2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Contingency Plan for USAID AGRO Activity In Ukraine

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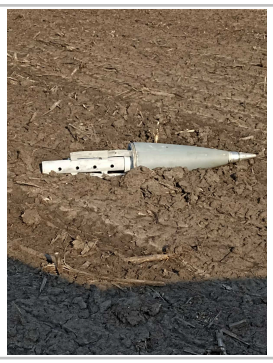

A shell in an AGRO beneficiary farmer field. The Activity has received many such photos since the beginning of the war. The farmer and his family were lucky to survive as when the shell flew, they were out to buy necessities for their children. Credit: REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino

Summary:

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a brutal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. The USAID Agriculture Growing Rural Opportunities (AGRO) Activity, which was not designed to carry out programming during a war, managed to tailor its interventions promptly and effectively to the new context using collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) tools of scenario planning and adaptive management. The AGRO team used scenario planning ahead of the Russian invasion to prepare for how activities and the project approach would change. Adaptive management tools helped AGRO to ensure the safety of staff and beneficiaries and then build off its worst-case scenario to pivot focus from supporting agricultural markets to prioritizing farmers' and rural communities' immediate needs.

Within about a month, ARGO had expanded the Activity's geography and target value chains, launched programs to help agricultural enterprises relocate to safer areas, facilitated supply chain and logistics recovery, began finding new markets for agricultural producers, and collaborating with local and international stakeholders to document damage from the war.

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?

Operational since November 2019, AGRO is an integrated agricultural and rural development activity that applies a market systems approach to accelerate the economic development of rural Ukrainian communities. The activity was envisioned to improve governance in the agricultural sector and encourage more productive, modern, and profitable micro-, small-, and medium-sized agricultural enterprises (agri-MSMEs) to be successfully integrated into competitive markets in Ukraine and internationally. The activity hoped to accomplish this vision through three objectives: 1) improve the productivity and market access of targeted agricultural value chains; 2) improve key supporting functions in Ukraine's agricultural sector; and, 3) improve agricultural sector rules and regulations.

Since March 3, 2020, AGRO has been working remotely due to COVID-19. This was challenging as AGRO's focus regions were in eastern and southern Ukraine and working with farmers requires in-person fieldwork. The AGRO team was able to adapt to these obstacles, which would set it up for an even bigger challenge yet to come.

In December 2021, the U.S. and Europe warned Ukraine of a possible full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation. Even though a full-scale war in Ukraine was considered unlikely at the time and no one on AGRO had experience working during a military conflict, the team started discussing and planning for war-related scenarios. The team decided to plan for three possible scenarios, determine triggers that would prompt further steps, and provide employees with clear instructions and training on what to do in each scenario.

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

CLA is built into AGRO's design so that the team can operate in a frequently changing environment of a developing, high-risk economy. AGRO's CLA plan includes a wide variety of tools for capturing, systematizing, and applying lessons learned and explicit and tacit knowledge, as well as engaging stakeholders and partners.

Until recently, scenario planning had not been a usual practice for AGRO. Previously, the team had used this CLA tool only once, for risks related to potential legislation that would impact AGRO activities.

The impacts of a war would have significantly greater consequences: agriculture is among Ukraine's biggest economic sectors so a war could have an unprecedented effect on basic food security in Ukraine and globally, and on the Ukrainian economy as a whole. As the country is rather big, the team also considered that only one contingency plan may not be adequate depending on where war broke out.

Moreover, the team had no experience working in conflict zones, so it would be important for them to have clear instructions and expectations. Foreseeing these potential challenges, AGRO decided to prepare contingency plans for three scenarios.

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.

First, senior management discussed the risks of Russia's attack internally and identified three possible scenarios:
1) Increased conflict in the two eastern regions where hostilities had been ongoing since 2014
2) Occupation of Ukraine's eastern regions
3) Occupation of large areas of eastern, southern, and central Ukraine, where AGRO mostly works.

The entire staff was involved in scenario planning. All AGRO teams (three technical, administration and grants, and CLA/Communications) would work on each scenario to suggest possible solutions related to their workstream. Each team was tasked with reviewing their current activities and providing the following:
-- Updates on the status of ongoing activities.
-- Recommendations on what activities should be terminated/suspended/continued under each scenario. For this, staff members contacted their respective partners and asked about their plans in different scenarios. Independently, they considered partners' location, specialization, equipment, stage of implementation, and capacity. Staff members communicated across teams for knowledge sharing and to ensure a unified approach.
-- Suggestions for additional actions to be taken in each scenario. At the time of planning, a Russian invasion was perceived unlikely, so we encouraged staff to be creative and treat scenario planning as a logic puzzle.
An Excel chart with each team's information was created so the teams could cross-check, comment, and agree with each other on inputs into the plan. By mid-February, AGRO had finalized contingency plans for all three scenarios.

On February 24, Russia invaded Ukraine, and the third and worst scenario became a new reality. Adaptive management requires "making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context." Before AGRO could focus on executing the planned scenario to restructure programmatic activities, staff safety and security took priority, and that was our first adjustment. During the first days and weeks of the war, AGRO provided relocation assistance to ensure staff and their families reached safe havens. To secure partners, the team also ensured that information about activities and partners were not accessible to Russian soldiers. AGRO hid all GIS data and social media accounts from public view.

