

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.

## **USAID/Zimbabwe’s Big Weeks and CLA: A Blueprint for Participatory, Scenario-Based CDCS Development**

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Zimbabwe Big Weeks Planning Session. *Perry Pockros.*

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

From the fall of 2015 through spring of 2016, USAID/Zimbabwe undertook the development of its Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2016-2021, its first full CDCS after the three-year transition strategy. USAID/Zimbabwe used a collaborative, scenario-based CDCS development process to learn how to incorporate CLA into Mission-wide practices and across every stage of the program cycle. USAID/Zimbabwe developed the “Big Weeks” approach where the entire Mission worked together during an intensive four-week period to consider strategic analyses, development hypotheses, country context scenarios, and, ultimately, develop the CDCS Results Framework, corresponding narrative, and additional elements of the five-year strategic plan.

Inspired by the Agency’s progressively sophisticated development and use of CLA, combined with Zimbabwe’s volatile operating environment, the Mission engaged in a collaborative CDCS development process to better understand the country’s standing and trajectory, and to develop scenarios to inform adaptive management over the course of CDCS implementation. USAID/Zimbabwe’s focused Big Weeks approach brought together the entire Mission staff, USAID/Washington colleagues, Zimbabwean experts, and contractor Social Impact – with

performance management/strategic planning facilitators and technical subject matter specialists – in a series of carefully designed and facilitated, iterative work streams.

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

The need for a new five-year CDCS for the post-Mugabe era was one impetus for the Mission to develop a strategic plan in a participatory and collaborative manner that explicitly articulates an expanded CLA approach. The second impetus is Zimbabwe's current precarious position. As one of Africa's most vibrant, productive, and resilient countries, its decline over the past 20 years due to a series of political and economic shocks has resulted in a fall in the standard of living for the typical Zimbabwean and increased popular discontent, distrust, and socio-political stagnation. With this current political and economic environment, it is critical that USAID/Zimbabwe gain a nuanced understanding of the latest country developments, base its decisions on sound and reliable information, and, importantly, adapt swiftly and with flexibility to meet the challenges or opportunities that an emerging situation may produce.

For these two reasons, CLA is important to both take stock of the current situation and understand USAID's comparative advantage, and as a basis to optimize achievement of the Mission's CDCS goal and objectives with the support of a robust CLA system.

Therefore, the USAID/Zimbabwe CDCS development process incorporated the following CLA-related features:

1. Big Weeks as a CLA event: Utilizing the Big Weeks approach resulted in a giant, four-week CLA "pause, reflect, and build" set of opportunities.
2. Big Weeks as using CLA as the basis for the CDCS itself: It grounds the Mission's CDCS in an evidence-based, agile approach, which is based on a scenarios-based approach and a scenario surveillance system.
3. Big Weeks as the initiation of a Mission-wide CLA system that will help USAID/Zimbabwe manage and implement the CDCS: It has empowered the Mission in understanding how their current practices contribute to CLA and how to reach new heights in actively and systematically managing the CDCS by following key ADS Program Cycle guidance, deliberative products, and events.

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

USAID/Zimbabwe's CDCS development process was an active, purposeful CLA approach with the following main features: a) The Big Weeks were a CLA event in themselves, based on collaboration of multiple stakeholders; b) joint learning based on evidence from research and consultation; c) adapting based on the findings of that research and consultation, as well as the resulting CDCS results framework, narrative, and scenarios produced during the Big Weeks; and d) Big Weeks

leading to the first articulation of a CLA approach for the CDCS, which includes a CDCS Scenario Surveillance System and defining the six core elements of the Mission's CLA Plan that will help the Mission manage and implement their CDCS.

