2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Better Together: Using Co-Creation to Strengthen Localization in Kenya

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Participants at a USAID/KEA FAA Pause & Reflect. Credit: SoCha.

Summary:

In 2020, USAID Kenya and East Africa began utilizing co-creation as a way to tap into local expertise, improve design, broaden perspectives, and promote sustainability. In the following 24 months, the Mission Support for the Journey to Self-Reliance Pivot (MSP) activity and USAID/KEA finalized a strategy focused on Kenya-led development; executed 15 co-creations; and held repeated learning and adaptation exercises to improve Mission performance, partnerships, and activity design. Although the long-term process was unplanned, the iterative collaborating, learning, and adapting approach was intentional. MSP and USAID uncovered lessons learned, held pause and reflect sessions and after-action reviews, and continuously chose opportunities to observe, reflect, and adapt to changing circumstances. Accompanied by USAID's spirit of openness, local partners shared both innovative ideas and realistic perspectives on context. Throughout the process, we learned, maintained flexibility, and recognized that we would achieve our intended objectives, locally-informed, and locally-led development interventions, if we worked with the process and with each other.

When we do it right, local partners improve their own capacities, but we also learn and grow. Working with Kenya-led organizations, we expect to see a better design of development interventions, more local ownership, sustainability, and better development results.

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?

For decades, although USAID has continuously championed collaboration with local partners and stakeholders, the Agency has been slow to move the locus of decision making. However, a series of localization efforts have accumulated momentum in recent years, including the 2014 Local Systems Framework, 2018 Acquisition and Assistance Strategy, 2019 New Partnerships Initiative, and culminating in 2021 with Administrator Power's New Vision for Global Development. We recognize that for sustainable development to occur, local actors and institutions must rely on themselves to achieve inclusive growth. Thus, as outlined in their 2020-2025 Kenya Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), USAID Kenya and East Africa (USAID/KEA) set out to work with Kenyans to design and implement development interventions that place Kenyans in the driver's seat. Co-creation, one element of the shift toward localization, taps into the expertise of local experts, improving context knowledge for activity design, encouraging innovation through a diversity of perspectives, and promoting sustainability through local ownership. Beyond better designs, if done right, co-creation has several soft benefits like better partner engagement, collaboration, and greater job satisfaction on the part of participants.

Since December 2020, the Mission Support for the Journey to Self-Reliance Pivot (MSP) activity, implemented by SoCha LLC and supported by Social Impact, has worked with USAID/KEA to facilitate 15 co-creations involving approximately 40 different local partners. Co-creation can take many forms, but it typically happens during solicitation and activity design phases. Co-creation is a participatory design technique that draws people together to develop a mutually valued solution. It alters the relationship between USAID and partners, fostering shared vision and decision-making. By making strategic and intentional decisions about why and how to invest in the capacity of local actors, USAID contributes to achieving and maintaining development results and effective local humanitarian response systems.

Through its co-creation experiences, USAID/KEA has become more adaptable in its development approaches and gained a stronger appreciation for the contribution of its partners. Local partners have seen their ideas come to fruition in activity designs and strengthened partnerships which could lead to future collaborations.

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 the build-up to its 2020-2025 Kenya Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), USAID/KEA recognized that traditional approaches to development were yielding decreasing returns. From previous transactional partnership models, technical silos, and a donor-led strategy, the Mission understood that it must evolve. Out of a desire to do business differently for better development outcomes, USAID/KEA committed additional effort, workforce, and resources to strengthen and collaborate with local actors and organizations.

The purpose of the MSP activity is to support USAID/KEA staff and stakeholders to be more efficient, effective, transparent, and skilled in achieving development outcomes through the use of evidence, performance management techniques, and collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) practices. MSP is inherently a learning mechanism that uses CLA to improve Mission performance and achieve subsequent development outcomes. By design, MSP promotes the utilization of CLA within USAID/KEA. Further, the Activity's Contracting Officer's Representative (COR), leadership, and staff also deliberately foster a CLA culture.

MSP and USAID/KEA recognize that the appropriate use of CLA approaches can lead to better outcomes. Rather than treating CLA as a novel innovation, we see it as the current evolution of progressive ideas on continuous improvement. People have always worked to improve their results, from Francis Bacon's 17th-century scientific method to Deming's circle and Japan's postwar quality transformation. CLA is simply our approach to how we do better work and achieve development results.

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-late 2020, MSP worked with USAID/KEA's Strategic Planning and Analysis Office to frame the co-creation process and articulate the Mission's approach, outlining objectives, scoping, stakeholder engagement, tools and facilitation, with an emphasis on iterative learning and adaptation. Following this foundational thought process, MSP worked with the Environment Office (ENV) and Office of Acquisitions and Assistance (OAA) to plan three Local Works co-creations which would serve as platforms for local stakeholders to design conservation and capacity-building interventions in partnership with USAID. MSP continued collaborating with USAID/KEA to complete 15 co-creations in partnership with technical and support offices from December 2020 to June 2022.

Following the first series of ENV co-creations, MSP conducted a full review of lessons learned, facilitating a reflection session with USAID/KEA staff, a pause and reflect with USAID/Washington Local Works, and interviewing local partners. As a result, MSP produced a case study articulating challenges, lessons, and recommendations for adaptive management.

