2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

From Good to Great: Meeting Conservation and Biodiversity Goals in Programming with Actionable Planning Tools

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Good to Great Tool logo. Credit: Training Resources Group (TRG)

Summary:

How can USAID staff ensure their biodiversity programming is good, if not great, at meeting conservation goals? USAID/Biodiversity Division tackled this critical question in designing and implementing a programmatic support tool for biodiversity programming called the Good to Great (GtG) tool. The tool was designed to communicate standards for implementing high-impact, biodiversity and integrated programs at USAID, drawing upon a CLA approach to help implementers reflect on program cycle management processes, identify priorities, and design action plans to continually improve and adaptively manage programs. The GtG tool provides a spectrum of criteria across five technical components, highlighting "good" to "great". The tool harmonizes Agency guidance for programming and promotes best practices described in the Biodiversity Handbook and USAID's CLA approach, into an actionable tool for adaptive management.

The team took a CLA approach to its development to ensure appropriateness and utility. GtG was developed in partnership with the USAID/Biodiversity Division under Measuring Impact (MI), where the criteria for programming was established. USAID's Sharing Environment and Energy Knowledge (SEEK) project then converted the criteria into an actionable tool for programming. Through SEEK, the GtG tool was developed, socialized, and adapted. Finally, it was shared with a cohort of 25 individuals as a pilot under SEEK's Biodiversity Advisors program. Since the release of the tool, USAID operating units (OUs) continue to utilize it and a Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop was hosted with Measuring Impact II (MI2) facilitators to ensure the tool's sustainability.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

USAID/Biodiversity supports OUs and their biodiversity programming in a number of ways, helping staff achieve programmatic success and support Agency conservation goals. Yet, knowledge and application of best practices in biodiversity are often inconsistent. Many OUs simply meet the minimum requirements for biodiversity programming or require additional support. How then could USAID staff better support OUs, empowering them to transform programming from good at meeting conservation goals to great, when needed?

To address this question, USAID/Biodiversity worked in partnership with MI to develop a maturity matrix outlining criteria for good, better, and great programming in biodiversity. The matrix communicated standards for implementing high-impact biodiversity programming aligned with Agency goals in conservation. The matrix allowed OU's to adapt it to their unique context and synthesized best practices, evidence, and lessons learned from a variety of stakeholders working in the sector. It built upon requirements from the USAID Biodiversity Policy, the Biodiversity Code, and the Automated Directives System (ADS) 201.

With the maturity matrix in place, USAID/Biodiversity then worked collaboratively with the SEEK project to develop the GtG tool. The tool examines five technical components: Internal and External Collaboration, Technical Evidence, Theory of Change, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning and Adaptive Management. GtG allows OUs to lead themselves through a process of reflection and learning to assess how programming supports Agency conservation goals and what areas of design, implementation and management could be improved to move programming from good to great, when needed. Through the tool, OUs are able to reflect upon, identify, and then apply change management approaches to evolve, grow, and expand their biodiversity work for greater impact. Through this tool, OUs are empowered to lead change in their programming, fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement to meet conservation goals.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

The GtG tool was inspired by the Good to Great framework developed by author Jim Collins in tandem with the USAID CLA framework and PPL's maturity matrix card deck. These approaches are complementary, recognizing existing biodiversity programming achieving "good" criteria for conservation goals while further empowering OUs to transform programming from good to great using elements of CLA. Like USAID's CLA approach, the Good to Great framework recognizes that programmatic improvements do not happen in a vacuum, multiple components and actors are needed to achieve greater results and there are critical lessons to be learned from "good" programming. With the Good to Great framework, there are three components that contribute to major breakthroughs from good to great. These components include (1) the process, (2) people, thoughts, and actions taken for improvement, and (3) the broader enabling environment for learning, known as the flywheel. SEEK saw a natural overlap in this framework with the six components of CLA to improve programming. Thus, incorporating both approaches allows USAID OUs to see a clear path of progression while simultaneously applying familiar CLA concepts to (1) Assess the current status of adaptive management in biodiversity programming along a spectrum of good, better, and great, (2) identify strategic linkages to the Program Cycle in their operating unit, (3) Prioritize what can be done in the areas that the team selects for focus and improvement, and (4) Facilitate agreement upon action steps to improve programs and leverage for adaptive management decisions over time.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

To tackle USAID/Biodiversity Division's questions around program improvement, the GtG tool embodied CLA both in its design and throughout the development process. Incorporating CLA in both stages was critical to ensure the appropriateness and utility of the tool and foster sustainability in the long term.

During the design process, this was achieved first by establishing an environment open to learning and adaptation, through openness and a strong working relationship with MI to understand the initial maturity matrix and criteria, lessons learned from the development process, and how best to transform the framework into an actionable tool. The tool was then integrated into the SEEK project Biodiversity Advisor's Program to be piloted, allowing the SEEK team to implement and gather data on the success and utility of the tool for future improvements. 16 of 24 participating advisors hosted programming discussions with their operating units, helping them to identify (1) lessons learned from experiences planning, facilitating, and applying the tool, and (2) next steps for supporting individual action planning to implement results of the facilitated discussions. This then enabled USAID/Madagascar to leverage the tool to inform planning and design for their forthcoming biodiversity programming. This process fostered strong knowledge management practices to articulate the impact and success of the tool, contributing to a ToT for 12 MI2 facilitators.

