2021 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Using CLA to design and operationalize the Embedded Research Translation model

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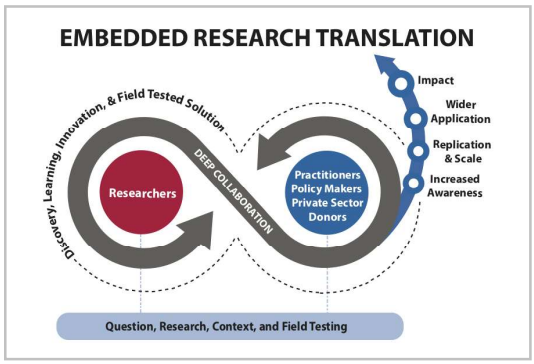

The Embedded Research Translation (ERT) model designed and operationalized through CLA. ERT is an iterative co-design process among academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders in which research is intentionally applied to a development challenge.

Summary:

LASER (Long-term Assistance and SErvices for Research) PULSE (Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine) is a five-year program that delivers research-driven solutions to field-sourced development challenges in USAID partner countries. We understand that novel approaches are required to address complex international development challenges like poverty, migration, and climate change. LASER PULSE promotes research translation to deliver co-produced evidence-based research for development, but there is a lack of established models or processes for research translation in international development. Therefore, we faced two challenges: (1) to design a model for researchers and practitioners to be systematic and intentional about research translation, and (2) to operationalize the model. We did not start intentionally with CLA, but the need for it emerged in the first two years of programming. Through internal collaboration, and pause & reflect, we built mutual understanding to design a research translation model called Embedded Research Translation (ERT). Then through monitoring & evaluation, external collaboration, and leveraging learning into adaptive management, we implemented processes to operationalize ERT. CLA improved our organization effectiveness and development outcomes. Before, our management was ad hoc. Since applying CLA approaches, our team is more effective at working collaboratively and adapting to learning. We implemented the ERT model and processes in September 2020 and expect to observe improved research translation through changes in development programs and policy. Initial evidence shows changes at the individual level because our ERT processes improve collaborations between researchers and practitioners in research projects. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the need for CLA .

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can 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 is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

In 2018, USAID funded LASER (Long-term Assistance and SErvices for Research) PULSE (Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine) a five-year, $70M program that delivers research-driven solutions to field-sourced development challenges in USAID partner countries. A consortium led by Purdue University, with core partners Catholic Relief Services, Indiana University, Makerere University, and the University of Notre Dame, implements the LASER PULSE program.

LASER PULSE operates with the understanding that novel approaches are required to address the complexity of international development challenges like poverty, migration, and climate change. One response to address these complex problems is for practitioners to adopt evidence-based practices in their decision-making. In a perfect world practitioners would have the reliable evidence they need, however the data is often lacking, inaccessible, or irrelevant.

Co-production of knowledge is another response for research to address these complex problems, in which practitioners co-produce evidence with academic researchers. Co-production builds on practitioners and researchers' complementary skills and can result in scientifically sound evidence to inform decision making. However, co-production is time consuming and lacks clear principles or processes.

In response to the lack of readily accessible evidence and lack of principles for co-production, LASER PULSE recognized the need to develop a framework to guide Research Translation in International Development. Research translation, at the most basic level, is implementing evidence into practice. Our aim with LASER PULSE is to create a foundation for researchers and practitioners to be more systematic and intentional about translation, and to enable us to dedicate the resources necessary to make it happen. Therefore we faced two challenges: (1) to design a research translation model to support the uptake of evidence in development programming and policymaking, and (2) to operationalize the model.

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

LASER PULSE did not build CLA into the project design, but the need for it emerged during the first two years of the program. As we designed our model of research translation, called Embedded Research Translation (ERT), and began to operationalize it with funded research projects we were prompted to collaborate, learn, and adapt. Our leadership encouraged us to invest time into CLA and to foster a culture of valuing learning and iterative improvement.

COLABORATE - LASER PULSE is a collaboration amongst a consortium of researchers and practitioners in universities and an NGO. At the start, we struggled to have the same understanding of the ERT model. Additionally, we struggled to have clarity in roles and responsibilities because our team members are from institutions with different cultures and expectations. We needed to collaborate to design and operationalize the ERT model.

LEARN - The LASER PULSE leadership recognized the need to learn and invested the time into identifying gaps and successes in the design of our model. We conducted extensive interviews with researchers and practitioners so we could learn barriers and enablers to research translation. Additionally, our monitoring and evaluating processes evolved to also include the outcome mapping method to expand the depth of data to inform our programming.

ADAPT - Lastly, adaptive management became a fundamental component of LASER PULSE. Timely pause and reflection provided us opportunities to gather evidence of our current activities and think through how to operationalize our ERT model. Without a systematic approach to adapt, in the past, we tended to react to "emergencies" and apply an ad hoc solution to "fix" problems. This led us to develop a tracking process to systematically collect evidence to measure the success, challenges, and impact of the ERT model.

