



Measuring the Contribution of CLA to Organizational & Development Outcomes: What have we learned?

REFLECTIONS FROM MARKETSHARE ASSOCIATES

What did we set out to do?

USAID funded five partner organizations to examine the question: does a systematic, intentional and resourced approach to **collaborating, learning, and adapting** (CLA) contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes? And if so, how and under what conditions? Each partner used their \$100,000 grant to design and implement a study in response to these questions over 20 months ending in April 2018. Given the **documented challenges** associated with measuring the contribution of CLA to organizational or development outcomes, each grant was an investment in piloting and learning from measurement approaches, creating a safe space for trial, error, and ultimately improving current and future attempts at similar research.

This document describes the key findings from one **learning network** member, Marketshare Associates, who sought to build, test and measure the impacts of a set of CLA-focused tactics with the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF), a five-year, DFID-funded project that takes a market systems development approach to women's economic empowerment in Egypt, Palestine and Jordan. The study focused specifically on AWEF's Egypt program and tested whether or not CLA occurs when tools, processes, and coaching are tailored to individuals' and team's unique contexts and whether or not more effective CLA translates to improved development outcomes.

What did the research reveal?

The evidence we collected supported one of our initial hypotheses that CLA is optimized when related tools, processes and support (e.g., 'coaching') are tailored to individuals' and teams' unique collaboration challenges, and context/room for adaptation. The evidence was not sufficient to validate our second hypothesis that more effective CLA translates to improved development outcomes.

What methods and tools were used?

To answer the research questions, we developed the following tools which we plan to use again with the other AWEF countries and potentially with other projects attempting to improve and/or measure their levels of CLA:

- **Baseline, midline and endline surveys** to measure changes in CLA during the lifetime of this project. As mentioned earlier, the baseline survey was an online survey questionnaire, supplemented with qualitative interviews with selected AWEF Egypt and DAI HO staff. The midline and endline 'surveys', however, consisted exclusively of qualitative interviews.

- **A CLA framework ('ADAPT5')** and associated self-assessment tool tailored for development projects.
- **A set of CLA-related indicators & associated results measurement tool** that feed into AWEF's logframe and is linked to the ADAPT5 framework. Information collected from this tool supplemented the data from our surveys about CLA-related practices and changes

Key lessons learned on our methods are as follows:

1. Self-assessment and measurement must be preceded by conceptual clarity about CLA.
2. A self-assessment and baseline assessment of CLA can serve different purposes, and should be timed accordingly. A self-assessment/diagnostic can help a team identify and agree on areas for improvement, and can also be an important platform for airing CLA-related issues and speaking openly. Related but slightly different, a CLA baseline aims to capture current levels of CLA within a team across different dimensions, and track that progress through subsequent surveys. While a self-assessment can be conducted at any point, we learned that a CLA baseline should not be conducted at the start of a development project, or even at inception phase, but rather when implementation has been occurring for a while (at least six months) and staff have been in their roles for a while (at least one year).
3. Mixed methods are needed to capture learnings and drivers of change.

MSA took two main steps to establish plausible contribution and mitigate contribution bias:

1. Mapped out our **Theory of Change and Results Chain**, including assumptions and means of Verification
2. Identified **“Expect-to-See” evidence** i.e., “data we would expect to find if the contribution claim holds true. If we don't see this evidence, the claim is likely false. If we do see it, the claim is a plausible cause of the observed change, but it may not be the only cause. It is necessary but not sufficient to support a contribution claim.”[1] The main “Expect-to-See” evidence that we identified below the ‘red line’ in our Theory of Change (i.e., up until the point to which results could be captured) was: “Team opinion that changes made (e.g., dropping low-performing partners and interventions, adjusting results chains and activities, looking for information from new sources or new information) were made more quickly due to new CLA tools and procedures.”

Based on our experience in this study, a key recommendation to other researchers would be to frame the research questions to minimize confirmation bias. An example could be, “are there cases or circumstances in which collaborating, learning and adapting does not meaningfully contribute, or even hinder, development outcomes? If so, how and why?” The study could then set out to investigate cases where this has occurred, polling a broad cross-section of development projects and then conducting case studies on a geographically and sector-diverse sample to illustrate the different circumstances under which investments in CLA might not be an effective use of resources.

What else did we learn about integrating CLA?

Other learnings that may be relevant to other projects trying to improve their CLA are as follows:

1. **Relations between country teams and head office can greatly influence CLA** within the program overall. CLA is generally conceptualized at the levels of a) within a program team, b) between program staff and partners, c) between a program and a donor. However, we have learned from this study that CLA at the head office level, and between HO and the country level, can greatly influence implementation. Practitioners looking to improve CLA within a program must therefore also consider this aspect in identifying needs and designing support (e.g., include HO staff in CLA workshops, consider payment structures and milestones between the two levels).
2. CLA must be **linked to the project's highest priority** outcomes. CLA tools and technical assistance are best received and applied if it can be shown how they would be used to improve implementation of the most significant outcomes and outputs in the project logframe.
3. **Advising on CLA requires deep project knowledge** and is therefore best integrated with other technical support. While there are certain well-known CLA best practices that can be applied across most projects, in most cases, CLA cannot be separated from project activities. In our case, as an external party advising a project on how to

improve its CLA (which was our case), the advice was both most relevant and best-received when it came from one of our staff who already knew and had worked with the project, and already had good relationships with project staff.

4. **Reactive and proactive adaptation have different approaches** and implications. A decision made in the face of an obstacle (reactive) must be distinguished from one made in anticipation of either an obstacle or an opportunity (proactive). In most cases, the latter approach is obviously preferable. However, there is such a thing as too much adaptation i.e. when a decision is made for the sake of experimentation or without giving a partnership enough time to succeed. A combination of experienced leadership and good contextual knowledge are still essential to good decision-making about when an intervention or partnership simply needs more time and resources to succeed, and when it's time to exit or pivot. Regular reviews of decisions made with both country and global staff can help to establish a common understanding of what it means to adapt proactively.

For more information about this study, please contact Ben Fowler, ben@marketshareassociates.com.