2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

CLA for Evaluation Use: The Case for Stakeholder Engagement

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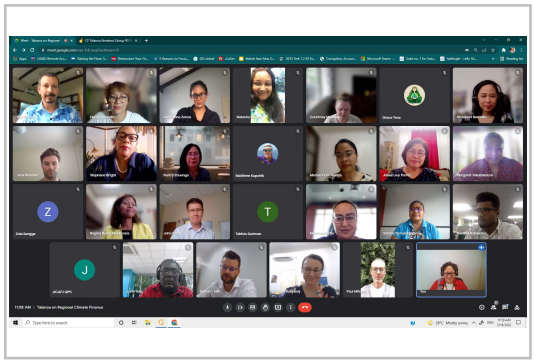

A Virtual "Talanoa" with representatives from Pacific Islands to discuss recommendations and lessons learned. Credit: Nancy Ebuenga

Summary:

This case fits in the context of USAID prioritizing evidence-based decision making for its Climate Strategy, and, more broadly, the intentional use of evaluation findings to improve Development Objectives. Because the Pacific Islands' ability to finance climate change mitigation and adaptation is crucial both to USAID and to Pacific Islands governments, making sure that stakeholders learned and took actions based on the evaluation of USAID's Climate Financing Activities was of utmost importance. To that effect, USAID/Pacific Islands and Agency MEL and technical experts worked closely to design an evaluation that leveraged local and international expertise and actively engaged stakeholders. They thought through a process and the respective roles of evaluation, USAID Missions, implementing partners (IPs), and local stakeholders to learn from evaluation findings and to derive recommendations for future actions.

The significance of this case can be measured along the CLA maturity matrix. It demonstrates advanced practices with respect to both external and internal stakeholder engagement, as well as technical evidence base. With respect to M&E for learning, it puts USAID Pacific Islands on the trajectory to institutionalize a focus on timeliness and usefulness of evaluations.

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?

USAID/Pacific Islands had been stuck with traditional practices of evaluations. With regards to the evaluation purpose, ownership, and utilization of evaluation results by internal and external stakeholders, the Mission had never explored active partnerships with IPs and stakeholders, but instead limited internal and external stakeholders' role to a passive one, as, for example, key informants during data collection. The Mission's active role would traditionally only resume when reviewing the draft evaluation report, rather than taking the opportunity to actively participate and provide inputs and insights into preparation of evaluation reports before it was drafted. This was inefficient because the Evaluation Team only received feedback after they had already invested a copious amount of time drafting the narratives accompanying the findings. It was also a missed opportunity to facilitate active participation and learning from stakeholders.

There was also an over-reliance on the contractor's recommendations, some of which were not actionable. An evaluation contractor might have strong analytical capacity and be able to provide USAID with strong and useful evidence, but not be best suited to come up with actionable recommendations. This could be due to the contractor's limited understanding of critical context internal to USAID or that of the operating environment on the ground, or due to their insufficient expertise in programming and implementation.

The lack of active participation from internal and external stakeholders undermines the value of external evaluations, utility of the recommendations, staff learning, and the cost-effectiveness of the evaluations. Most of all, evaluations had become a tick-the-box exercise rather than a meaningful learning tool for the Mission. To overcome the challenge, the Mission intentionally required a CLA approach - participatory workshops for validation and recommendation development - in the statement of work for a joint performance evaluation of two climate financing activities.

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

While the Mission's CLA focus had already improved dissemination of evaluation results, instilling collaboration and learning earlier in the evaluation process brings the Mission to the next level as a learning organization, by leveraging two components of the CLA framework: culture (relationship and network) and learning (M&E for learning) and applying lessons from Senegal’s CLA Case Competition winner in 2018.

In light of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and USAID’s new Climate Strategy, the evaluation was designed to provide timely information on how USAID may support the mitigation of climate change impact in the Pacific Islands, a region particularly prone to natural disasters and highly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. The activities involved local institutions and required local buy-in both for the evaluation process itself and the evaluation findings.

The CLA approach allows the Mission to be more strategic and intentional about which partners and stakeholders to engage and for what particular purpose, considering the number of countries, government and non-government counterparts involved in each country, and relevant regional entities. CLA in the evaluation did not only allow for local buy-in but also demonstrated transparency among multiple partners and stakeholders, while enhancing ownership over the evaluation results. The learning derived from the CLA approach not only helped strengthen the evaluation recommendations that will lead to more appropriate adaptive management but it will also be used as a good example to advocate for a change in evaluation culture at the Mission.

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.

For USAID's performance and impact evaluations, recommendations are a conceptual shift from findings. Findings are about looking backwards at the implementation to determine what lessons may be drawn, whereas recommendations are about applying these lessons forward for future programming. In February and March 2022, USAID/Pacific Islands hosted both a Findings and a Recommendation Workshops, two weeks apart, as part of the joint evaluation of two climate financing activities: Adapt to Climate Change (ISACC) and Pacific Climate Ready (READY). The workshops were crucial steps in the evaluation that aimed to "get a better understanding of how and if the activities have contributed to meeting USAID/Pacific Islands' long-term goal of helping the Pacific Islands advance its capacity to respond to disasters and to prevent and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change." Facilitated by the evaluation team, the workshops were conducted virtually and the evaluation team leveraged virtual CLA tools at their disposal.

Both workshops were timed so that they would occur after data analysis was completed (so it was not about preliminary findings), but before the delivery of the first draft of the evaluation report. The planning of the workshops was in itself a collaborative exercise between USAID and the evaluation team. Iterative planning discussions helped both parties make more strategic decisions concerning its objectives for each workshop and determine how, based on these objectives, the participants and workshop exercises would differ between the two workshops.