- I. USAID/Zimbabwe CDCS development process as an active CLA approach resulting in three overarching CLA-related results
  - a. Big Weeks as a CLA event leading to learning and adapting
    - i. Collaborating – Brings together Mission staff, Washington staff, and external stakeholders. Creates an extremely participatory process where all the actors mentioned above are exchanging ideas and allowing people to better understand their and other sectors, linkages between them, and, hence, a broader vision for developing the Mission's CDCS.
    - ii. Learning – Helped Mission better understand the country context, challenges and opportunities within the sectors, and partner and stakeholder objectives and priorities through a variety of learning opportunities: formal presentations (both internal and external speakers), facilitated sessions, various plenaries and working sessions (all staff, DO teams, CLA team, etc.), “homework,” review opportunities and report outs. Allows people to learn about other Mission colleagues' work (approaches, objectives, etc.); brings evidence through studies and summary briefings; provides experts to inform discussions; and directly reviews/constructs Mission's development hypothesis, game changers/scenario planning and M&E and learning.
    - iii. Adapting C/P/R – It is changing and expanding the way that the Mission does business. In terms of culture, it is building in a participatory approach and building a work environment that appreciates, values, and builds upon CLA, M&E, evidence basis, and critical thinking. In terms of Mission processes, the Big Weeks approach is helping to systematize opportunities for CLA. It grounds the Mission's CDCS in an evidence-based, agile approach, which is based on a scenario-based approach and a Mission Scenario Surveillance System. Aligns CDCS development process through a CLA lens.
  - b. Big Weeks as the initiation of a Mission-wide CLA system that will help USAID/Zimbabwe manage and implement their CDCS
    - i. Collaborating – Brought together a non-operational Mission M&E Team, resulting in an expanded and active CLA Group that has taken the lead for CLA. They are creating linkages with other vital Mission units, including PO, Front Office (FO), Office of Acquisition and Assistance, Office of Information Technology, and others.
    - ii. Learning – Together, through facilitated sessions, charting a course forward that started with a stocktaking opportunity (what is the Mission doing related to CLA presently) and is identifying the promising practices that it will utilize for CLA.
    - iii. Adapting C/P/R – Creating new organizational linkages, responsibilities, and procedures all related to their CLA Plan. The effort has evolved to the first articulation of the Mission's approach to CLA. This will be expanded as the PMP development process begins and throughout the CDCS.



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

### I. Success factors

- a. An innovative CLA- and scenario-based approach that will allow the Mission to act on evidence and to learn and adapt continuously throughout the CDCS and beyond.
- b. Mission leadership and support at the highest levels – Mission Director, PO Director, and their respective offices emphasized the importance of the collaborative CDCS development process and Big Weeks approach and personally led the process.
- c. Devoted, committed Mission team – While leadership set the tone, leading by example, the entire Mission reflected that commitment and were actively participating and contributing. A positive attitude around the CDCS was shared by all.
- d. Advanced planning and coordination – Big Weeks is a big effort, but worth the required time and commitment.
- e. Comprehensive vision that allowed for full participation, open discourse, and created a conducive learning atmosphere – All elements were brought together to allow people to think and engage deeply.
- f. Mutual respect for each other and the process – Including the recognition that all Mission teams – technical and support –contribute to the same goal.
- g. Underlying appreciation for the evidence-based strategic planning process as an organizing principle to best help the Mission reach its development outcomes.
- h. A Mission should develop a CLA approach as early into the program cycle as possible – ideally, during CDCS development – by using an appreciative inquiry model that identifies and builds on current practices that embody CLA. These practices form a known and recognizable starting point for staff, removing fear of the unknown and avoiding the “starting from scratch” anxiety.
- i. USAID momentum on CLA – The Mission has benefitted from the Agency’s push on strategic planning, program cycle, policy, and CLA initiatives.
- j. USAID/Washington participation – Defined support from Africa Bureau and PPL was valuable in helping to understand the Washington perspective (particularly in a time of pending ADS revisions). Before SI deployed to Harare for follow-up CLA support, they held several DC-based consultations with PPL and its Learn contract team to understand the Agency’s latest thinking and approaches on CLA, received latest Agency resources (including the CLA Maturity Matrix), and were advised on their approach to introducing CLA to the Mission.
- k. Experienced strategic planning advisors working closely with the PO and FO to provide planned and progressively sequenced CDCS/CLA orientation sessions and a variety of facilitated working sessions.

### 2. Challenges and considerations for those that attempt a similar approach

- a. The Big Weeks approach was extremely effective for Zimbabwe, but it requires a great deal of planning, FO and PO leadership and commitment, participation from USAID/Washington, additional experts and stakeholders, strategic planning advisors and facilitators, and commitment from Mission staff.
- b. Mission size and timing are considerations when adopting this inclusive and action-oriented approach, since scheduling the Big Weeks precludes other major activity in the Mission.

- c. Continued and intense staff engagement for a 4-week period can be fatiguing and there needs to be ways to keep up momentum. Plus, trying to have staff free from IPs, host country, other stakeholders, conferences, etc. is also challenging.

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

1. Resulted in a CDCS that the entire Mission is committed to as the strategic plan is firmly based on a deeper understanding of Zimbabwe's context; evidence-based calling on a literature review, USAID studies, and expert presentation; fully informed through extensive facilitation and refinement; and an integrated approach that fully takes advantage of linkages across DOs, technical offices, and cross-cutting issues.
2. The Big Weeks design involved a particularly participatory and collaborative engagement with USAID/Washington, which resulted in a congenial process, a well-aligned rationale, and a relatively straightforward approval process.
3. Scenario basis of the CDCS forced staff to start to think critically about how to plan for and operate in different country environments and helped USAID/Zimbabwe start to adopt a more flexible and agile posture for CDCS management and implementation.
4. CDCS Scenario Surveillance System creates opportunities for periodic pause and reflect, and consider scenario changes.
5. Places Mission practices and the program cycle at the center of USAID/Zimbabwe's CLA approach.
6. Builds an environment conducive to teamwork and collaboration, respect, and balance between blue sky and targeted thinking. A workplace culture that values and appreciates planning, M&E, CLA, and the utilization of evidence in decision-making.
7. The development of an initial CLA approach with stated objectives and elements, which will serve as a starting point for continued growth and expansion into a CLA Plan. The process has also convened a new CLA Group (with objectives and stated roles) and created linkages within the Mission to advance CLA broadly. (See the additional materials document to see the CLA Plan graphic, which highlight the six key elements.)
8. In addition to linkages and discussions created within the Mission, USAID/Zimbabwe has also initiated several discussions with Washington (e.g., exploring "adaptable mechanisms").