Other requests for similar support followed. Six months after the first co-creation workshops, MSP was asked by OAA and the Office for Financial Management to facilitate a series of trainings to help local implementing partners (IPs) to improve their capacity for USAID award management. In late 2021, MSP continued the learning and improvement process, working with OAA to organize a pause and reflect session on fixed amount awards. In 24 months MSP and USAID/KEA had together finalized a CDCS focused on Kenya-led development; executed 15 co-creations with local partners; held three reflection exercises and countless workshop after-action reviews to learn and adapt to changing situations.

Although not planned from the start, most of the learning was intentional - deliberate decisions to stop and think about what we were doing and how we could improve. Every workshop ended with a 30-minute after-action review between MSP, USAID staff, and a lead from the local partner. Throughout the process, MSP culled lessons and shared them with USAID during quarterly reflections. Collaborating with its COR, MSP made deliberate changes to work orders to improve the execution of co-creation support services.

None of the co-creation awards could have been executed without consistent guidance and internal collaboration between OAA and other support offices. Likewise, no co-creations would have been possible without the full commitment and ownership of local partners. Other USAID IPs, government stakeholders, and technical and support offices also contributed.

MSP was able to observe, reflect, and improve its approach because of the collaborative nature of staff interaction and the strong relationships between MSP and USAID. MSP prioritizes adaptive management, engaging technical leads in COR check-ins for quick troubleshooting, utilizing a transparent online work order management system, and encouraging direct interaction between USAID points of contact and the MSP staff who provide services. MSP systems, processes, and culture encourage both internal and USAID-focused collaboration, learning, and adaptation.

The effects of external collaboration were apparent when USAID leads formed a strong partnership with local partners before the co-creation workshops. Through USAID's spirit of openness and a desire to understand local partners, as well as willingness to give honest feedback, local partners were willing to take risks, be realistic about their capabilities, and set achievable goals. This attitude toward partner relationships was important for both design and execution of the workshops. We saw partners share both innovative ideas and realistic perspectives on context. We also saw USAID accept those perspectives and work with local partners to find opportunities to achieve results.

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?

Although, as an Agency, USAID has ample guidance on how to plan and execute a co-creation process, not all USAID/KEA or MSP team members had a full understanding of how they would be required to work together from the beginning. But we learned, most often through planning, execution, a deliberate study of our results, and then iterative adaptations. Midway through the process we hit our stride and built a system for planning and execution, including standard agenda, facilitation plans, presentations, workshop activities, and logistical support. We also learned how to maintain flexibility and look at the bigger picture, recognizing that the outcomes of any one session or workshop day were only a piece of the whole, and we could achieve our objectives, locally-informed and locally-led development interventions, if we worked with the process and with each other.

CLA continues to help us all to improve our co-creation processes, executing workshops where participants come with an open mind and leave with new ideas for development interventions in Kenya. The reflective aspect of CLA has helped us to continuously examine our own intentions and actions and improve how we plan and execute. The CLA mindset has helped us to honestly consider how USAID staff interact with local partners - including encouraging some USAID staff to modify their own attitudes to give space to local voices. Because CLA highlights collaboration, we show up with a willingness to identify our roles and help others see where they fit - so that we use the best attributes of all team members, including our local 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?

The CLA approach has contributed to development outcomes by enabling USAID/KEA to advance directly toward their 2020-2025 goal of Kenya-led, Kenya-owned, and Kenya-managed development. When we do it right local partners adopt CLA, assess their own strengths and weaknesses, and are willing to change. Inherently with co-creation, we recognize that we learn from them as much or more.

In the future, if we can continue to transfer the CLA approach to local partners, we expect to see immediate capacity improvements in their finance, operations, administration, human resources, strategic planning, leadership, and other core organizational competencies. Although all co-creations culminated in designs that expressed programmatic objectives, they also nearly all included internal improvement objectives with deliberate investments in building the organizational capacities of each of the local partners. We expect that through co-creation with Kenyan organizations USAID activities are better contextualized to the area of intervention, geographic focus, cultural setting, and local development needs. Co-creations are an example of development “by and with” instead of “for” the Kenyan people. In the long-term, by building a cadre of strong local partners, and by designing and implementing through Kenya-led organizations, we expect to see a better design of development interventions, fewer duplicative or ill-placed efforts, more local ownership, sustainability, and better development results.

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?

Key enablers throughout the co-creation process include USAID/KEA's willingness to do business differently, their authentic and active interest in co-creation with local partners; a CDCS aimed at locally-led development; Agency initiatives espousing locally-led development; an OAA willing to guide; and the multi-year efforts of the ENV office to support local organizations prior to considering direct awards.

Unfortunately, barriers also exist. Although uncommon, not all participants approached co-creation with an attitude of equal footing. Some co-creations may have had better dialogue and idea generation if partners felt that USAID would build on their ideas rather than critique them. USAID teams that found ways to make conversations generative tended to have better outcomes from workshop sessions. Additional barriers included time constraints, rushed planning, and disparate priorities. Occasionally, USAID may have been overly prescriptive on design, rather than open to partner ideas which fit within the overall framework. Some co-creation partners had unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved in a short funding time frame or saw the exercise as an organizational funding opportunity rather than a collaborative approach to design interventions to achieve shared objectives.

Overall, the consistent collaborative attitude of both USAID technical staff and key leaders from local partners gave each co-creation an opportunity to take risks, encouraging participants that all of their perspectives were valid. And an open dialogue throughout the planning process set the stage for effective workshop sessions.