2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Fields Don't Close: Locally-led adaptation to survive the COVID lockdown in rural Paraguay

FECOPROD technician training producers on herbs packaging. Credit: FECOPROD

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Summary:

In March 2020, Paraguay registered its first local case of COVID-19. Driven by the need to protect its population, the Government of Paraguay established a total lockdown with strict sanitary and circulation restrictions that lasted 45 days. Although this quick response allowed Paraguay to initially stand out as one of the most successful countries in fighting the pandemic, it also brought about harsh economic impacts nationwide.

In this challenging context, the Paraguayan Federation of Production Cooperatives (FECOPROD), implementing the Inclusive Value Chains Program, had to adapt their technical assistance to continue supporting small-scale farmers and womens' committees during the pandemic. Locally-produced food had to reach Paraguayan homes now more than ever, when imports were also affected by the closed borders.

Under the motto "The Fields Don't Close", FECOPROD took up the challenge of being the local leader needed to guide small-scale farmers and women committees in navigating the waters of the pandemic. Thanks to a strong adaptive organizational culture, and unprecedented levels of internal collaboration, FECOPROD managed to still reach beneficiaries remotely. Through virtual training, digital learning materials, and mobile-based assistance they helped beneficiaries also adapt to continue producing and selling with new very strict sanitary protocols.

Farmers continued cultivating, milking their cows, and selling their produce. Womens' committees starting using technology for the first time in their lives to reach customers' homes. CLA helped them to not only make ends meet, but most importantly, to stay on track on their development journey towards a better and more self-reliant being.

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?

In March 2020, the Government of Paraguay established a total lockdown as a response to the first cases and casualties of COVID-19 registered locally. Regular circulation was prohibited, except to get food, medicine or medical care. These tight restrictions lasted 45 days, after which the Government implemented a so-called "Intelligent/Smart" Quarantine. Flexibilizations included a gradual return to work and social activities with physical distancing and strict hygiene measures. Although this quick response allowed Paraguay to initially stand out as one of the most successful countries in fighting the pandemic, it also brought about harsh economic impacts nationwide.

The Inclusive Value Chains (IVC) Program, implemented by the Paraguayan Federation of Production Cooperatives (FECOPROD for its Spanish acronym), aims at increasing the incomes of small-scale farmers by linking them to agro-industrial supply chains. Some of the main value chains that IVC supports are sesame, dairy, and herbs. The program also supports women committees in selling their home and farm products in the local market fairs. FECOPROD achieves these objectives by building the capacity of farmer associations to improve their group sales and services provided to its members, and to work in a more sustainable way.

With the strict lockdown in place, FECOPROD's technical staff was not able to deliver their assistance as before. Circulation between cities and rural communities were forbidden, as well as group meetings, and agglomeration of people in markets. However, despite COVID-19, the fields still needed to be harvested, the cows still needed to be milked, and the produce still needed to be sold. Locally-produced food had to reach Paraguayan homes now more than ever, when imports were also affected by the closed borders.

Under the motto "The Fields Don't Close", FECOPROD needed to respond to the challenge of supporting farmers to continue producing and selling despite the strict sanitary measures in place. With closed borders and an economy that had to depend more heavily on its local production and sales, FECOPROD took up the challenge of being the local leader that would guide small-scale farmers and women committees to navigate the waters of the pandemic, and continue meeting their economic needs.

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

FECOPROD decided to respond to this challenge by applying a CLA approach to carry on their support to farmers despite the pandemic. This approach was a mix of their own Continuous Improvement Processes (CIP), plus the fundamental value of collaborating that USAID's CLA vision brings. Because of this embedded learning and adapting culture, FECOPROD was eager to respond quickly to the challenging context.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic taught them that the situation required to work collaboratively in unprecedented ways and manage adaptively to address the new program challenges. FECOPROD's team was committed to support farmers' efforts to continue producing and selling, but they needed to adapt to the new pandemic context with its sanitary and circulation restrictions, limited human and financial resources, and new obstacles to reach the markets.

