

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.

Promoting CLA among the USAID/Pakistan Implementing Partners (IPs) – IPs M&E Community of Practice

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A Community of Practice meeting.
USAID/Pakistan.

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

USAID/Pakistan has the second largest program portfolio within the Agency. It consists of more than 80 complex and robust

mechanisms with a combined value of almost \$2 billion. Most of the activities are implemented in remote and challenging security environments to which the USAID staff has limited access. The Mission's program size and complexity make monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL) invaluable tools to guide our strategies and programs toward success. USAID/Pakistan provides oversight to its programs by applying the Agency's standard practices for monitoring and evaluation (M&E), including the use of a portfolio-level performance management plan, project- and award-level performance MEL plans, and annual and semi-annual portfolio reviews. In addition to oversight, the Mission places a strong emphasis on learning and utilizing data to continuously improve our development approach.

Due to the size of its assistance program, the political significance of its portfolio, and the operating realities of a challenging security environment, USAID/Pakistan finds that independent services are essential to support Agency-mandated performance M&E and organizational learning responsibilities. Hence, the Mission uses the independent Performance Management Support Contract (PERFORM), a \$96 million, 5-year contract launched on May 1, 2015, that provides M&E and analytical products that

are relevant, useful, timely, and cost-effective, as well as supportive services to enhance the Mission's learning and adapting process.

Under its learning and local capacity building component, PERFORM supports USAID/Pakistan to collaboratively identify and utilize local knowledge and fill knowledge gaps to better utilize USAID resources. It builds the capacity of local USAID staff and implementing partners (IPs), particularly local Pakistani organizations and host-government counterparts, on USAID performance management requirements and expectations.

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

The Mission's more than 80 IPs are the first line of data collection in our programs. IPs collect data on each project on a quarterly basis and report it through PakInfo, the Mission's data collection database. The data are then reviewed by the Mission. USAID uses this performance data to ensure our projects are achieving their intended results. During data collection, data analysis, and other steps of implementation, our IPs go through multiple challenges and limitations, including struggling to develop appropriate methodology to monitor or evaluate their projects, a lack of capacity to analyze data, struggling to understand USAID performance management policies and regulations, security issues, and lack of access to remote areas. They make every effort to mitigate these challenges. They learn from their experiences how to improve the process in future.

Our IPs have world-class performance management champions who are working tirelessly on different M&E activities that contribute to the success of the projects. Every day, someone finds a new and/or innovative way to address a problem, develop effective tools for monitoring or data collection, devise an easier way to analyze quantitative/qualitative data, redesign an M&E template to make it more user-friendly, and conduct many other successful performance management activities. But unfortunately, these successes and achievements are not being shared with USAID/Pakistan or other IPs who might be facing similar issues and searching for potential solutions. They are unaware that another IP has already solved the problem and have a solution that can be shared.

USAID/Pakistan discovered this problem when a team of Mission M&E specialists in the Program Office's Performance Management Unit (PMU) held a series of meetings with IPs to learn about their MEL policies and general practices. They found out that there are many common performance management problems among the IPs and multiple efforts to solve them. This lack of knowledge-sharing among the IPs is leading to duplication of effort and waste of Mission resources. IPs are investing time and energy on problems or issues that might have been solved by another IP.

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

After the identification of the knowledge-sharing problem, the USAID/Pakistan performance management team came up with an idea to form a learning platform where IPs' M&E staff could gather every quarter to share experiences and new ideas. The idea emerged from an IPs' M&E working group under one of the Mission's development objective (DO) portfolios, the Economic



Growth and Agriculture Office (EGA). This group was working well, but it worked alone. Because the Mission's central contract, PERFORM, has a learning and capacity building component, the Mission asked the contractor to assist in establishing and managing such a platform, later dubbed "IPs M&E Community of Practice." However, before launching the idea, the PMU took a collaborative approach and reached out to the Mission's M&E working group, which includes M&E representatives from all the DOs, and shared the idea with them. All the DOs appreciated the idea and recognized the need for such platform.

In order to launch the first Community of Practice, the PMU worked with PERFORM to develop a comprehensive agenda and format. Given the number of IPs and their geographical diversity, it was decided to split the IPs by region hold two meetings, not one, which were held in June 2015. One was in Islamabad, the capital, and included IPs from Punjab, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas/Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, and Balochistan. The second was held in Karachi, covering IPs from the Sindh. This split ensured that the IPs spent minimum travel time to participate in the meeting. USAID/Pakistan staff, including program officers, the gender specialist, the M&E specialist, and the contract/agreement officer's representative (C/AOR), also participated in the meeting.

The focus of the first quarterly meeting, which lasted half a day, was *collaboration*. It was designed in a way to allow more time, space, and opportunity for the IPs to collaborate and talk to each other, and let them learn how they all are collectively contributing toward the development objectives and goal of USAID/Pakistan. Therefore, a limited number of presentations on M&E issues was included. All the presentations were prepared and delivered by USAID/Pakistan and PERFORM staff.

Approximately 90 IPs and USAID/Pakistan staff attended the first meeting in Islamabad; about 30 attended in Karachi. It was observed that most of them were meeting each other for the first time. It was sad to see that the people who are contributing toward a common goal did not know each other. Some of them might be contributing to the same result or indicator, but had never shared the data collection methodology or tools or data analysis process. During the collaboration, the IPs also realized this gap and appreciated USAID/Pakistan's initiative to create the Community of Practice meetings. They showed huge interest in bridging the knowledge-sharing gap across the USAID/Pakistan portfolio, and strongly supported the idea to hold the sessions every quarter. They all suggested to extend future meetings to full-day sessions.

