Case Competition Toolkit

Key considerations for developing and implementing a case study competition.

Introduction

Case study competitions are a useful tool for:

- Capturing what's working, what's not working, and lessons learned on a certain topic or approach
- Gathering a body of examples for analysis and further study
- Facilitating connection and knowledge-sharing among people doing similar work

This case study toolkit was developed based on experience managing USAID's Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) case competition for three years[1]. Over the course of those three years, the case competition planning and implementation process was adapted and refined many times. As you plan your case competition, plan to learn and adapt as you go!

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

We suggest reading through this entire toolkit before you begin planning your case competition. Then, use the Table of Contents to jump down to specific sessions as you plan and implement.

Do you have questions about or suggestions for this toolkit? Contact Amy Leo at aleo@acuteincite.com.

Table of Contents

1 This toolkit was created by Amy Leo, Senior Adaptive Management Specialist and Principal Consultant with Acute Incite. Previously, Amy served as a Communications Specialist on the Learning and Knowledge Management (LEARN) contract, implemented by Dexis Consulting Group, where she designed and implemented the USAID CLA Case Competition from 2016-2018. The contents included therein comes from this experience, and experience designing subsequent case competitions.

Scope & Plan

DEFINE OBJECTIVE(S)

Defining clear objectives for your case competition will facilitate easier decision making throughout planning and implementation.

Here are some key questions to consider as you define your objectives:

Category	Questions to Consider
Level of Effort & Team Involvement	• How much time do you have to dedicate to managing the case competition? • How will your other team members be involved, and how much of their time will be required? (Ex. Help with competition promotion, judging cases, analysis, etc.) • How much time might potential submitters have to spend on their case study submissions?
Target Audience	• Who, specifically, are you interested in capturing case studies from? • Is there a target number of cases that you are aiming for? What would be too many submissions for you to handle? • Are there any difficult-to-reach groups that you would like to see represented in your body of submissions? How will you facilitate these submissions?
Promotion	• How will you get the word out to your target audience? • What incentives do you have to offer submitters? How will you entice people to take the time to submit their stories?
Crafting your Submission Form	• What level of detail are you looking for in the cases you collect? Do you just need high-level summaries, or detailed descriptions of the entire process from start to finish? • In addition to the primary information you are looking for, what other information would you like to capture? For example, are there sub-themes such as resilience, self-reliance, M&E for decision-making, etc.? • What tools do you have available for capturing submissions?

Post-submission Actions	• What will you do with the cases you collect?
	  ○ If you plan to publish and/or showcase them, will you refine them first? If so, how?
	  ○ What are the other possible applications of the case studies you collect across your activity and/or organization?
	  ○ Are there elements of the Theory of Change that these cases could inform?
	• What criteria will you use to select winning cases?
	• Will you analyze the body of submissions? If so, what criteria will you use?
	• What tools do you have available for publishing and/or showcasing submissions?

DETERMINE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Who may be involved in case competition planning and implementation? Below is a list of possible roles and responsibilities you may adapt depending on how you design the competition.

Role Title	Role Description	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed
Activity Manger	Scopes and manages activity from start to finish.	X	X		
Leadership	Reviews and approves concept.		X	X	X
Funder (When Appliable)	Reviews and approves concept.			X	X

Communications Team	May support text development and case competition promotion. May support post-competition case editing, packaging and publishing.	X		X	
M&E Team	May weigh in on submission form questions. May assist with case study analyses (qualitative, quantitative).	X		X	
Operations Team	May assist with logistics, ex. determining eligibility, event planning, travel arrangements for winners, etc.	X			
Judges	Read and evaluate case submissions.	X		X	

DEVELOP PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

The sample schedule below was based on a major case study competition that was open to all USAID staff and implementing partners. You should be able to reduce this schedule by half for a case competition with a smaller scope. Be sure to build in ample time for approvals and discuss, from the beginning, how your activity or organization's leadership would like to be involved.

