2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Getting REAL: A Visual Synthesis of Results from Resilience Programming Research

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Landing page of REAL Interactive Dashboard. Credit: Emily Marshall

Summary:

REAL was itself a response to a CLA problem, specifically the lack of concrete and context-specific evidence to validate and inform refinement of resilience concepts and definitions. Despite the Award's success in strengthening the technical evidence base for USAID-funded resilience programming, REAL was challenged to develop knowledge management approaches that would make the full set of learning resources accessible to and useful for multiple audiences.

When REAL's planned approach to knowledge exchange – i.e. in-person 'culmination workshops' – were made impossible due to COVID-19, the consortium adapted plans, collaborated with a new partner (I4DI), and learned a new approach to presenting advanced research in a compelling format.

Through consistent internal and external collaboration, joint learning on the part of consortium partners and I4DI, and continual adaptation of the Dashboard structure and visualization, REAL's Synthesis of Evidence from Resilience Programming (the Dashboard) has evolved into much better, more interactive and more effective tool than the static infographics initially envisioned by the consortium. We are excited to unveil this valuable new resource for knowledge sharing, advocacy, capacity strengthening and decision-making among a wide audience of potential users. Most importantly, we expect the Dashboard will be instrumental in promoting wider application of the technical evidence base in Activity planning and implementation, and distill learning from a range of knowledge management resources in a format that is widely accessible among a diverse community of practice.

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?

The general context in which this case study takes place is one in which development and humanitarian actors around the world struggle to effectively respond to an array of protracted and complex crises. Increasingly, USAID Missions, government counterparts, and implementing partners seek to coordinate humanitarian assistance and development activities through the pursuit of the common objective of strengthened household and community resilience.
Since its inception in 2016, the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award has focused on providing demand-driven evidence generation, demonstrating thought-leadership within frontier areas of resilience programming and measurement, and facilitating use of knowledge to enable improved design and adaptive management of USAID resilience investments.

Several of REAL's initial efforts – in the form of country-specific resilience studies and large-scale impact evaluations – relied on comprehensive analysis of resilience indicators specifically intended to inform high-level policy and investment decisions made by select USAID stakeholders.

While these expansive, detailed, and often complex analytical products developed under REAL have been robust, we've learned that many have not been particularly applicable to inform decisions made by more general practitioners responsible for overseeing and/or implementing resilience strengthening activities.

Similarly, despite the success of REAL consortium partners in finalizing dozens of context- and topic-specific research and learning products, we continued to face challenges in summarizing basic takeaways and common lessons learned across individual studies and geographic contexts in a manner that was both informative and compelling for a wide range of potential users.

While several -sbu-components are relevant, this case study submission focuses specifically on the TECHNICAL EVIDENCE BASE and KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT sub-components of the CLA Framework.

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

Despite clear success in the technical evidence base related to resilience programming, an internal Reflection Session (2018) and an external After Action Review (AAR) of the REAL Award (2021) identified key areas for improvement, including: defining and reaching key audiences; developing more accessible, utilization-focused products; increasing knowledge sharing beyond REAL; and strengthening capacity related to resilience measurement.

In the case of the Dashboard, the CLA approach was initially set in motion by the need to adapt. As knowledge management lead on REAL, Save the Children had initially planned and budgeted for a series of in-person "culmination workshops". REAL envisioned these peer-to-peer learning events as a means of presenting key findings from the full array of REAL knowledge products generated over the life of the activity, and engage researchers, donors, government representatives and implementing partners in discussing the implications for resilience programming, monitoring and evaluation.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ruled out the possibility of in-person learning events, the REAL Knowledge Management and Communications team raised the idea of "data analytics and visualization" as an affordable and creative alternative to in-person knowledge exchange, and one we hoped would meet the same objectives. Given the lack of experience and technical capacity in this area, consortium partners and USAID counterparts agreed that we would need to contract the services of a qualified data visualization partner. The many months of engagement in consultative and iterative design processes since that time have demonstrated the value of CLA approaches and further solidified commitment to them among individual partners contributing to the Dashboard.