Under the request of USAID's Agreement Officer Representative (AOR), FECOPROD convened its key staff to develop a Risk Management Plan in response to COVID-19. This plan analyzed the impact the pandemic was having on program activities, and proposed mitigation and adaptation measures to achieve objectives despite the emerging obstacles and challenges. Staff from all levels of the organization, from the General Manager, the Program Coordinator, the field supervisors and technicians, collaborated tirelessly to plan on how to adapt to continue assisting program beneficiaries.

This enhanced collaboration was not only helpful, but essential to quickly decide and implement the changes needed to continue delivering their development assistance, which had to be provided within the context of FECOPROD's own suspension of general activities to also respond to the Government's strict sanitary measures.

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.

First of all, and in line with FECOPROD's learning culture, the leadership called for a meeting with section heads and team leaders of development programs. The objective was to discuss what were the specific issues that needed to be addressed to continue supporting farmers' production. After each section presented their challenges, the team made several decisions that would affect how to continue working. This included changes on the number of personnel that would actively be going to the fields to provide assistance, adapt training programs to virtual methods, and develop digital learning materials. They also needed to "localize" even more their assistance, by relying on local technicians to provide in-person support to their own peers and neighbors, training to smaller groups to avoid conglomeration, and helping them follow sanitary measures through the provision of face masks and hand sanitizers.

The beneficiary group most affected by the pandemic was the women committees, who could not continue their sales because the Government banned the operation of local market fairs. Considering that their peak sales season was about to start with Passover and Mothers' Day, the IVC team had to act quickly and creatively to continue supporting them. The team decided that they would help them adapt to the current needs of the market, which although under strict lockdown, was still eager to consume their products. On-line promotions and sales became the only option, with direct personal delivery to customers' homes by bicycles or motorcycles.

This adaptation did not come easily. Rural Paraguayan women are very traditional, used to doing things their way, without leaving their routine and comfort zones. They have very busy schedules taking care of their homes, their children, their husbands, and their farms. With schools closed, they also now had to tutor their kids and use their cellphones to attend virtual classes and send in homework. Learning about new ways of doing things, and most importantly, learning to use new technology and social platforms was not something that they would normally accept very eagerly. These tools are very common in the city and the industrialized world, but a huge innovation in the countryside where personal contact is still the widely preferred way of doing business. But the need to make ends meet, and the ready availability of IVC's support, encouraged them to face the situation differently and become innovative, flexible and modern.

After identifying who already owned a smartphone to promote their committees' group sales, the IVC team supported them on the design of social media flyers and on-line delivery strategies. A FECOPROD field supervisor promoted this new delivery service during interviews with a local radio, which is still the main mass communication media at the community level. The program also worked with municipal governments, cooperatives, and other local stakeholders to safely reopen market days in various cities using larger and more open spaces like city bus terminals. Also, the IVC team sought opportunities for beneficiaries to receive special licenses that would permit continued sales of products despite shut-downs. Producers also helped one another by volunteering to bring others' products to markets, if individuals were unable to attend the fairs.

All these efforts were a great help for women committees, who ended up successfully delivering their on-line orders to their clients' homes. Those who were too old to deal with technology hurdles, or deliver their products themselves, received help from their own children or neighbors. Although profits were not as good as previous years, it was definitely more than they would have gotten had they not adapted to the current market context and sanitary demands.

Besides adapting their program implementation, FECOPROD also had to change the way they were tracking their efforts and reporting back on their progress. Under the guidance of USAID's AOR, FECOPROD adapted its own monitoring systems to be able to respond to the Agency's new remote monitoring guidelines. As an example, FECOPROD started utilizing video and geo-referenced pictures to report back on their progress considering the AOR's limitation for in-person field visits. Although difficult at the beginning, these changes brought about several positive unexpected outcomes that were very welcome by FECOPROD and USAID.

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?

All in all, CLA -particularly the collaborating and adapting pillars- have had a tremendous impact on FECOPROD staff, USAID/Paraguay, and most importantly, the end beneficiaries. In the case of FECOPROD, although the CLA spirit was already intrinsic to the organization, new staff, specially the ones related to the IVC program, had to embrace and learn from the CLA way of collaborating and managing adaptively. They had to internalize it and apply it to their everyday work, which had a great impact in their strategic thinking and in the way they provided technical assistance.