**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?**

1. Major CLA pause and reflect events will take place annually that will correspond with the Mission's bi-annual portfolio reviews where the spring session includes an administrative review and the fall session includes a strategic review. During these annual reviews, USAID/Zimbabwe will incorporate a review of the CDCS Scenario Surveillance information to inform the course forward and any needed corrective action, as well as to understand if the Mission is moving into different country scenarios.
2. The Mission, guided by the new CLA Group, will develop monitoring procedures within the expanded CLA Plan, which will track foundational elements of CLA – including number of CLA



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events (internal/external, IP interactions, presentations/reviews/discussions, etc.) – and how this new information actually impacts how CDCS management and implementation decisions and adjustments are made.

3. Information management and collaboration and engagement of collaborators and partners are also expected to be addressed through the new CLA Plan.

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

Each Mission is unique with differing staff and budget levels, technical portfolios, and so forth. Therefore, what works for one Mission may need to be tailored and adapted to be useful for other Missions. USAID/Zimbabwe's CDCS development process with the Big Weeks approach is a case in point. This approach may not be feasible or appropriate in its entirety for all Missions, however certain principles or elements could be gleaned and applied. Below is a list of helpful principles that will allow Missions to engage in similar CDCS development processes and suggestions on how to adapt Zimbabwe's approach to meet different Mission needs.

1. Continuous preparation and planning and openness to new ideas and situations are hallmarks to collaboration, learning, and adapting.
2. Collaborative mentality that recognizes that everyone involved in the CDCS process – and there are many individuals – all are interested in a successful endeavor.
3. The significance of leadership in communicating the importance of key objectives (in this case, the CDCS development process inclusive of developing a vision for CLA), rallying together for that cause, setting a positive yet disciplined tone, and – perhaps most importantly – creating a fun workplace where staff enjoy the technical challenges and the people they work with.
4. Facilitative flexibility. Groups need to be flexible in adjusting meeting agendas to accommodate emerging issues and returning to prior topics with recently surfaced/discovered information.
5. “Pause and reflect” events are critical to build into the CDCS process to foster a collaborative, open, and innovative environment.
6. Divide the Big Weeks tasks into two or three distinct time periods that will allow Missions with less time to focus on certain aspects of the CDCS process. With this approach, it is important to strike a balance so that Mission staff have adequate time to fulfill their primary responsibilities between CDCS development periods, yet remain engaged throughout the process. Engage staff during off periods through Mission/team progress check-ins, CDCS calendar posted for Mission focused high-level thinking or strategy sessions, or homework assignments.

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

- I. Additional challenges and considerations
  - a. Having individual consultants hired by the Mission and a management consulting firm with sector and CDCS experts under contract increases complexity and dilutes channels of responsibility. One comprehensive source of assistance may be simpler and more effective.
  - b. While the briefing book –a concise summary of pertinent reports, studies, and analysis that formed the Mission's evidence base – was a success, it would have been more beneficial if

- participants had reviewed the findings more carefully and were more conversant with its contents.
- c. Need increasingly “adaptable mechanism” language incorporated into awards so that needed adjustments are made easier.
  - d. Conflicting messages from Washington given the evolving ADS 200 series.
  - e. Utilization of the technical experts was overall good, but need to think about how best to utilize (e.g., who participates in-country, are some best utilized only providing remote assistance, when should experts be brought into the process, for which tasks, etc.).
  - f. USAID/Washington participation added great value to the CDCS process, augmented both the Mission and SI CDCS objectives and progress, and hopefully gained further insight relevant for Washington. Ensuring that Washington efforts are fully captured and integrated into the CDCS is important.
2. Cost considerations
    - a. SI technical assistance and facilitation (strategic planning facilitators, technical subject matter specialists)
    - b. Mission direct consultants
    - c. USAID/Zimbabwe staff time, USAID/Washington time and travel
  3. Needed resources
    - a. USAID/Washington participation, technical experts (Zimbabwean, USN), performance management and strategic planning advisors/facilitators.
    - b. Vision, careful planning, leadership, and knowledgeable facilitation.

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