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.

In mid-2021, as part of an effort to improve REAL knowledge management, REAL inventoried all the technical evidence, resilience learning products, and events generated under the Award. This included nearly 50 distinct learning products, including evaluation and recurrent monitoring survey reports, technical guidance notes and briefs, case studies, as well as recordings and presentations from knowledge sharing events. This inventory provided immediate benefit by making individual REAL technical, thought leadership, capacity strengthening and knowledge management resources easier to access.

Two key challenges remained:
1) Even if general practitioners knew how and where to access individual learning products, many of the dense, 100 + page research reports were not well-suited to inform program-level decision making; and
2) Despite having completed numerous research and learning products, REAL partners and USAID counterparts could not easily summarize common findings and key lessons learned after 5-years of robust resilience research.

In late 2021, through close consultation with consortium partners and Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS) counterparts, Save the Children elected to contract a data visualization firm to present synthesized findings in a practical, visually appealing format, and, therefore, improve and expand application of evidence and learning generated through REAL.

Through a competitive procurement process, REAL contracted the Institute for Development Impact (I4DI) to develop what partners initially envisioned as a series of static infographics conveying key findings from REAL research. In the early phases of the planning process, TANGO International and Mercy Corps collaborated to provide I4DI with a detailed orientation to the conceptual principles and methodological processes supporting resilience measurement. This enabled I4DI to carry out an efficient and technically-sound 'meta-analysis' of key REAL research and learning products in an efficient and technically sound manner. Similarly, I4DI contributed to learning on the part of REAL partners and RFS by highlighting several distinct technical challenges in retroactively synthesizing findings expansive data sets that were not initially designed for this purpose.

The experience and expertise I4DI shared during these initial planning meetings was instrumental in demonstrating to REAL partners the value of developing an interactive dashboard as a better means of engaging diverse users in exploration of key findings drawn from multiple resilience analyses. After reviewing the quantitative and qualitative evidence generated through REAL, I4DI consulted with consortium partners and RFS counterparts to establish 'story lines' aligned with specific concepts established in widely-accepted resilience measurement frameworks.

By providing detailed and diverse evidence within each of these key themes, REAL partners and I4DI have designed a tool that will provide policy makers, analysts and field-level practitioners with concise, practical information related to:
– Shock exposure and response across distinct geographies and populations;
– Resilience capacities most consistently linked with recovery across different contexts/shock profiles;
– Evidence of the effect of 'cross cutting' elements on household and community resilience (social capital, access to essential services, empowerment and social cohesion, gender dynamics etc.); and
– Linkages between humanitarian assistance and resilience building.

Having just received formal approval of the Dashboard from RFS in May 2022, Save the Children has begun coordinating with partners to develop and implement a socialization plan to promote awareness and use of the Dashboard among a wide community of practice. In addition to presenting the Dashboard among internal partner meetings, REAL will engage a diverse range of practitioners in initial 'content mining' of the Dashboard, develop a walk-through video for new viewers, orient Center for Resilience staff and other USAID technical counterparts to the Dashboard, and promote its use through the FSN Network website, newsletters and social media campaigns.

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?

