2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Developing a new virtual KM model for FP/RH professionals in Africa and Asia

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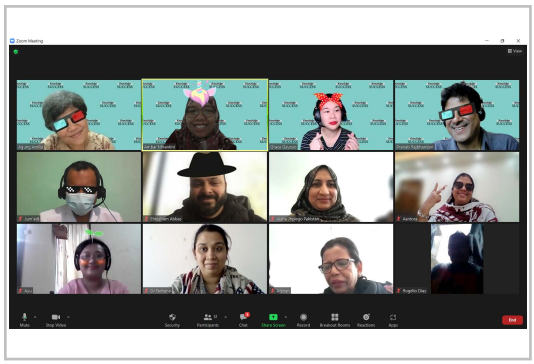

Screen shot of participants and facilitators during the Asia Learning Circles cohort (November - December 2021). Credit: Knowledge SUCCESS/CCP

Summary:

In response to new challenges around remote work, webinar and information overload, and lack of in-person connections due to the pandemic, Knowledge SUCCESS developed a highly interactive regional online series, called Learning Circles, to allow for dialogue, learning, networking, and collaboration among family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH) professionals working in the same region. By creating a space where participants feel comfortable sharing detailed, practical, context-specific solutions to program challenges with their peers, Learning Circles aims to improve reuse and adaptation of FP/RH best practices while avoiding past mistakes.

What makes Learning Circles unique among other webinars and workshops is how we define experts and expertise. Many models use a panel of experts to present on technical topics, with time afterward for Q&A. In Learning Circles, we're interested in highlighting knowledge and experience gained from daily work in putting programs into practice. In Learning Circles the participants are the experts.

Through post-session debriefs and routine After Action Reviews, the planning and facilitation team is taking a CLA approach to adapt, iterate, and improve the Learning Circles model with each new regional cohort.

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?

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. With stay-at-home orders in place, the work for many professionals working in FP/RH immediately shifted from an in-person setting to a virtual nature. On the one hand, this shift to a virtual work environment created a norm for FP/RH projects and programs to produce more digital content and host more webinars to disseminate important new findings and information from the field. However, we learned through co-creation workshops, hosted by the Knowledge SUCCESS project in mid-2020 with members of the FP/RH workforce based in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, that this new influx of information and opportunities to attend webinars was creating an overwhelming feeling of cognitive overload. Workshop participants also expressed a need for detailed, tacit knowledge and experience, particularly about how to implement successful FP/RH programs—the kind of information that is not often found in formal reports, articles, and presentation-style webinars.

In response to these new challenges around remote work and lack of in-person connections due to the pandemic, Knowledge SUCCESS developed a highly interactive regional online series, called Learning Circles, to allow for dialogue, learning, networking, and collaboration among FP/RH professionals working in the same region. By creating a space where participants feel comfortable sharing detailed, practical solutions to program challenges with their peers, Learning Circles aims to improve reuse and adaptation of FP/RH best practices while avoiding past mistakes. Key insights from each regional cohort are documented and shared online so that the wider FP/RH community can benefit.

The Learning Circles model consists of a number of tools and techniques for sharing knowledge, which participants can adapt and use with their own networks. While Knowledge SUCCESS had implemented many of the approaches in previous activities, the combination of approaches that we used and the overall model we designed was new. Figuring out how to adapt the approaches to a virtual setting was another challenge. Taking this into consideration, the planning team was prepared to reassess and make adjustments to the model all throughout the implementation process.

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

Knowledge SUCCESS, as one of USAID's flagship knowledge management projects, builds CLA approaches into our activities from the outset. In developing Learning Circles, specific components of the CLA approach—including collaborating, learning, adapting, culture, and processes—were directly relevant to ensure cohort participants share, exchange, and learn about program experiences and best practices around relevant and pertinent FP/RH technical topics. We enlisted our audiences to identify the priority themes that each regional cohort would address. The topics addressed during the first series of cohorts were "Challenges in Family Planning and Reproductive Health During COVID-19 (English-speaking sub-Saharan Africa)," "Meaningful Youth Engagement in Family Planning Programs (Francophone sub-Saharan Africa)," and "Ensuring Continuity of Essential FP/RH Services During Emergencies (Asia)."

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.

We built opportunities for Learning Circles participants to collaborate and exchange knowledge into every stage of the Learning Circles activity.

To start, we use a regional approach in which cohort members come from neighboring countries so that shared experiences are relevant to everyone. We also select participants for each cohort using a range of criteria to maximize equity and meaningful collaboration. Considerations include expertise and experience with the cohort theme, project role and level in their organization, and motivations for participation. We also strive to maintain a balance in terms of gender, country of work, and organization.

Before the first session of each cohort series, we connect cohort members through a WhatsApp group where participants are encouraged to introduce themselves and share their expectations and anticipations for the series. We also ask participants to complete a short "participant profile" with basic information about themselves, which participants can refer to throughout the series. The first session mostly includes get-to-know-you activities and icebreakers to establish a light and informal tone. These efforts establish trust and support, which is crucial for allowing participants to feel comfortable talking about sensitive or complex issues, especially around what is not working well in their FP/RH programs. As one participant in the francophone sub-Saharan Africa cohort expressed, "The sessions were facilitated in a relaxed atmosphere to better get to know one another."

