2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

READ II team in one of "Pause and Reflect" sessions. Credit: Berihun Mekonnen.

Case Title:

Adapting in Action – Early Grade Reading to Education in Crisis and Conflict in Ethiopia

Name: Guy Bostock, Dereje Getahun, Betelhem Tesfaye

Organization: Creative Associates International

Summary:

Ethiopia READ II ("Activity" and "READ II") is a USAID-funded Basic Education Activity running from January 2018 to October 2023 and implemented by a team led by Creative Associates International, Inc. Originally designed as an Early Grade Reading (EGR) educational Activity, READ II rapidly evolved after the onset of COVID-19, and later, due to the extended war in Northern Ethiopia, into an Education in Crisis and Conflict (EiCC) intervention supporting primary school students in the conflict-affected areas of Amhara, Afar, and Tigray.

The rapid change process, captured through six pivots and fifteen cooperative agreement modifications, relied on the Activity's Collaboration, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach for the project to stay relevant and effective. The following are some reflections from READ II's CLA application and its resilient and adaptive programming which truly reveals the development-humanitarian nexus:

- The frequent and timely adapting to changes created an opportunity for the team to ask harder questions like "What does success looks like for READ II?" at each change point/pivot, requiring a redefinition of "success" for the Activity. READ II repeatedly revised its results framework and key indicator set to align with the changes.
- Establishment of strong camaraderie and common focus among the staff, stakeholders, and USAID.
- Documented and utilized learning about the development-humanitarian nexus and working in a dynamic and non-permissive environment for continuous improvement and future programming.
- Success in demonstrating that EiCC has a rightful place as a life-sustaining endeavor in emergency and conflict situations.

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?

During the first two and a half years of implementation, READ II was unfolding smoothly as an early grade reading and writing program in Mother Tongue (MT) and English. The program developed and implemented evidence- and needs-based interventions to support school administrators, teachers, and communities in seven MT languages and English in seven regions, reaching 3,000 schools and 3,000,000 students.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, READ II faced a succession of crises including the shutdown of the education system from March to September 2020, a reduction of approximately 24% of its funding due to Mission level funding constraints and the impact of the Northern Ethiopia Conflict, which disrupted education and livelihoods in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions. Donor funding priorities have also shifted due to the confrontation between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Government of Ethiopia (GOE). As a result, READ II had to pivot in response to these challenges, and the CLA approach built in the MEL plan was deployed to support project leadership in managing the frequently changing context for adaptive management and robust decision-making.

READ II faced challenges such as teleworking, reduction in workforce, and transitioning from EGR to EiCC. Our main development challenge continues to be the rapid development and implementation of an optimal EiCC program within funding constraints. The program description, MEL plan, and budget have been repeatedly overhauled and the project implementation team has shrunk to only two international partners. On the other hand, new knowledge and partnerships are being formed as READ II works with more organizations in the humanitarian sector.

Although the changes were externally mandated, READ II had to learn to do something new and relied on CLA approaches such as Adaptive Management and Continuous Learning & Improvement, which were supported by Internal and External Collaboration and Pause and Reflect Sessions as tools for change.

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

Due to budget reductions in the last two years, the COVID -19 pandemic, and conflict in Northern Ethiopia, the READ II Activity underwent six pivots and fifteen modifications. While READ II successfully adapted to the new situations, many hard decisions such as eliminating important aspects of the program and laying off valuable staff were necessitated. READ II was required to produce compelling interventions and strategies to remain relevant and respond to the needs of beneficiaries and clients in the dynamic environment. Scenario planning, continuous learning during the multiple pivots, transparency, as well as open communication at all levels were critical to making better decisions and smooth adaptations.

The READ II and USAID education teams acted as one team in the change management process and READ II collaborated internally with the technical and operational teams and implementation partners to shape new program descriptions. New partnerships with local and international partners such as Whiz Kids Workshop, UNICEF, and Imagine 1 Day were established. READ II collaborated with all stakeholders including the community to effectively implement its interventions in a less permissive environment. The shared goal, collaborative efforts, and the sense of oneness among all helped the Activity to respond effectively.