The purpose of a Findings Workshop is two-fold. One is to disseminate findings to the broader audience. The other is for participants to act as sounding boards, to vet and to reflect on the findings either with agreement or disagreement, and to provide additional context and insights to strengthen the findings presented by the experts on the Evaluation Team. The two-hour workshop gathered technical and MEL staff from USAID and the two IPs, representatives from financing institutions, and the Pacific Islands' regional development organizations. To meet this dual purpose, the evaluation team presented the findings to stakeholders using visual "data placemats," then split participants into breakout groups to discuss several prompts: (1) What clarifying questions do you have about the findings?; (2) What reactions do you have to the findings? (2a) What resonated with you? (2b) What surprised you? (2c) What similarities or differences do you see between the two activities? These prompts stimulated stakeholders to engage in critical thinking and provide feedback to the Evaluation Team. As a result of the workshop, the Evaluation Team was able to add more nuance to specific findings and to pave a way for the follow-on Recommendations Workshop among the more targeted subset of participants from the Findings Workshop.

The motivation for collaboratively brainstorming recommendations with stakeholders instead of having these written by the Evaluation Team on their own, as traditionally done, is because generally evaluation teams, while experts in evaluation methodologies (that is, designing the evaluation method and collecting and analyzing data) are not experts in programming and implementing development assistance projects or activities. USAID technical staff, IPs, and local and regional stakeholders have invaluable expertise to help determine the practical implications of the evaluation findings for future USAID work to advance the capacity of Pacific Islands countries to respond to disasters and to prevent and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change. Given the context of USAID's Climate Change Strategy and the high level of government and stakeholder engagement required for climate change financing interventions, the workshops served a dual purpose of anchoring the recommendations in practice as well as to immediately get buy-in and get the word out.

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?

Changing attitudes and behaviors is particularly challenging in a Mission that has been reliant on the Evaluation Team to dictate recommendations. The joint ISACC and Climate Ready evaluation served as an exciting opportunity to adopt CLA and initiate changes in the organization's culture by shifting the evaluation practice. Now evaluation results are more useful, relevant, and credible to internal and external stakeholders, and they can be used in a more timely manner.

Recently, the Mission hosted a series of “Talanoa” (Pacific Islands term which means a partnership or a dialogue that brings people together) to prioritize climate change and climate finance programming. The Mission gained such substantial insights from stakeholders through the Findings and Recommendations Workshops that the Mission’s MEL Specialist had the necessary information at hand to present key findings at the Talanoa, even when the report had not yet been submitted by the Evaluation Team.

The most significant outcome, however, is that the Mission is now adopting a "new" and improved evaluation approach by organizing participatory workshops where findings can be vetted which lead to increased trust and buy-in, and where recommendations can be shaped collaboratively among stakeholders who are actually the recommendation's users and actors. With collaboration from Asia Bureau MEL staff, the Mission is also drafting a "how-to note" to institutionalize this new evaluation approach that is geared towards reaping well-informed and vetted recommendations from stakeholders and USAID experts. This implies that the Mission has gained ground and maturity to be actively and constructively engaged in the evaluation process, using its CLA abilities to enrich and improve the content of evaluations without biasing its content. The Evaluation Team remained in the driving seat, contributed its expertise in evaluation design and implementation, and maintained authorship of the evaluation report, while benefiting from a more collaborative process.

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?

Typically, external evaluations rely solely on the contracted evaluation team to develop findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Through CLA and participatory workshops in particular, meaningful collaborative engagements of USAID’s personnel, IPs, and stakeholders were achieved. This led to increased buy-in to evaluation findings, illuminated nuances that would be useful to stakeholders for decision-making, and enhanced stakeholders’ understanding of the limitations of the evaluation design and findings. In addition, the process empowered stakeholders to contribute their knowledge, wisdom, and/or concerns to ensure that recommendations are feasible and actionable, which is indispensable for future success of the activities and other similar programming. Lastly, this streamlined the report drafting process, in that the discussion and vetting of findings with stakeholders happened before efforts were put into drafting the report.

The Mission has gained an increased appreciation of its own technical competence to review findings and shape the recommendations, but most importantly its ability to challenge traditional evaluation practices and adopt a more open organizational culture. Taking time to work through the draft design of these participatory workshops as proposed in the Evaluation Design and Work Plan and engaging a series of collaborative planning sessions between USAID and the Evaluation Team, the Mission was able to clarify the objectives and make more intentional decisions on how these workshops would contribute to increasing buy-in and relevance of the evaluation report.

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?

In today's dynamic development and humanitarian environment, organizations such as USAID/Pacific Islands face the challenge of fostering creativity in order to enhance effectiveness. The following factors contributed to successfully piloting the participatory workshops and challenging the traditional evaluation practice of reliance on the recommendations from the evaluation team:

-- An enabling work culture open to new ideas and taking advantage of opportunities emerging in the environment where USAID operates.
-- Tapping into the expertise available in USAID/Pacific Islands, USAID/RDMA and USAID/Asia collaborated with the Evaluation Team to develop better work methods and procedures to successfully organize the participatory workshops.
-- Utilizing the expertise of Pacific Islanders and local stakeholders in determining the next steps and recommendations in the evaluation report that best fit their context and needs.

Being creative and challenging the traditional evaluation practice in USAID/Pacific Islands is not without pain. One important barrier for rolling out the participatory workshops successfully is the time spent to educate and convince colleagues about the benefits of holding such time-consuming workshops and advocate for the principle that creativity in the workplace is driven by individuals' commitment to openness coupled by an enabling work culture. New ideas that are backed by key stakeholders within USAID/Pacific Islands have more potential of being executed successfully and present opportunities for the Mission to learn and adapt to meet the emerging and dynamic operating context.