2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Considerations for Measuring Capacity Development in LMICs

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Credit: Emmanuel Offei, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
Caption: Organizational capacity development workshop sponsored by one of USAID's BRIDGE-Train projects

Summary:

To build strong institutions and improve livelihoods, USAID supports projects that strengthen human capacity and improve organizational performance. Measuring increased capacity, however, can be challenging. For example, organizations are multi-faceted and constantly changing, and it can be difficult to explicitly link a training event or program to an individual's improved ability to increase the organization's capacity. To address some of these inherent measurement challenges, USAID created the CBLD-9 indicator to track and measure Agency-wide progress to strengthen the performance of local organizations. The indicator measures the percentage of U.S. Government-assisted organizations with improved performance.

In October 2021, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) leaders from six USAID higher education projects started a MERL Community of Practice (COP) to discuss their experiences and challenges with using CBLD-9. The purpose of the MERL COP is to use the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) model to share project-level lessons learned, troubleshoot and brainstorm solutions to ongoing issues, and share key lessons learned with other USAID projects.

This learning brief will discuss the benefits of learning groups such as the MERL COP, share findings from an organizational capacity building pilot study conducted in 2022, and discuss how a key aspect of outcome mapping can assist in the measurement of CBLD-9. The MERL COP hopes the knowledge shared here will prove useful to others and looks forward to receiving feedback from those who read this CLA learning brief.

Note: This submission was authored by six individuals: David Schlinkert (CARISCA), Frederick Rossi (LASER), Katharina Anton-Erxleben (SHARE), Rachael Jackson (RTAC), Timothy Silberg (MUST-ISP), and Michael Eschleman (ASPIRE).

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?

This MERL COP formed to advance the organizational capacity development discussion and spur action. This brief will summarize a pilot study and an innovative framework for measuring capacity development planning and monitoring impact in the field.

This is a non-traditional CLA case study submission because it focuses on measuring capacity development through one USAID indicator, CBLD-9, from the experiences and lessons learned from six active USAID projects. The CBLD-9 indicator is reported as a fraction: The number of organizations that a USAID project has attempted to improve organizational capacity is the denominator, and the number of organizations that have reported improved performance is the numerator.

The new CBLD-9 indicator is a useful framework for thinking about and structuring the analysis of organizational improvement, but it is not as clearly defined as some of USAID's other indicators, such as the program and policy change framework. This is a challenge and an opportunity: projects can create and adopt new tools that fit each local context, but projects may find it difficult to benchmark and learn best practices from each other due to disparate instrumentation.

The MERL COP used the CLA model to discuss measurement challenges with CBLD-9 and found several recurring themes, including, but not limited to:

* How projects choose to strengthen and measure organizational performance needs to be flexible enough to accommodate contextual nuances. This flexibility ensures that capacity strengthening is tailored to local contexts, but it can prove challenging when trying to measure the magnitude of a change and compare outcomes.
* Projects must determine which organizations they want to include in their CBLD-9 indicator, and capacity building takes time and requires strong and consistent in-country partnerships.
* Another challenge with CBLD-9 is that achieving "success" is somewhat dependent on working with a large number of partners.

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

In October 2021, MERL leaders from six of USAID's BRIDGE-Train and HESN 2.0 projects started a MERL COP to improve collaboration and share knowledge between USAID higher education projects. The purpose of the MERL COP is to use the CLA model to share project-level lessons learned, troubleshoot and brainstorm solutions to ongoing issues, and share key lessons learned with other USAID projects.

The MERL COP has identified a number of challenges with measuring CBLD-9, as mentioned above, but there are also structural barriers that make organizational capacity building difficult to implement. The COP adopted the CLA model because it not only fosters honest conversations within projects, but across them as well. The CLA approach has been incredibly helpful to each partner involved, and the group continues to grow.

The COP decided to work through its development challenges of measuring CBLD-9 by highlighting the work of two projects, Supporting Holistic & Actionable Research in Education (SHARE) and Long-Term Assistance Services for Research (LASER).

Not only is the COP using the CLA approach, but each individual project is as well. For example, SHARE is using a collaborative approach to its measurement of CBLD-9 and capacity-strengthening activities in order to ensure that its activities respond to the actual needs of local partners and enable co-creation in research projects that are relevant to the local context.

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.

This section outlines how two USAID projects are testing and conceptualizing ways to measure organizational capacity building based on CLA discussions.

SHARE Pilot Study

Supporting Holistic & Actionable Research in Education (SHARE) is a USAID-funded project that advances global education learning priorities in partnership with local higher education and research institutions. One of its priorities is to contribute to partner organizational capacity strengthening.

SHARE has developed a tool that operationalizes CBLD-9 by assessing partners' capacity in 17 different predefined capability areas relevant to SHARE's project objectives, including research project management, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), methodological competencies, and promoting evidence uptake, among others, as well as partner-defined additional areas. Aside from tracking CBLD-9, data will be used to develop tailored capacity strengthening plans.

The tool intentionally promotes a collaborative approach that aims to move away from one-directional capacity-building toward capacity exchange:

* Partners have the opportunity to add capacity areas they want to evaluate beyond those suggested by SHARE.
* Partners select capacity areas they wish to strengthen, ensuring that capacity strengthening activities are driven by partners' priorities rather than prescribed by SHARE.
* Partners are also asked to indicate capacity areas where they are strong and are willing to share their expertise, which SHARE will use to facilitate exchange between partners, thereby enabling the strengthening of connections within the partner network.
* Capacity strengthening plans will be developed in co-creation with partners.

Semi-annual reviews will track progress in the priority capacity areas and allow for adaptive management of the capacity strengthening plans.