Continuous learning was achieved through routine school visits and studies such as Effectiveness Evaluations and Local Education Monitoring Approach, and studies on the broadcasting work during the COVID-19 period.
As part of READ II's continuous learning, Pause and Reflect exercises took place each time study results were available, during or upon completion of major activities, and during monthly technical meetings.

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.

During the COVID-19 school closure, READ II collaborated with USAID, Whiz Kids Workshop, UNICEF, and six regional education bureaus to commission educational TV and radio programs, and used an Interactive Voice Response Hotline to reach out to parents with advice about supporting home learning. The team learned through two virtual surveys of school directors, parents and woreda officials about how each of these groups were coping during school closures and whether the broadcast programs were reaching the beneficiaries. Drawing on the findings of the surveys, READ II worked with the Ministry of Education to develop COVID-19 precautions and safety guidelines and provided intensive training to education stakeholders and community leaders. The COVID-19 period remote survey experience and findings were shared during internal Pause and Reflect sessions and externally through different international forums (CIES and BEC).

In connection with Mission-level funding constraints, the project was required to downsize its interventions and passed through an adaptation process to accommodate the reduction. The project was de-scoped through a collaborative effort with USAID and through positive engagement with the GOE counterparts.
Due to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia in November 2020, the Activity was again forced to pivot its programming and resources to the war-affected region, Tigray, and eventually to Amhara and Afar regions. The major focus of the Activity changed from Early Grade Reading to EiCC, providing Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Psychosocial Support (PSS) to students in schools and internally displaced children as well as integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into classroom instruction.

The EiCC design was informed by rapid assessments done in crisis-affected areas. The onsite visits and consultations with local education officials and community members assisted in learning about the magnitude of the damage that schools sustained, the trauma impact on children who spent time in IDP Camps, and the immediate needs of schools and the community. READ II also conducted a series of consultative, internal meetings with Creative HQ and USAID to discuss the findings of the rapid assessments and to identify key interventions and strategies. The consultations helped to build a sense of ownership and a "we can do it" spirit among staff.
READ II drew on approaches used by humanitarian sector NGOs to develop and implement its EiCC program from the humanitarian and development nexus perspective. For example, temporary learning centers are a standard way to enable children to continue learning in IDP camps. The READ II team was trained on PFA, PSS, and SEL by an international expert from World Vision International and similar trainings were then cascaded to teachers, school administrators, and community members in Amhara and Afar regions.

READ II also used lessons from its previous Crisis Modifier experiences to increase the efficiency of the supply chain to undertake massive procurements and distributions of materials to target schools that were damaged during periods of conflict and to train target beneficiaries in PFA. A training package that was originally designed for volunteer teachers in IDP camps in Somali region during Year 3 of the Activity became the foundation for training teachers and school directors for school reopening after the COVID-19 pandemic. The training package was re-adapted for use in IDP camps in Tigray and IDP camps and schools in Amhara and Afar Regions. READ II has actively participated in the national and sub-national Education Cluster groups since its inception and has used this forum to exchange information and ideas, and to participate in Cluster-organized assessments.

The READ II security team has closely monitored the situation at the implementation sites and has provided security clearance and guidance so that interventions run safely and smoothly. Security information from field offices, USAID, Creative Associates, UN Agencies, International NGOs, Government sources, and social media is used for context monitoring.

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?

Working in the EiCC sector is emotionally draining since the team regularly encounters traumatized beneficiaries and is witness to the devastation brought by war. P&R, AARs, and internal collaboration has enabled the team to develop a shared vision and continuously learn and adapt. Flexible and adaptive management have helped the team stay relevant and devise effective emergency interventions. A strong camaraderie and common focus among staff and with the USAID team and informal peer support has helped everyone to cope emotionally.