As soon as the security issues were solved, AGRO resumed its technical work, starting with deciding on whether to terminate/suspend/continue activities, and then planning immediate next steps. AGRO built on its initial worst-case scenario plan to quickly adjust activities to the new reality. To accomplish this adjustment, AGRO engaged its entire team again for a week-long exercise. Teams communicated with partners and one another to ground truth information. AGRO used an Excel table to organize updates from partners and a daily situational report to ensure timely monitoring and sharing of information. After the teams submitted their ideas, feedback from partners, and budget estimates, AGRO leadership categorized the activities: those for immediate implementation and activities which could only be implemented with additional funding. The activities were organized into three levels:
1) Immediate Response: activities that are immediately in demand for crisis response. Many of these activities focus on food security and production support.
2) Early Recovery: activities that are likely to be necessary in the six months following the cessation of active fighting to ensure proper orientation for market recovery.
3) Long-Term Recovery and Rebuilding: activities that focus on longer-term economic recovery and resiliency post-conflict and require more complex tools and adaptability depending on various post-war scenarios.

As the situation evolves, all three levels are enacted simultaneously depending on whether the area has active fighting, is occupied by Russia, or has been liberated by the Ukrainian Army. Since this exercise took place, AGRO has been constantly monitoring activity progress. AGRO keeps in close contact with local partners conducting surveys and assessments to understand the situation, emerging challenges and partners' needs, and readiness to adapt activities to a different level.

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?

Though we did our best to create a perfect scenario and plan, the reality turned out to be more unpredictable and complicated than we expected when drafting the contingency plan. Nonetheless, thanks to multiple discussions, a shared vision of emergency triggers and responses, several plans developed and redeveloped again after the situation became more clear. The team proved able to stay organized and productive in fast changing circumstances. AGRO could hardly have adapted so quickly without our “what if” exercise, adjustments based on new lessons learned, and multi-level plans.

AGRO continues to assess situations, communicate with partners and stakeholders, and adjust quickly and meaningfully to the new normal. During this challenging time, the team became more willing to share their tacit knowledge, talk more freely about lessons learned and challenges, and solve problems creatively. Thus, the informal learning environment has improved in the team.

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?

Using scenario planning and adaptive management tools, AGRO managed to save time, recover from shock, and renew activities to address logistics disruptions, food insecurity, input shortages, and farmers who urgently needed assistance for the sowing campaign which would have to happen under martial law and shelling.
Based on feedback from partners during the scenario planning exercises, AGRO understood the need to refocus its immediate respond from market systems development to ensuring food security. AGRO made adjustments to accommodate this change including adding grain and oilseed crops to its list of target value chains, expanding activities to all regions of Ukraine, initiating projects to deliver inputs and support relocation of businesses to safer regions, uniting with other stakeholders to adjust legislation to respond to the challenges of war, and documenting losses and damage caused by the invasion.

Already, AGRO is beginning to see the results of these adaptations:
-- Over 30 AGRO sub-grantees are using equipment purchased to feed people in their communities and those most affected by war; some of them adapted their product lines to respond to consumers' immediate needs, e.g., produce dry soups and ready-meal packs instead of fruit paste that they used to produce before the war.
-- Nearly 5,000 farmers, households, and internally displaced people received seeds, fertilizers, and plant protection products which enables them to ensure their family’s food security and sell surpluses.
-- About 2,000 people benefited from the food delivery thanks to AGRO addressing supply chain issues.
-- About 90 agri-businesses are receiving support to relocate to safer regions.
-- A 24/7 service center has been created for food processing companies suffering from lack of spare parts and adequately trained personnel.
-- 87 farms will use drones for spraying fertilizers and pesticides to substitute human labor where human resources are limited or land mines are present.

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?

It takes a big team effort to plan for scenarios. However, AGRO had two things working in its favor: 1) organizational culture that embedded CLA principles and leadership well versed in CLA components; and, 2) planning far in advance which made it easier to adapt to changes when they happened. Additionally, having a well-thought-out plan likely reduced panic when the worst-case scenario became a reality.

While the process was ultimately beneficial, it was not stress-free. It may be difficult to understand for those who were not living in Ukraine at the time, but clear thinking during this process was an obstacle as we had to address the cognitive dissonance between the government calming fears and being pushed to think of the worst-case scenario. Ukrainians grow up listening to grandparents' World War II horror stories and have a collective trauma of war. It was psychologically challenging to visualize the worst-case scenarios as our staff understood how the war would affect their lives. To relieve the stress, we agreed to treat the task as merely a logic puzzle or “what if” creative exercise. Other valuable lessons AGRO learned from this experience:

-- Better have a bad plan than no plan. Monitor as situation evolves and reiterate planning when new details arise.

-- Consider several scenarios, even ones that seem unrealistic. For us, the scenario that turned into reality was the one no one expected would be possible.

-- Be creative when it comes to unprecedented cases. Creativity is a team sport, thus engage all team members and consult with stakeholders. Don't reject or criticize ideas right away even though they seem unrealistic.

-- When security is threatened, take care of your staff first. They are the most valuable asset. You will be able to restart your work as soon as employees feel safe again.

-- Do not blame yourself for not being completely prepared for the worst-case scenario. No one can do that. If you have considered the risks, involved the team in developing contingency plans, and made sure that everyone on the team understands the triggers and instructions, you have already done a lot.

-- Trust yourselves and your instincts, listen to your team and partners, and be flexible and ready to adapt.