Using Outcome Mapping to Adapt CBLD-9

LASER uses outcome mapping to complement its core MEL processes, and this experience provides insight into how it could also be useful for enhancing CBLD-9. In outcome mapping, outcomes are understood as changes in the behavior of project partners – the various development actors with which it works directly – because the power to influence development rests with them. Additionally, progress markers are qualitative indicators that track behavior changes and provide succinct narrative statements describing the behavioral changes the project anticipates that its partners will affect as a result of their participation in project activities.

As such, project markers are objectively verifiable actions that should be relatively easy to track and document; they also span a range of actions – some (or all) of which may be displayed by a given project. Incorporating them takes CBLD-9 beyond a single binary measure. It is also important to consider the weight assigned to each project marker to give an accurate representation of progress made towards key indicators.

Since CBLD-9 is dependent upon the "improved performance" of an entity receiving capacity development support, progress markers help:

* Pre-define what performance improvement might look like, and
* Facilitate the recording of specific instances where a given definition is met.

For example, the CBLD-9 numerator could be constructed with the following project markers to measure the capacity development of projects that are attempting new models for translating research:

1. The research team includes, as a translation partner, one or more development practitioners (i.e., representatives of NGOs, local government agencies, etc.);
2. Development practitioners are involved early and throughout the life of the research project to help identify gaps in solutions to development challenges;
3. A dissemination plan is developed for widespread distribution of translated research products;
4. All translated research products are co-designed, with the translation partner taking the lead in producing them.

Weights applied to progress markers are crucial: each item listed above is weighted 0.25; if the first and third PMs are fulfilled, then a score of 0.5 is recorded. However, many weighting permutations are possible, as are the number of PMs that could be employed.

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?

SHARE is currently piloting its CBLD-9 measurement tool with 12 local partners (universities, networks, think tanks, etc.) in South America, Africa, and Asia. Partner feedback from the tool will be used in the following ways: Individual capacity strengthening plans will be developed with each partner, tailored to their priorities and needs and building on partners' existing organizational structure and processes.

SHARE will identify areas where several partners indicate a need for capacity strengthening. Based on the capacity strengthening plans, SHARE will then support the partners in their efforts, which may include individual mentoring where SHARE has in-house expertise, connecting partners to other resources, implementing trainings for groups of partners, and facilitating exchange between partners.

By using a CLA approach to measuring CBLD-9 and to designing capacity strengthening plans, SHARE expects greater buy-in and commitment from partners to the capacity strengthening activities, increasing the likelihood that any changes that partners implement will be maintained beyond SHARE.

Improved partner capacity, along with local advisory boards, is expected to create a more robust contextualization of the research and increase its relevance for the respective country contexts. Last but not least, SHARE expects to stimulate connections and possibly new collaborations between partners independent of SHARE.

LASER is currently developing a Performance Indicator Reference Sheet (PIRS) to capture the proposed adaptation of CBLD-9. Since the example in the previous section is quite basic, the actual version LASER deploys will consist of approximately six to eight progress markers, each of which will explicitly define "improved performance" as specific actions that are readily observable. LASER will then compare this construct against another indicator serving as a proxy for change in performance following capacity development support on research translation. These modifications and the outcome mapping thought process may be useful for informing the MERL component of other USAID projects.

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 MERL COP was formed to share experiences, talk through challenges, and share resources on CBLD-9. The COP's findings highlight the fact that there is no cookie-cutter way to measure organizational capacity development in LMICs, which can be a tremendous creativity catalyst.

The CLA process enabled each USAID project to share their experiences and perceptions of the indicator – to learn from each other and devise new ways of thinking. The team has generated new ideas about how to modify or improve the CBLD-9 indicator, as well as thoughts on new ways of planning for measurement and obtaining direct feedback on organizational capacity development from the field.

Through lively COP discussions, abstract ideas about measurement were taken and transformed into a concrete outline of how projects could set up observable and measurable change markers. These group discussions were essential to the development of the information in this learning brief and will directly impact development measurements and outcomes.

USAID projects should consider both organic and strategic approaches to finding organizations that want to improve their performance, as there are many preconceived notions of how organizational capacity development assessments could affect organizations that seek such support. Trust-building takes time and participatory MERL activities can bolster project buy-in.

Various indicators are used across international capacity development projects to assess organizational performance. These indicators ensure that performance is not merely measured in terms of the physical outputs and outcomes (e.g., policies) delivered by an organization but the competency of those individuals (in one topic or another) that produce these outputs and outcomes and ultimately contribute to wider impacts. Establishing these indicators transparently with partners allows them to understand what outputs and competencies are being tracked and how they are being measured.

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 goal of this brief is to highlight the importance of the CLA model in developing new ways of thinking about measurement challenges around capacity development.

The CLA model is used as a meeting facilitation tool to run the MERL COP, which has led to new insights into how other USAID projects might think about and measure CBLD-9.

To support CLA activities, the group focuses on the enabling Culture, Process, and Resources (CPR) factors that contribute to successful CLA conversations. The group established a collegial and open meeting culture where everyone feels comfortable sharing their successes and failures. The group organizes its processes around knowledge sharing and moving the group's work forward, focusing on each individual's unique strengths and talents. The group has strong support from each project's leadership. Resources and staff time are allocated to staff to attend meetings and work on the group's knowledge dissemination activities.

As a larger learning team, the MERL COP will continue to meet and grow the number of MERL professionals that contribute to cross-project collaboration with the goal of leading innovative problem-solving and sharing lessons learned with USAID and other USAID projects.

The MERL COP is an example of a cross-collaborative group that fosters connectivity, and joint problem-solving and improves implementation capacity.

If you would like more information about MERL COP activities, please reach out to David Schlinkert at Arizona State University: david.schlinkert@asu.edu.