Cohort members meet virtually for four live sessions of facilitated plenary and small-group activities, and continue reflecting and exchanging with one another in fun and engaging ways between live sessions and beyond the series. We designed the series around four main knowledge exchange techniques. First, we use "Appreciative Inquiry" and "1-2-4-All" to help participants to reflect on exceptional project experiences related to the cohort topic and what made them successful. Next, to address challenges or setbacks related to the cohort topic, participants engage in the peer-to-peer approach, "Troika Consulting." In groups of three or four, participants take turns describing a challenge they are currently experiencing in their projects and programs, while their fellow group members offer advice and solutions. In the final session, participants take stock of what they've learned throughout the series, commit to applying this knowledge through an action plan, and engage in the networking technique, "Open Spaces," to discuss next steps.

After the final session, participants are encouraged to stay connected to one another and continue collaborating through their WhatsApp group and to share resources in their shared FP insight cohort collection.

Lastly, the Learning Circles planning and facilitation team consistently engages in adapting through team debriefs after each cohort session to discuss what went well and what could be improved as well as Pause & Reflect exercises at the mid-way point and at the end of a series to think about ways to improve and iterate the Learning Circles model. One key adaptation we made to the model was shifting participant discussions from a broad group challenge to individual challenges that are unique to each participant. This shift meant swapping out different learning exchange techniques and making tweaks to existing ones.

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?

When launching the first round of Learning Circles cohorts, the project's regional Knowledge Management officers based in East Africa, West Africa, and Asia supported the planning of their respective regional cohorts and led the facilitation for each session. Preparing for the first round of cohorts involved collaborating around how to shape the agenda, develop presentation slides and other materials, and select the participants. With our second round of cohorts, the regional KM Officers are building on the knowledge and skills learned to take the lead in planning and shaping their cohort series. An important adaptation made to the second round of cohorts was the decision to embed the activity within existing technical working groups, communities of practice, and other structures. For instance, participation in the East Africa Learning Circles Cohort II is limited to members of TheCollaborative, a community of practice for FP/RH professionals based in the region, led by our regional partners at Amref Health Africa. We're also engaging regionally based experts to contribute to cohort planning and facilitation, including the Ouagadougou Partnership Coordination Unit and West Africa Breakthrough ACTION. These efforts serve to ensure the sustainability of the activity beyond the life of the Knowledge SUCCESS project and to respond to more precise needs of our regional partners.

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?

Developed through a CLA approach, the Learning Circles model provides a space for members of the FP/RH workforce to share with peers and gain knowledge around timely and relevant technical FP/RH topics, which will help them immediately address pressing challenges in their work. During the final session, cohort participants come up with an action plan to address their individual challenges by developing commitment statements. Commitment statements are an evidence-based behavioral science method that helps individuals to stay on track. Research shows that expressing commitments (either in writing or verbally) will increase one's chances of remembering them and acting upon them. The participants' commitment statements strive to amplify what's already working well and avoid what hasn't been working well in this area, based on previous discussions throughout the course of the series. The statements are rooted in realistic and practical action steps that are within their power to achieve based on the freedom and resources currently at their disposal. In a post-series survey, one participant noted, "I made the commitment to develop a policy brief highlighting gaps in supply chain management for reproductive health commodities in my country."

In order to respond in real time to participant concerns, we asked participants to complete a feedback survey following each of the four cohort sessions, as well as a more in-depth evaluation at the end of the series. According to the survey and evaluation results, participating in Learning Circles has led to stronger professional connections, an expanded network, career growth, new solutions to FP/RH challenges, and knowledge gained around KM tools and techniques. We plan to conduct a more comprehensive follow-up evaluation to understand the impact of Learning Circles six to nine months after the series ends, by asking questions to learn what steps participants have taken and how those actions have improved their projects or programs.

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 primary enabling condition for using a CLA approach is our project's culture of adapting and iterating activities. Our team has established a routine of conducting After Action Reviews and participant feedback surveys to pause and reflect on our processes. In addition, we adapted many of the CLA practices used during the 2020 co-creation workshop series, for instance, the model of holding debriefs with the planning and facilitation team following each session. We also consulted with participants from the co-creation workshops to get feedback on the concept for Learning Circles and how we planned to implement the series.

Another enabling condition was the virtual setting. An important benefit to organizing a learning exchange series remotely over an in-person event is that we are saving project funds and can re-allocate them in ways that strengthen the overall activity. Unlike an in-person event, there is no need to spend money on travel, accommodation, and other related expenses. Freeing those funds has allowed us to allocate resources towards engaging additional regional facilitators and translators to translate series materials.

A final key enabling condition of this activity has been our partnership with our USAID team, who has been supportive of the CLA approach by providing feedback on the model and showing flexibility to adaptations throughout the process.

A challenge we faced during the early planning stages was getting too bogged down by small details because we wanted to make sure all the elements were perfectly in place before launching the activity. We went back and forth weighing all the pros and cons of various decisions, and that was preventing us from moving forward. After truly embracing the idea that this would be an iterative process and reminding ourselves that we would have many opportunities to reassess and adapt along the way, we were liberated from the pressure to fine tune every aspect of the first cohort, and stopped second-guessing every decision made.