I4DI's distillation and presentation of findings from multiple, complex research products means that, the technical evidence base generated by the REAL award is no longer accessible solely through a mountain of static reports. The Dashboard now serves as an interactive repository of information from which REAL partners, USAID counterparts, implementers and other users can extract a multitude of digestible lessons learned, as well as explore and compare both quantitative and qualitative data on resilience across multiple contexts.
Development of the dashboard has also provided a valuable opportunity for self-assessment. Through the development of this resource, REAL partners have themselves been able to view the evidence generated through distinct research activities from a higher-level perspective. For instance, this iterative process has enabled consortium partners and USAID counterparts to recognize the utility and limits of standardized quantitative indicators used in resilience measurement for the purposes of data synthesis and visualization. The distillation of all evidence generated through REAL has also highlighted the importance of leveraging qualitative analysis for contextualizing findings and drawing out key relationships for general audiences.
Though not yet publically accessible, initial presentations of the Dashboard to internal and external colleagues have generated significant interest in this approach to knowledge management and data visualization. When the Dashboard is ultimately hosted on the FSN Network, it will provide numerous opportunities to inform other USAID-funded research, learning and capacity strengthening awards (e.g. Practices, Research and Operations in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (PRO-WASH), Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture and Environment (SCALE), the Gender and Youth Activity (GAYA), the Humanitarian Assistance and Evidence Cycle (HAEC), etc.). it will also link REAL evidence with other digital knowledge management platforms focused on resilience learning including USAID's ResilienceLinks, the Resilience Platform maintained by the Global Resilience Partnership, and KORE, FAO's knowledge sharing platform on resilience.

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 ultimate goal of REAL (and REAL 2) is to generate and share evidence and learning that enables USAID, host governments and implementing partners to expand the scale and impact of programs strengthening resilience at the individual, household, community and systems levels. We've done this through a variety of ways, including conducting high-quality impact evaluations and resilience research in strategically important contexts; supporting USAID in planning and designing resilience studies and M&E systems, and developing knowledge management and communication tools to ensure that REAL analysis and thought leadership contributes to achievement of USAID's broader strategic goals related to resilience.

To date, we have often pointed to the productivity of the Award (in terms of the number of individual research products completed) as a measure of our effectiveness in informing USAID resilience policy and programming. Still, after five years of hard work, we've encountered numerous opportunities to question whether we're reaching the broadest audience possible, or whether we're providing learning resources that are directly applicable for role.
When socialized among the broader community of practices, we anticipate that the CLA approach employed by REAL to develop the Dashboard will directly contribute to achievement of our intended outcomes by:
- Enabling non-experts at all levels to gain basic, evidence-based knowledge of resilience dynamics;
- Support decision-making among donor representatives, implementing partners, and host governments by providing top-line results from context-specific resilience research;
- Clarify multiple linkages between humanitarian assistance and resilience capacities; and
- Strengthen the capacity of resilience program staff and M&E professionals by demonstrating trends in key indicators of household and community resilience, and providing a visual representation of results generated through application of REAL Methodological Guide for resilience measurement.

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?

Multiple enabling conditions contributed to successful development of the Dashboard. From the outset, Save the Children received resounding support for this use of knowledge management resources from consortium partners and USAID/RFS colleagues. Additionally, the Save the Children US Department of Hunger and Livelihoods – through which the REAL Award is managed – maintains a strong culture of CLA, supported by an exemplary knowledge management / communications team and a full-time, dedicated CLA Director. Regular communication among SCUS colleagues and our I4DI, TANGO, Mercy Corps, and RFS colleagues also enabled the team to continually iterate and refine the design of the dashboard through multiple phases. SCUS also benefitted from the experience of other departments who had developed data visualization tools, and from a relatively streamlined process for procuring the services of external contactors (in this case I4DI).

A primary challenge was the lack of standardized data throughout the evidence REAL generated. Given the continual evolution of resilience measurement methods since 2016, it was exceptionally difficult for I4DI to categorize quantitative and qualitative data into like categories and identify common themes across REAL reports. They were able to achieve this, but because data had not originally been collected systematically, this effort required more time and manual data extraction than initially anticipated.
This reality poses similar challenges going forward. Now that REAL and I4DI have created the infrastructure for data visualization in the form of the Dashboard, there is a keen interest in continuing to expand the technical evidence base by updating it as new data becomes available. On the other hand, RFS and implementing partners increasingly cite a need to move away from highly standardized approaches to resilience measurement, toward more tailored research aimed at informing project-level decisions. We expect the Dashboard will provide a tangible and useful example to inform resolution of these and other issues in resilience measurement practice going forward.