While the process to develop the tool took a decided CLA approach, the GtG tool itself also incorporates a CLA approach in how it frames programmatic change and adaptive management. Thus, while the Good to Great framework provides an overall pathway for improvement, USAID's CLA approach provides the resources and means to achieve results and foster improved adaptive management processes in programming. The tool is captured in interactive Google Sheets, a supporting implementation guide, and Google Slides, designed to allow USAID OUs to lead transformative discussions and formulate action plans for improvement on their own. The tools are designed to harmonize Agency guidance and promote best practices identified for programming. It further creates space for intentional moments of pause to evaluate and reflect on what lessons, successes, and knowledge can be gleaned from past and current biodiversity programming. Armed with that knowledge, OUs can then make informed decisions on how best to design and improve current and future programming, drawing upon examples and evidence of what works to foster not just good but great biodiversity programming that achieves development results and moves the needle on conservation goals. Through this process, OU staff are then able to work collaboratively with their teams to develop action plans designed to foster ownership and drive change, employing adaptive management strategies to transform programming.

To ensure the sustainability of the tool, the SEEK project supported a ToT with MI2 facilitators in 2022. The goal of this training was to provide facilitators the necessary context, skills, and knowledge to support USAID OUs in program development, making them ambassadors for the GtG tool. In future programming, USAID OUs may then approach facilitators trained on the tool for support, contributing to the longevity and application of GtG as an adaptive management and planning tool. In addition, those OUs already familiar with the tool will continue to build a robust body of evidence to draw upon in implementing future biodiversity programming, generating and documenting lessons learned, adaptive management approaches taken, and areas for improvement to ensure their programming continues to meet great criteria on the good to great scale.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Design and implementation of the GtG tool illuminated several lessons learned and impacts for USAID/Biodiversity. Primarily, the process of developing the tool helped USAID more clearly define and articulate what successful programming looks like in the field. This clear articulation helps OUs understand what is needed for successful programming and empowers them to produce an action plan for improving their programming. This has further aligned programming commitments to policy objectives and strengthened relationships and networks between USAID/Washington and the field.

These findings were emphasized in feedback from the Biodiversity Advisors program webinar in 2021, during final coaching sessions, and throughout program surveys. Advisors felt the tool was practical and a useful for thinking strategically and adaptively managing programming. For many, the tool helped facilitate natural points for pause and reflection, often integrated with broader discussions like work planning. Many OUs incorporated the tool into quarterly team retreats and internal pause and reflects as a result. Advisors further cited the tool as a powerful connection point, allowing OU staff to foster collaboration on programming. Many also recognized the tool's ability to support knowledge management, allowing for the sharing of lessons learned and best practices to inform programming rooted in evidence. One example of the tool at work was shared by participants during the Biodiversity Advisor's webinar:

"We decided to pilot the tool as we launch a new marine activity. We were struggling a bit as we didn't feel like we had enough information. We were able to use this [tool] as stocktaking. As we were thinking about if we were doing good, better and great, and this reminded us of some things we could do [to improve programming]."

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Through solicited feedback and targeted implementation opportunities, USAID/Biodiversity can point to several instances where the GtG tool has supported OUs to design and implement activities that more greatly meet policy objectives and goals in conservation across the Agency. One such success story is the implementation of the GtG tool in USAID/Madagascar.

In 2021, USAID/Madagascar hosted two sessions on the GtG tool to review lessons learned from past programming and develop an action plan for improvements to inform planning efforts of their Communities and Conservation Project (CCP). After working through their portfolio together, the Mission completed a self-assessment of their programming. For each area of assessment, they used GtG to evaluate their performance as "good", "better," or "great." Ultimately, staff found their portfolio of work reflected a combination of "better' and "great" processes, practices, and approaches. Yet, USAID/Madagascar was still able to identify three action areas for improvement to center their CCP programming firmly in "great": (1) Establishing alignment between new activities and the project early, (2) setting clear adaptive management expectations in design documents, and (3) starting the design process early. When asked to reflect on their usage of the GtG tool, USAID/Madagascar shared:

"The Biodiversity Good to Great Tool demonstrated tremendous usefulness in helping our team go through a process of reflection and learning to assess and inform how we navigated the design process, and the assessment itself yielded fruitful insights that will help inform the upcoming project design. As we gear up for a new design process, reflecting on the ways we accomplished such a strong design will help us replicate and improve upon our past successes in activity designs to come."

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

The success of the GtG tool development and implementation is due in large part to the strong partnerships established between USAID/Biodiversity, MI, and SEEK. The thought-partnership and coordination between stakeholders helped advance work quickly, requiring careful planning and commitment to collaboration and adaptation from all stakeholders. Another critical success factor was the ability to integrate a pilot of the tool into the Biodiversity Advisor's program. This allowed USAID to test the tool with knowledgeable participants, generating data on application and considerations for how to improve the tool for future use. This facilitated good knowledge management to scale the tool, supporting the USAID/Madagascar pilot and MI2 ToT.

While the GtG tool was successful and well-received by the field, USAID/Biodiversity did encounter and continues to grapple with several challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge for Missions/OUs to leverage GtG is building it into existing practices and processes while clearly defining the purpose of the tool in practice. USAID has started to address this challenge through the MI2 ToT, but will need to continue to think intentionally about ways to raise awareness of the tool, identify the appropriate time to utilize it, and clarify its benefits to encourage wider adoption. Another challenge centers on diffusion of the tool, meaning greater adoption across Missions/OUs who manage Biodiversity Activities. In addition, the programmatic discussion and action planning encouraged through GtG is not a fix-all solution but rather a stepping stone to launch ongoing discussions for improvement. An essential question USAID/Biodiversity and OUs continue to struggle with is once actions are identified and set, how do OUs return to their action plans in meaningful ways to sustain adaptive conversations? Lastly, USAID will need to continue to evolve the tool as Agency priorities and knowledge on conservation issues advances.