



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

REFLECTIONS FROM POLLEN GROUP & CANOPY LABS

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, Pollen Group. With support from Canopy Labs, Pollen Group developed comparative, longitudinal case studies of two organizations in relation to their approach to CLA: USAID-funded Bangladesh Agricultural Value Chains (AVC) Project and Musika, a Zambian non-profit company founded in 2011 with initial support from the Swedish Embassy in Zambia and UKAID. The overarching methodology, essentially 'following' the organizations for more than a year, was designed to understand which investments in CLA were the most beneficial for the organizations (and why), and to synthesize learning that could assist other projects working in different contexts to identify the investments that might be appropriate for them.

What did the research reveal?

1. In both AVC and Musika, **investments in CLA resulted in greater organizational ability to process observational data** that led to decisions about changes in partnerships, strategies, or internal operations.
2. Specifically, this research found that **CLA within partnerships is enabled by shared decision-making amongst the project team**.
3. In addition, **flexibility in the duration, structure, and value of funding as well as effective and timely M&E were essential for projects to adapt** and apply what they had learned from their partnerships.
4. At the strategy level, beyond individual partnerships, **decision-making was enabled by capturing systems-level data**, which fueled follow-on research in areas of interest to the technical teams.
5. **Investments in CLA were linked to change in the behavior of partners, particularly in terms of how partnerships were able to evolve over time**, and impacts on higher-level decision making with regard to which sectors to work in. However, it was challenging to extend this link to development outcomes at the beneficiary level beyond specific cases.

What methods and tools were used?

This research was qualitative in nature and involved a mix of observation of project staff during learning meetings (quarterly review), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with the projects' staff and key partners including market actors, donors, and other development actors.

Our initial approach used a comprehensive list of questions related to 'measures' of CLA including donor and contracting management, framing, organizational structure, staff capacity, and institutional biases, sophistication/quality of learning, CLA management, market reactions to adaptation and foreseeable counterfactual, challenges, and influence of and on other projects. Upon trying to operationalize these questions in an interview format, our team realized this level of detail would require too much time, exhaust good will with staff/management, and perhaps not yield the results we were interested in. From this list of eight measures, we distilled them down to the questions (see data collection tools below) we were most interested in for understanding CLA in the project.

Following learning and reflection from an initial research trip, it was decided that the study should emphasize a pivot log methodology—tracking the course of decisions made over time and the motivation for these changes—in order to better understand key decision-making points within the projects' life frames that were enabled by investments in CLA. We anticipated that this would help clarifying the link between CLA and outcomes. Given the experience of this study, an evaluation method that is able to capture decision-making more effectively (e.g., via pivot logs) over the duration of a project lifetime would be highly valuable in strengthening the link between CLA and good development outcomes. This need not be time-consuming and costly but should look at a long period of time. Systemic change takes time and responding to signs of systems change (or lack thereof!) is a slow process. In addition, a qualitative approach appears to make sense in the absence of a clear counterfactual.

Several tools were used to collect, analyze, and frame the data collected during the research project including:

1. **Data collection** – for **FGDs**, we structured the discussion around three key questions: (1) How does CLA happen in the project?, (2) What enables/inhibits CLA in the project?, and (3) How does CLA change your role within the project? For **KIIs**, we used a semi-structured approach which loosely followed these three questions and was tailored to the position of the specific interviewee. For example, the KII with the operations liaison at AVC focused more on internal learning and coordination processes, whereas the KII with the market systems team lead focused on CLAs role in strategies with external partners. In both FGDs and KIIs, we would end the discussion by inquiring about what the 'perfect' CLA environment would look like. This question often revealed staff's critiques of the current learning environment as they were asked to imagine how their ideal situation would operate.
2. **Analysis** – to understand how CLA did or did not connect to outcomes, our team used a pivot log methodology to share specific stories of how learning led to a decision-point for the project team and led to impact. This pivot log included six column headings for each individual story including:
 - a. Information source (where did the information come from, how was it 'found')
 - b. Learning (what lesson was extracted from this information)
 - c. Pivot (action taken or not taken)
 - d. Internal impact (Did/how did the pivot change things within the project)
 - e. Partner impact (Did/how did the pivot change the partner or relationship)
 - f. System impact (Did/how did the pivot change the system the project and partner operate in)
3. **Framing/synthesis** – Our team developed the CLA 'landscape' framework to refer to different levels in which CLA happened on each project. This 'landscape' was broken into three related buckets (see below).
 - a. **Internal processes:** organizational and staff management practices, such as consistent messaging, communication norms and channels (including ICT to enable this), spaces for constructive criticism and open discussion, and investment in staff learning and skill-building.
 - b. **External processes:** mechanisms by which projects establish a joint-venture with a partner including formal vetting processes, due diligence, written agreements.

- c. **High-level strategic decision-making:** suite of tools and processes used by these projects to communicate, investigate and gather intelligence about their operating environment. The key characteristic here is learning related to the system rather than a specific partnership.

The team used this CLA 'landscape' framework to differentiate between types of CLA investments and provide examples (pivot stories) of how these have led to a change in strategy, tactic or intervention design in both projects. Given the method used (KIs, FGDs) and our presence in the project space, we recognized that confirmation bias as well as our influence on the staff was a drawback of the approach. To mitigate the impact of this we:

- Explicitly acknowledge the limitations of the approach before and throughout the research process
- Triangulated staff and management interviews with other sources of information including reviewing project documentation (over time including annual and quarterly reports/reviews) and conversations with partners and, where possible other development projects and the donor
- Spoke to multiple staff from each team (operations, technical, knowledge management, etc.) and tended to focus on ideas/points that were brought up multiple times as opposed to outliers.

Figure 1: Pollens' CLA Landscape Framework



What else did we learn about integrating CLA?

Both AVC and Musika have made significant investments in internal processes that allow a **culture of CLA** to thrive, and in turn, foster more **adaptive relationships** with external partners. Specific takeaways include:

- **More flexible donor structures enable better CLA.** Musika was in a better position to take a learning approach as a semi-permanent entity with multiple sources of funding. This reduced pressure on meeting specific targets by externally set deadlines.
- **Operations systems aligned with CLA are essential to doing CLA well, if at all.** Contracting and procurement policies hindered AVC's ability to adapt. Getting internal contracting and procurement systems right was essential but took precious time away from other elements of CLA and building effective partnerships over time.

- **There is more than one way to do CLA.** Musika and AVC had very different organizational cultures and leadership styles (e.g., with regard to systems analysis versus action) but both could be said to imbibe the spirit of CLA.
- **Common themes emerged across different continents and types of projects that correlate with the CLA Maturity Tool:** Within both AVC and Musika, for effective CLA, it was essential that project management consistently message CLA and back it up with action. These actions included the creation of informal spaces for increased staff interaction, sharing, and feedback, open relationships between managers and staff, as well as considerable investments in staff learning and capacity through internal workshops and access to external coaching and support through consultants and other avenues. These internal investments enable effective and adaptive relationships with external partners and align with the 'categories' of necessary investments laid out by the USAID Maturity Tool; culture, processes, resources.

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