This was a big success for the Mission. But our goal goes beyond just collaboration. The ultimate objective of this activity is to build on the momentum coming out of the first gathering to create a self-sustaining IP Community of Practice. Our goal is to build the capacity of our IPs to a level where they can hold such platforms without Mission support and continue filling in the knowledge gap and adapt best practices from each other.

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

Interest and support from the Mission management made this activity successful. The Program Office, all the DO team leads, the Mission M&E working group, and the C/AORs provided their full support to PMU and PERFORM in the design and organization of the Community of Practice. The C/AORs encouraged their IP staff to attend the first quarterly meeting. Without their support, it would be extremely difficult to get a huge participation. Also, support from PERFORM has been extremely



valuable. From preparation and delivery of MEL presentations to the logistic arrangements, PERFORM took care of all the technical and administrative issues. This removed logistics and administrative burdens from Mission staff, allowing them to allocate their time to promoting the Community of Practice idea within the Mission, which subsequently led to a higher rate of attendance at the three quarterly meetings that have been held to date.

A constant challenge we are facing is the participation of Mission staff, particularly C/AORs, in the meetings. While they strongly support the Community of Practice and encourage their IP staff to participate, the rate of their participation has been very low compared with IPs. We consider this a big challenge and limitation, because without their participation, it will be difficult to fill the knowledge gap completely. There are times when the IPs ask questions that cannot be answered completely without input from the relevant C/AOR. These questions, although linked to M&E, include contractual aspects and cannot be answered by the M&E specialists alone. We are working with the DO team leads and Mission management to further motivate and encourage C/AORs to participate.

Another challenge is related to travel costs for IP staff. Simple attendance is not a problem; it is when an IP staff member participates as a presenter. If we ask them to present their work in another region, the IP feels reluctant to send their staff on two trips in one quarter. Other than this, we have never received any questions or concerns about travel costs from the IPs. The rest of the costs (e.g., venue, food, and other administrative expenses) are covered mostly through PERFORM and sometime, if the venue is U.S. Embassy, through the program support cost. The average cost of one meeting varies depending on the number of participants, the location and venue, and the duration and format.

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

So far, three quarterly IPs M&E Community of Practice meetings have been held; the fourth one is being planned for August or September 2016. Significant results have been achieved to date, in less than a year.

The most significant outcome is that now the IPs see each other as a resource and do not rely on the Mission only. They share data and knowledge with each other to learn what works and what does not, and how successful ideas can be adapted by other IPs. They share most of the information through a working group on [USAID Learning Lab](#) based on recommendations from IPs during the first quarterly meeting. Called the USAID/Pakistan Implementing Partners M&E Working Group, it is active with the Learning Lab, and IPs activity participates with it.

The data-sharing has resolved many long-standing issues. For instance, one of our youth workforce development projects has two components, each implemented by a different IP. Though the two components are slightly different, their main goals are the same. During the first meeting, we were surprised to learn that the IPs were not sharing data. In fact, we found out that one IP was reluctant to share data, even after the other IP requested it, because it thought it was not allowed to share data with anyone, not even another USAID IP. We told the IP data-sharing was allowed, and encouraged them and all the other IPs to share context and performance data with each other after approval from USAID.



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Another achievement is that, in the first meeting, the agenda and all the presentations were prepared and delivered by either the PERFORM or PMU staff; however, the ownership and leadership role changed at the subsequent two meetings. Now the agenda is set collaboratively. The PMU sends out a quarterly survey to all the IPs and the Mission to solicit agenda items at least one month before the Community of Practice meeting. So, now the IPs set the agenda. Similarly, now most of the presentations are given by the IP staff or DO team M&E specialists. PERFORM and the PMU provide technical support only when IPs ask for it, which has enhanced the IPs' capacity, especially the local partners, and has given them confidence to lead M&E best practices and emerge as MEL champions.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

Although the activity has been a success to date and produced many positive results, our goal is to make the IPs M&E Community of Practice self-sustaining so that it can work with minimum or no support from USAID/Pakistan. At the Mission level, our plan is to increase the participation of senior management and C/AORs. We would like to encourage the IPs to use this platform more and more as a networking and learning space. Rather than doing presentations only, our aim is to push the IPs to focus more on collaboration and working sessions. For example, many IPs collect data against a common indicator, so it would be interesting to see them have a joint session for developing tools for data collection and conduct joint data analysis. Similarly, IPs contributing to the same development objective can hold joint review sessions, in the presence of their C/AORs, to go through their results framework and M&E plans, and propose changes as required. These joint initiatives and sessions will lead to consistency in data quality and validity across the portfolio, and will ensure that all the IPs comply with USAID policies and regulations.

What were the most important lessons learned?

The concept of the IPs M&E Community of Practice is in the interest of both USAID and its IPs. USAID/Pakistan will continue to support these meetings. The outcomes mentioned above are beneficial to both the IPs and USAID. Our intention is to not lose the momentum and enthusiasm that the IPs have now and use their energy and time to further strengthen the meetings. The key to success is IP ownership of the Community of Practice. If we want to gain the maximum benefit, it is vital to let the IPs' M&E champions lead the Community of Practice and allow the USAID M&E specialist to get involved only when the IPs need it.

The CLA Case Competition is managed by USAID LEARN, a Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) mechanism implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner, Engility Corporation.