Four Months from Launch

- Hold a kickoff meeting to:
  - Define objectives, target participants, and incentives
  - Decide on a high-level schedule for competition
- Begin drafting promotion text
- Begin drafting submission form and judging rubric

Three Months from Launch

- Finalize promotion text
- Finalize submission form and judging rubric
- Create promotion graphics, if desired

One to Two Months from Launch

- Adapt promotion text for internal and external communications channels and create a timeline for when it will be released
- Find judges and ask them to block time on their calendars for judging cases

Day of Launch

- Publish promotion text and submission form
- Push out announcements on social media, chosen listservs and other channels
- Send out announcement via relevant newsletters
- Ask colleagues to send promotion text to their networks and/or post on LinkedIn

Time between Launch and Deadline

- Send regular notices about the competition and deadline via relevant channels
- Ask colleagues to send reminder promotion text to their networks and/or post on LinkedIn
- Contact target participants directly to encourage them to submit and ask if they have questions or need any help

Week of Deadline

- Train judges on judging process
- Schedule and advertise winner announcement webinar/learning event, if you decide to have one

Week after Deadline

- Save submitted cases in designated folder
- Assign cases to judges
- Answer judges' questions about the judging process

Month(s) after Deadline

- Facilitate judging process, including judging meeting
- Determine winners and finalists
- Announce winners and finalists
    - Package/publish cases for sharing
    - Host announcement webinar/learning event, if you decide to have one
    - Send email announcement to all submitters
    - Announce via relevant newsletters and social media

WRITE PROMOTION TEXT & DEVELOP PROMOTION PLAN

After you have decided on the objectives of your case competition, you can draft promotion text. Here are some key elements to consider including:

Who can enter?

Be sure to include clear information about eligibility in your advertisement text. There are several options for eligibility, which can be open to:

- All
- Activities in a given sector or Bureau of USAID
- USAID-funded activities by any implementer
- USAID staff only
- Staff in your organization only

Be sure to consult with your activity or organization's leadership and funder (when applicable) about whether there are any other eligibility requirements to consider. For example, the USAID LEARN contract's CLA case competition was able to accept cases from USAID missions but was contractually prohibited from issuing monetary awards to them.

What information are you looking for?

Provide an overview of the kinds of cases you're looking for, what information you are capturing in the submission form, and what will happen to cases after they are submitted.

Example text from the 2019 CLA Case Competition:

- *Are you building self-reliance through strategic collaboration with local partners?*
- *Does your team pause and reflect on your projects?*
- *Are you creating a learning culture within your organization?*
- *Have you adapted activity implementation based on evaluation findings for performance monitoring information?*

The annual Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) Case Competition captures real-life case studies of USAID staff and implementing partners using a CLA approach for organizational learning and better development outcomes. This is not a call for traditional success stories; we want to hear what's working well, what you're struggling with, and what you've learned along the way. It can be about something big, or about one small practice that made an important difference to your work. For example, maybe you've used an evaluation to adapt or improve your programming.

Your case submission will showcase your team's innovation and expertise, helping us all move the needle on strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management. All eligible case studies will be featured on USAID Learning Lab and may be shared via communications channels such as our blog, and on Twitter.

When are submissions due?

State the submission deadline and include time because submitters may be working in different time zones.

Example: *Submissions must be received by name@email by 5:00 PM EST on DATE.*

Why should submitters take the time to enter?

Why should potential submitters take the time to document their case studies? Possible incentives could include:

- Being featured on a public website and/or social media
- Being featured in an analysis of case study submissions
- Speaking or being featured in an online showcase
- Travel to speak or be recognized at an in-person event

You may consider consulting with possible submitters to determine whether incentives are enticing enough.

How are cases submitted?

Include very clear, step-by-step instructions on how to submit cases. Instructions to submit will depend on the submission form format you have selected. Include information about a point of contact that submitters can reach out to if they are having trouble.

Example 1: One-step process

To submit your case, complete the online submission form at LINK. Contact name@email with questions.

Example 2: Two-step process

1. *Complete the fillable PDF form at LINK. Be sure to download it rather than completing it in your browser. If you complete it in your browser, the information will not save. Be sure to upload a photo before submitting your form; contact name@email with questions about how to do this.*
2. *Email your completed form to name@email by DATE. You will receive automatic confirmation that your case was received.*

Promotion Plan Considerations

Consult with your organization's communications team to learn about your options for promoting your case competition. Consider hosting the main advertisement on a website so that the link can be readily shared with relevant audiences.

