What does Effective Learning Look Like?

Within the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework and CLA Maturity Matrix, strategic learning focuses on:

Tracking, using, and contributing to the technical evidence base: Our technical evidence base includes all relevant knowledge—USAID-specific, academic, or other local and international research, studies, and reports—that is available on a given topic or context. Effective learning happens when we consistently track and use relevant knowledge to inform planning and implementation. This can be done using a variety of methods, including literature reviews, discussions with local and international experts, and consolidation of learning from evaluations, assessments, and monitoring data. But once we also gain or create new knowledge relevant to our field, we need to contribute to the technical evidence base via conferences, working groups, online communities, learning networks, and even academic publication.

CLA in Action: Tracking, using, and contributing to the technical evidence base

Learning Question	Learning Activities	Key Decisions / Impact
What are the barriers to women receiving higher education scholarships provided by USAID/Pakistan's Merit & Needs Based Scholarship Program (MNBSP)?	Findings from a performance evaluation report led to a special study looking at this question. The special study included a literature review as well as interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders.	The evaluation and subsequent study led USAID to make important modifications to the design and implementation of MNBSP. This included expanding the number of fields and universities to include those more attractive to female applicants. In just one year, these modifications (and others) increased the female scholarship recipient rate from 23% to 50%. In addition, because of this success, USAID shared these results in-country, and Pakistan's Higher Education Commission adjusted its scholarship implementation model nation-wide to achieve higher female participation rates as well.

Testing and exploring our theories of change: Our theories of change dictate our program design and provide the rationale for why and what we implement. Effective learning happens when we consistently test and explore clearly articulated, high-quality theories of change that are based on evidence, logical, and relevant to the context in which we operate. We can test and explore our theories of change through a variety of learning activities, including assessments, evaluations, collecting monitoring data, and by gathering the experiential knowledge of our staff, partners, and communities affected by our work.

CLA in Action: Testing and Exploring Theories of Change

Learning Questions	Learning Activities	Key Decisions / Impact
What deters youth from engaging in political violence? Does job creation reduce support for political violence? These questions explored the theory of change: If youth have sufficient job skills and opportunities for employment,	Mercy Corps conducted focus groups with youth participants, local stakeholders, and program staff in three countries—Afghanistan, Colombia, and Somalia. In addition, they conducted a literature review and quantitative studies, including an impact evaluation in Afghanistan. They analyzed and synthesized	Mercy Corps found that "employment status appears to have little or no effect on whether a young person will engage in or support political violence" (pg. 14). The real drivers are "injustice, corruption, and normalized violence" (pg. 24). In addition, they found that programs that provide vocational training and civic education without meaningful ways to

they will be less likely to engage in political violence.	learning from these activities in this [report]().	apply that training could be doing more harm than good. This led to a call for a "reassessment of vocational training programs alone as peacebuilding tools" and more integrated approaches that take into account the drivers of political violence among youth.

Identifying Game Changers and Planning Scenarios: Game changers are the most significant conditions—beyond our immediate control—that affect our ability to achieve intended results. Examples include elections or political shifts, natural disasters, and conflicts. Effective learning happens when we consistently identify key game changers based on our context and intended results, develop [scenarios]() based on those game changers, and articulate context indicators that help us monitor changes in our operating environments. By doing this, we remain abreast of the larger system in which we operate and can adjust programming as the context shifts.

CLA in Action: Identifying Game Changers and Planning Scenarios

Learning Question	Learning Activities	Key Decisions / Impact
How will the results of the 2013 national elections in Zimbabwe impact USAID's portfolio?	Prior to the elections, USAID/Zimbabwe identified and planned for various scenarios, including what USAID's response would be to them. Then following the elections, once the results were clear, the mission undertook a collaborative review of the context building off of the scenario planning done prior to the elections.	As a result of these learning activities, USAID/Zimbabwe modified its [Country Development Cooperation Strategy](), specifically revising their approach to promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance in light of the election results.

Ensuring our monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are designed to help us learn from implementation, in addition to meeting established reporting requirements: Finally, effective learning requires effective monitoring and evaluation that provides high-quality, timely, and relevant information to decision-makers, as the examples above highlight. USAID and its partners rightfully spend significant resources on M&E. We can increase the value of these investments by tying M&E to learning priorities and using the data and information generated to inform design and implementation decisions in real time.

Ultimately, an investment in learning is an investment in the communities and sectors in which we work; when you know better, you do better. Based on these examples, we can see that the investment pays off. It enables us to maximize our most underutilized resource—*knowledge*—while being strategic with our scarcest resource—*time*—leading to better decisions and better development.

For more information, visit [usaidlearninglab.org]().