerable individuals, households, communities, and systems develop absorptive, adaptive, and transformative

capacities to protracted or recurrent shocks and stresses and transition to sustainable socioeconomic development

- The experiences and lessons learned during program/project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes that can help reorient future program/project designs in order to improve results and collective impact
- The challenges faced by individual interventions

On the basis of the consultations, SAREL organized CLA forums, workshops, training sessions, and online discussions that fit the demands for learning, programmatic adaptation, and collaborative action around:

- USAID and the host government's vision, policies, and expectations for the RISE initiative
- Resilience-enhancing practices, techniques, technologies, innovations, and approaches that the RISE partners and non-RISE resilience actors are already implementing
- Experiences, lessons learned, and honest discussions about strategies, interventions, results, and monitoring and evaluation tools that lead to the expected vision of USAID and the host government
- The level of (or gaps in) active participation, ownership, and commitment on the part of communities and the host governments in pre-project operational research and assessments to identify resilience capacity gaps and challenges, locally relevant shocks and stresses, extremely vulnerable people and communities facing specific shocks and stresses, and the design/strategy, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

The exchanges through the different CLA events have helped SAREL and the RISE partners better understand the above points, identify successful practices to expand and scale up, and identify strategic collaborations within and outside the RISE initiative to enable everyone to use their comparative advantages to meet their programmatic objectives in line with USAID and the host government's vision and expectations. As the partners had more opportunities for exchange, the more open they became about their successes and challenges and the more they elicited feedback from other implementing partners and the government.

Based on demand from the RISE partners, SAREL has developed templates to capture and codify — in simple, 5–6-page reference documents — the resilience projects and good practices so that they can be used as job aids when chiefs of party, component team leaders, and specialists (e.g., in livelihoods, governance, health, nutrition) wish to review and adapt their projects' design and activities based on good practices and lessons learned.

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

Understanding that CLA was a new concept for many, but that informal CLA practices existed within and sometimes between projects, SAREL established internal guidelines, in line with CLA, and started

to discuss and refine its role in the stakeholder community, through a series of introductions to the RISE partners and the host governments' resilience coordinating bodies. For implementing partners to see value in sharing their experiences with other projects, they had to move from a position of competition to one of partnership. As we collected information on their activities, successes, and challenges, we were able to point implementing partners to other entities that had overcome similar challenges; in other words, we kept them interested in engaging with us by directing them to a few solutions.

The knowledge events were structured around specific CLA methodologies and included discussions about concrete challenges the implementing partners were facing. These discussions helped partners get to know each other and built trust as they shared experiences and formulated solutions together. Over two years, SAREL has seen a growing interest among RISE partners and other stakeholders in collaborating with each other.

Two strong enabling factors were the culture within the SAREL project, which made CLA a centerpiece, and strong support from USAID, which helped convene the implementing partners and government entities for the workshops.

Apart from the essential trust-building between implementing partners, a big challenge for SAREL was one of resources. This is a small project with a small staff covering two countries, and CLA requires a great deal of face-time and dialogue, at least at the beginning, especially when introducing concepts and helping partners become intentional with knowledge sharing. The CLA and knowledge management portion of SAREL's activities use about 50 percent of the budget.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The most significant outcomes in the last two years are increased collaboration among stakeholders and better documentation of promising practices.

SAREL's most valuable contribution to date has undoubtedly been in helping RISE partners discover and begin to explore collaborative ventures that have the potential to improve the quality of interventions and enable scaling up. The two latest CLA events, held in March and May of 2016, were "collaboration market" exercises conducted in Burkina Faso and Niger. Implementing partners and other stakeholders pitched ideas to each other and sought collaborators for specific interventions and research, resulting in 62 collaborative activities — 21 in Burkina Faso and 41 in Niger. Two or three partners signed on for each activity, pledging to work together toward specific goals and to report back to the larger group in a few months.

Implementing partners that do not have a budget for collaborative activities are now allocating funds and personnel time for collaborating with other projects. In Burkina Faso, for example, Mary Stopes International intends to piggy-back on sessions between Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel – Enhanced Resilience (REGIS-ER) and its established mother-to-mother groups to provide

information and advice on family planning, and REGIS-ER and REGIS-Accelerated Growth are collaborating to provide veterinary services (e.g., vaccinations) to producer groups in the RISE intervention zone. In another example, the REGIS-ER chief of party traces the huge interest of other RISE partners in conservation agriculture to SAREL's April 2015 workshop, where REGIS-ER presented about the details of this intervention, which has proved to be one of its most successful.

What were the most important lessons learned?

The most important lesson is that building a culture of intentional and systematic CLA takes a great deal of time and resources; "build it, and they will come" does not work. In spite of all the available technology, building the trust for a CLA culture demands a great deal of face-to-face interaction.

That said, once trust has been built and a business case is clear, projects and stakeholders will put their own resources toward knowledge exchange and collaborative activities. For the RISE implementing partners, it became clear that sharing vital information, being open to learning from others, and collaborating on specific activities made their work more efficient and cost-effective, and obtained better results.

SAREL makes a very good case for investing in CLA.