The sample planning and implementation schedule above outlines when you may consider sending reminders. In addition to pushing the promotion text to "official" channels such as listservs, communities of practice, etc., encourage colleagues to share the promotion text with their personal networks. Sometimes these personal requests are more galvanizing than blanket pushes. Often, people need to hear about opportunities several times before taking action.

CREATE SUBMISSION FORM

Format

Use the table below to select the best format for your submission form:

	How it Works	Advantages	Disadvantages
Webform	Use Google Forms, Survey Monkey, or a similar web-based platform with functionality for different kinds of questions, required questions, etc.	• Easy for submitters to complete • All submissions will be captured in a single spreadsheet, which is great for analysis. • Built-in word limits (if desired).	• Unless submitters write their responses in a Word doc and then transfer them to the webform, it's hard for them to collaborate with others on responses. • Responses may not be as polished in a webform (incomplete sentences, spelling errors, etc.) • On the back end, it can be time consuming to publish cases if done en masse since all the text will need to be copied and pasted from the spreadsheet into another formatted document.

Fillable PDF	Submitters download a fillable PDF form and write their answers into text boxes with built-in word limits.	• This is the easiest option if you plan to publish all cases and receive a large quantity of them – if you include IDEAL branding in the PDF template, it's ready to go! • You can include a place for submitters to upload a photo. • Built-in word limits.	• Some submitters may be daunted by this technology if they aren't familiar with fillable PDFs. • If submitters complete the fillable PDF in their browser, responses will not be saved. This is frustrating for them! You can include a warning about this, but people will do it anyway… • This format is not as conductive to analysis since the responses aren't all in a single document- you'd need to cut and paste them into a spreadsheet.
Word	Submitters download a Word doc and write their answers into it.	• Easy for submitters to complete. • You can suggest word limits. • You can suggest that submitters include or attach a photo.	• You never know what you are going to get. Submitters may change the font, skip or combine questions, add lots of photos – even if you include parameters, there are no parameters built into this format! • You may have a head start on formatting cases for publishing, and it's easy to copy edit in Word, but it can actually be more time consuming to standardize since every submission will look different.

Submission Questions

Here are some things to consider in drafting your submission questions:

- **Focus on the information you really need:** Start with knowing exactly what kind of information you are interested in collecting from submitters and how you will use this information (see Objective(s)).
- **Keep it simple:** You will need to balance the number of questions you'd like to ask with the amount of time you think that busy submitters have to spend on completing the form. More than eight questions is probably too many.
- **Start high-level:** For ease of completion, the first few questions on the form should be high-level or general and get more specific toward the end of the form.
- **Be clear:** Consider asking colleagues familiar with survey methods to review the questions and provide insight on whether any of them appear leading or unclear. If you are able, host a user feedback session or focus group to determine what potential submitters think you mean by the questions and adjust them accordingly. Ask whether potential submitters think you've included too many or too few questions, or if you are missing anything.

Note that judging criteria should be developed in conjunction with submission form questions (see below).

Here are general questions to consider including/adapting in your submission form:

- What is the general context in which your case takes place?
- Why did you choose to use this [intervention]?
- Explain your [intervention] process from start to finish. Who was involved? How were they involved? What was your first step, next step, etc.?
- What impact have you seen, or do you expect to see, as a result of [your intervention]?

Implementation

COLLECTING SUBMISSIONS

If you are using a webform, it will keep submissions organized for you. If you are using a Fillable PDF or Word doc submission form, it is helpful to develop a system for managing submission files.

Here's a suggested process:

1. As submissions come in, number them in the order in which they were received. Consider including the submitter's name, organization, country, and/or case title in the document name. Use a standard naming convention for all cases.
    a. Ex. 21 – Mercy Corps – Mozambique – Applying CLA to Gender Analysis
2. Save the newly renamed submissions in a shared folder
3. Track submissions in a spreadsheet. Consider including columns for:
    a. Case number (numbered by the order in which it was received)
    b. Submitter name(s)
    c. Submitter email address
    d. Submitter organization
    e. Country
    f. Case title

Decide in advance whether you will allow late submissions. If it's a new case competition, it's a good idea to allow a week-long buffer period after the submission deadline and before judging begins to accommodate late entries. You won't want to advertise this, but it is nice to have if/when submitters ask if they can submit their case after the deadline.