This was an osmosis process, from insiders to outsiders, from top to bottom. The continuous improvement systems and the adaptive mindset had a total spillover effect from the leadership throughout the entire organization and into the field. FECOPROD's continuous learning and adapting policies guided program managers, which in turn motivated supervisors, coordinators and field technicians. Most importantly, these field technicians transmitted the CLA approach to the leaders of producer organizations, and through them to the ultimate beneficiary. This increased collaboration has made processes more efficient, budget assignments more fluid, and allowed for renewed relationships within the organization. Elevating the importance of each person's role in a collaborative environment, where everybody is part of a bigger system, enhanced team motivation and the sense of belonging. The satisfaction of being able to help others overcome adversities, while finding new efficient ways of working, is one of the most important organizational effects of this enhanced collaborative environment.

Similarly, USAID/Paraguay has appreciated the increased opportunities to monitor and participate in IVC. Before COVID-19, trips to field sites were limited to two or three per year. Now, the AOR receives regular virtual -sometimes live- updates on training activities, beneficiaries' experiences, and stories from FECOPROD, which helps strengthen the collaborative relationship between USAID, program staff, and beneficiaries.

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?

The positive spillover of this collaborative and adaptive approach was also felt at the field. Field technicians now communicate more directly and often with USAID/Paraguay, which has helped them feel more visible and more included in the larger program mission and goals.

At the same time, the relationship between field technicians and beneficiaries also improved. Although meeting in person less frequently, beneficiaries perceived an increased sense of support thanks to digital and mobile communication. Farmers used WhatsApp to send updates on their plans and products as well as to ask questions about video tutorials. From other parts of the country, FECOPROD technicians and mentors can respond to questions or provide feedback. FECOPROD continues to conduct virtual training and film activities to serve as on-line tutorials. Before COVID-19, opportunities for training and monitoring were more limited due to time and resource constraints, but virtuality became an efficient alternative that allowed them to be closer to the field.

But most importantly, this process has helped beneficiaries transform their mindsets from one of despair, hopelessness and frustration, to one focused on growth through continued collaborating, learning and adapting. This was more tangible in the case of the women committees. Never in their lives they imagined that they would be selling their produce by WhatsApp, Instagram and other social media, let alone delivering them directly to customers' homes. This otherwise small adaptation had an exponential impact in their lives. It allowed them to still make interesting profits to continue feeding their families, paying for their children schooling, and to stay away from extreme poverty. Applying the Washington-born CLA approach to their Paraguayan rural community context, allowed them to effectively challenge the pandemic and turn their desperation into a personal growth opportunity. CLA helped them to not only make ends meet, but most importantly, to stay on track on their development journey towards a better and more self-reliant being.

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 main enabler to this collaborative adaptive process was FECOPROD's organizational culture, the leadership's vision, and the staff's commitment and sense of belonging. When these elements are in place, the internal communication becomes fluid. Frank and candid dialogues can help find the best solutions to complicated situations, even when facing different points of views or different approaches to problem solving.

This fluid communication was the basis for reaching an enhanced team collaboration. Had FECOPROD's teams not planned their new strategy to respond to farmers needs in a participatory way, the implementation would not have been as effective. This also included having an open dialogue with beneficiaries themselves, to have a real understanding of their current needs and jointly deciding on the best and practical way to assist them.

One of the challenges the program had to face throughout this adaptation process, was the initial rejection to the use of new technologies to implement remote technical assistance and monitoring. FECOPROD's field technicians had to learn how to use technology to provide assistance and collect monitoring data in a faster and more comfortable way. FECOPROD was able to overcome this with a lot of training and coaching, and now, besides new virtual trainings and tutorials, the technical monitoring is also based on technology. These changes allow the program to adapt faster and respond more appropriately to the ever changing context of the pandemic.

Finally, one of the lessons learned is that the collaborating, learning and adapting culture has to be promoted at all levels of an organization. In this case, the need to learn and adapt quickly spurred a collaborative process not seen during normal times which was essential to respond to the complexity of the situation. Strategic decisions made at the leadership level, were accompanied by strategic changes and flexibilities at the operational level, like in the finance and accounting offices. Although for some it was harder to adapt than to others, the constant collaboration throughout all organizational levels, with strong leadership support, was the secret to such effective results.