The READ II team is deliberate in conducting rapid assessments and P&R sessions as they facilitate continuous learning and adjustment to the changing context. For example, Pivot 6 planned to focus on IDP camps. However, it was observed during implementation that most IDPs were living within their host community or returning home as soon as security permitted. Therefore, the focus was tweaked to mainly support host schools, while also working in new IDP camps that are established as the conflict ebbs and flows.

External collaboration has enabled the team to “retool” as EiCC workers. Staff received training on PFA from World Vision’s Global Crisis Response Team. Thus, Early Grade Reading specialists became relevant to EiCC technical demands. Building on its prior experience with a Crisis Modifier, READ II adapted training materials and further enriched them with experiences from other organizations including UNICEF and Save the Children.
Through READ II’s work, Creative Associates gained capabilities in EiCC, organizational change and adaptive management, and developed closer relationships with humanitarian organizations in Ethiopia. This is important for the future, as agility to respond to shocks by quickly developing and deploying new capabilities will be an asset in Ethiopia and beyond as regular shocks become “the new normal.” As USAID’s Development Strategy favors local capacity-building, Creative looks forward to building local organizations’ capacity to apply CLA approaches and adapt quickly to new situations.

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?

READ II remained relevant through the frequent contextual changes and pivots. During the COVID-19 school closures, the Activity reached students at home with MT literacy lessons via TV and radio and through collaboration with Whiz Kids Workshop and the Regional Education Bureaus (REBs). Evidence from READ II’s qualitative study indicates that a good number of students were reached, although the proportion varied considerably by region. Whiz Kids Workshop won an “Impactful Person of the Year” award for the work they did with READ II and others during this period.

The READ II team drew lessons from previous and current experiences using P&R sessions and AARs. For example, an approach to supporting IDPs in Somali in 2019 and Tigray in March-June 2021 is now applied in Amhara and Afar. This enabled schools and temporary learning centers to operate. Over time, this will translate into rising school enrollment and full resumption of teaching and learning. The PSS training package and approaches have been continuously revised, incorporating experiences from implementation, other organizations, and relevant literature. As memories of the conflict recede, there will be further revisions to support a full return to learning in the next school year. Training of stakeholders on how to support themselves and their children to recover emotionally will hopefully make schools and communities more resilient and more child friendly. In 2022's second quarter of implementation, 136,084 children, 347 schools, 923 teachers and 289 Parent Teacher Student Organizations benefited from READ II support.

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?

Led by experienced and courageous field project leadership and home office support team who were open to change, READ II was able to pivot quickly, using flexibility, transparency, adaptive management, and consultative and collaborative decision-making processes as tools to navigate through the changes. To complement this robust internal team dynamic, there was also strong collaboration with USAID, implementing partners, and other organizations as one team with a shared goal to effect positive impact in a changing system. Technically, READ II was able to draw on previous experiences implementing Crisis Modifiers and to re-purpose some existing products and services from EGR to EiCC. The MEL Plan, which integrated CLA from its inception, gave the Activity a useful toolkit for change. Administratively, the finance and the technical teams worked closely to quickly reconfigure the budget for each pivot. Staff were kept informed by e-mail and virtual meetings even when working from home, and hard decisions were always clearly explained to those affected.
Challenges:
Pivoting took time, diverted attention, and affected team morale. Reductions in budget and staff also reduced the capacity of the team before needs were fully known. During the pandemic, implementation and monitoring were highly constrained, and specifically, responding to hard questions and defining what project success “looks like” was a challenge.

Advice:
- Rapid change, even within short-term projects, seems the “new normal.” Accept it as you will need to change to stay relevant. Inevitably, change comes with “collateral damage” such as reduction in workforce and de/rescoping programming, which must also be accepted. Also, using available opportunities and applying CLA approaches helps to create a shared goal.
- Answering the hard questions, such as, “What does success look like now?” is critical to learning and effectively adapting.