If you only have capacity to evaluate a limited number of submissions, you may consider putting a cap on the number of submissions you will collect. If you do this, be sure to include this parameter in your promotion text.

JUDGING PROCESS

Choosing Judges

Depending on the number of cases submitted, choose between 3-5 judges. Two is too few (no tie breaker!) and more than five is too cumbersome to manage and facilitate toward decision-making. If there are too many submissions for five judges to evaluate, there are some potential workarounds (see below).

Judges should:

- Be familiar with the case competition subject matter
- Be willing to suspend partiality based on submitters names and/or organizations, or their familiarity with specific aspects of the subject matter
- Have ample time for evaluating cases and participating in the judging meeting

Judging Criteria

Judging criteria should be determined as the submission form questions are developed.

There are two ways to evaluate cases:

Option 1: Assign a potential point value to each question and write criteria for each level of points for each question.

Example: Question 1 – Tell us why you chose to use a CLA approach. What is your perceived value of CLA for this activity?

- 3 points – Response explains why a CLA approach was used and articulates the comparative value of CLA over other approaches.
- 2 points – Incomplete response – may explain some of the value proposition for CLA but fall short of making the connection between the goals of the activity and how CLA could help to advance them.
- 1 – Response is very weak or does not answer the question.

If you choose this option, here are a few guidelines to consider:

- Consider weighting the potential point value based on the length and/or importance of each question. For example, two points for a question about the general context of the case and three or four points for a question about results and impact.
- Judges will likely need to add up these points in their head, so try to avoid assigning more than 5 points to any one question and more than 25 points across the entire submission form.
- **Advantages:** This approach tends to be the most efficient because it allows judges to focus on and evaluate one question at a time. It is less subjective than Option 2 because it includes specific criteria for each question and there is less grey area about point value judgements.
- **Disadvantages:** Compared to Option 2, this approach does not capture the overall "impact" of the case as well. Submitters may have great responses, Option 1 is not as strong at evaluating the usefulness of the case study for the intended audience.

Option 2: Create a rubric for holistic evaluations of each submission.

Ex.

	Completeness	Use of Evidence	Innovation	Leadership
3	All questions answered completely	Some evidence included as available	Very innovative, breakthrough ideas or application	Demonstrates strong leadership decision-making and delegation
2	Some partial responses	Mixed use of evidence	Some innovation	Mixed references or incomplete discussion of leadership
1	Many partial responses or no responses	Little or no evidence used	Does not include innovative ideas or applications	Does not discuss or reflect leadership

After reading each submission, judges consider the whole body of responses and evaluate the case based on holistic criteria.

- **Advantages:** This approach allows judges to quickly assess the overall strength and usefulness of a case.
- **Disadvantages:** Compared to Option 1, this approach is more subjective because it inadvertently brings more factors into consideration. For example, it may be more difficult for judges to disentangle the impact of superficial elements such as writing skills or their preexisting familiarity with the subject matter from their assessments.

Judging Process & Timeline

Use the judging spreadsheet to assign cases to judges and monitor their scores in real time. Judges should be locked out of the tab with all scores and only allowed to access their own tab.

There are many was to divvy up cases among judges depending on the number of cases submitted. For the CLA case competition, with 100+ cases that were 5 pages each, each case was assigned to three judges. As judges entered their scores in the judging spreadsheet, the activity manager noted if the first two scores were below the median and removed the third judge from that case. Cases that scored above the median or had vastly differing scores were then read by a third judge. This helped to manage the overall level of effort for judging.

For a case competition with a smaller number of submissions, you may ask all judges to read all of the cases.
Judges will likely be juggling this responsibility with others, so allow as much time as possible for judging. When determining how much time to budget for judging, consider the length of case submissions and how many cases each judge will be asked to review. For the CLA case competition, judges got two weeks to read about 25 5-page cases each.

Judging Kickoff Meeting

Schedule a meeting to walk judges through the judging process. Be sure to cover:

- Guidelines around impartiality (not showing favoritism to people/organizations/activities with which they are familiar)

- Judging criteria (walk through each question and criteria)
- Judging process timeline

When possible, provide an opportunity for judges to judge a practice case and compare their scores and rationale. This will help them to calibrate their scoring with other judges and identify questions to discuss with the case competition leads and other judges while you are gathered.

Final Judging Meeting

You may decide to name the cases with the highest score(s) as the winner(s). However, you may consider using a slightly more qualitative approach that takes into considerations other parameters such as geographic diversity of winning cases, variety of approaches, etc. If you choose the later, you may need to hold a judging meeting.

Schedule the judging meeting to occur a few days after scoring is complete. In preparation for this meeting, create multiple views of the aggregate scores spreadsheet, such as sorting by highest average score, cases in the top 20% and then sorted by the lowest standard deviation, etc. and plan to present this information to the judges to kick off the meeting. Then, explain what other parameters the judges should take into consideration in their decision-making. For example, if you will have three winners, three finalists, and want them to be geographically diverse, explain this. Then, using your analysis of scores and these parameters, facilitate a discussion to determine these finalists. For the CLA case competition, with 10 winners and 10 finalists, this judging meeting lasted 3 hours with a break and lots of snacks!

ANNOUNCING WINNER(S)

When deciding how you will announce the winning cases, consider the original objectives of your case competition. If one of your objectives is to highlight good practices and lessons learned and/or facilitate connections among people doing similar work, you may decide to host an event or other opportunity for people to engage with the cases while you have their attention. This may require that you wait to announce the winner(s) until you have finished analyzing/packaging/publishing your cases (see next section).

Here are some ideas for announcing the winner(s) of your case competition:

- Email blast that links to winner(s) and finalist cases
- Webinar that includes:
    - PowerPoint presentation or video compilation of key themes or highlights from top cases
    - Highlights from top cases
    - An interview or panel discussion with winner(s)
    - Launch of a report or case study collection
- Awards ceremony during a conference or other in-person event

In addition to your main announcement, consider other opportunities to spotlight your winner(s), such as via announcements on related listservs and websites, facilitated discussions among Communities of Practice, during conferences or other in-person events, etc.

Analyzing, Packaging & Publishing Cases

There are many ways to use the case studies you collect. Below are a few examples.

When determining what to do with your case studies, here are a few things to consider:

- **Who is the primary audience for the case studies?** How much time do they have to read and absorb case studies? What kind of information do you think they will be looking for?
- **What do you want your audience to do with the information they read?** For example, if you want your audience to replicate good practices, be sure case studies contain enough detail about practical tools and tips.
- **What questions do you have about the information you've captured in the case studies?** What kind of qualitative or quantitative analyses may answer these questions?
- **If they will be available publicly, how will your primary audience search for and access case study files on an ongoing basis?** Does it make sense to create a special destination for your case studies, or keep them among other resources?

STANDALONE CASE STUDIES

Publishing standalone case studies is a good option for showcasing best practices with widely applicable applications. You may re-frame the text (see long-form case study example below), or publish the questions and answers exactly as they were collected (see brief CLA case study example below).

Examples:

- Brief CLA Case Study
- Long-form Resilience Case Study

ANALYSIS OF THEMES IN CASE STUDIES

You may choose to conduct a quantitative or qualitative analysis of the submission you collect. Possible lines of inquiry for your analysis:

- Count of countries and/or organizations represented in submissions.
- What themes emerge in submitters' overall approach?
- What are the conditions in which approaches were most successful/least successful?
- Frequency with which certain sub-themes emerge, ex. role of leadership, organizational culture, etc.

Examples:

- 2018 CLA Case Competition Analysis
- CLA Case Competition Self-Reliance Analysis

FILTERABLE CASE STUDY MAP

If you have an ample number of case studies from different regions, you may consider using a filterable case map or other visual as a searchable index. The example linked below was built with Awesome Table.

Example:

- CLA Case Studies Map on USAID Learning Lab