3. 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.

The steps in implementing our CLA approach were to first, internally collaborate, second to pause & reflect, third to learn through monitoring & evaluation, fourth to externally collaborate, and fifth to leverage learning into adaptive management.

LASER PULSE is a five-year USAID funded consortium that delivers research-driven practical solutions to critical development challenges in USAID interest countries across all technical sectors. LASER PULSE promotes research translation as a way to deliver evidence-based research for development. The underlying concept to this early model of research translation was based on LASER's implementing partners' deep experiences in collaborating in research for development projects.

But about a year in, we learned, through INTERNAL COLLABORATION that consortium partners had conflicting understandings of research translation. Some partners understood research translation to be a two-step linear process, where translation occurs after research completion. While other partners understood research translation to be an iterative model that promoted deep and ongoing collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

After this collaboration showed a discrepancy, the LASER PULSE partners took time to TO PAUSE & REFLECT which helped to team to have honest conversations about designing and operationalizing research translation. These conversations helped the consortium to build mutual understanding and design a systematic and intentional model of research translation. We named the model Embedded Research Translation (ERT). ERT is the iterative co-design process among academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders in which research is intentionally applied to a development challenge. This was a key decision point informed by LEARNING from partner experiences and evidence gathered in key informant interviews with researchers and practitioners.

Once the model was designed, then the consortium worked collaboratively to design processes to operationalize the model in research projects. The next key decision point was how to MONITOR AND EVALUATE the ERT model as it was operationalized. Through collaboration we designed new M&E tools to collect data on what we needed to know to inform decision making and programing ERT for research projects. We developed a biannual Qualtrics survey to understand different perceptions of research team members on the four pillars or ERT: partnership, process, product, and dissemination. The survey encouraged teams to pause and reflect on the operationalization of research translation.

The first round of data from the M&E tools informed decision making about how to improve the model. LASER PULSE then through EXTERNAL COLLABORATION with research teams at universities and in the field, to speak directly with them about their experiences in operationalizing the ERT model. Their feedback from the meetings informed the capacity strengthening resources we developed to assist their research translation projects addressing development challenges.

Finally, all this learning was leveraged into ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT to continue to improve the Embedded Research translation model design and the processes to operationalize it. Two important enabling factors strongly influenced our CLA approach.

The LASER PULSE leadership established a culture of valuing CONTINUOUS LEARNING. For example, we worked on a systematic literature of research translation approaches to situate the ERT model amongst other models.

The other enabling factor is that LASER decided to articulate CLEAR PROCESSES for the operationalization of research translation. Together these multiple CLA subcomponents addressed our challenge to design a research translation approach for international development and operationalize it to improve development outcomes.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: 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?

BEFORE CLA: Without using CLA, our organizational effectiveness was ad hoc. In the first year and a half of LASER PULSE, we did not have processes for our consortium to implement a clear model of ERT. We struggled to have the same understanding of ERT concepts as well as the clarity in roles and responsibilities. We did not have standard operating procedures or monitoring tools for research translation. In response, we had a reactive management approach. These rapid responses drained time and resources overall because it drew attention away from the rest of the program, causing delays and quality issues.

AFTER CLA: Since we applied CLA approaches, our team is more effective at operationalizing the ERT model and working more effectively as a consortium. Several organizational changes improved our effectiveness.

To collaborate better, we established an Embedded Research Translation working group to coordinate activities, events, and to provide a platform for reaching consensus on LASER PULSE's research translation strategy through sharing experiences and resources.

To learn better, we developed several tools to monitor ERT in our awards mechanisms. We used M&E data to identify gaps and direct resources to areas that need to be strengthened. Additionally, we did a SWOT analysis on the ERT model and identified gaps in our project management tracking processes.

To adapt better, we developed and integrated processes to operationalize the ERT model. Through improved collaboration and learning, we now have clear roles, responsibilities, and structure on how the consortium worked with ERT. Now we have defined roles to support and monitor teams.

5. Development Results: 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?

We implemented the ERT model and processes in September 2020 with the first five RFA awards. Since then we have applied the model and processes to all newly funded research projects. As we gather more data, we will continue to collaborate, learn, and adapt to improve the ERT model.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES - We expect that the operationalization of the ERT model and processes will improve research collaborations in research translation to address complex development problems with co-produced evidence. The research projects are generally two years, so the outcomes on the development problems will be measured in the future. Thus far, we have evidence on changes to research practices through the implementation of ERT processes at the individual level as reported by researchers and practitioners. This data was collected in biannual surveys and in virtual meetings. For example, one academic researcher said she always wanted her research to have an impact but having processes to keep her on track has really improved her collaborations with practitioners and the co-management of their research project to improve sales of indigenous African vegetables.

FUTURE OUTCOMES - We expect to see several outcomes in the future. First, we expect to document evidence used to change policy and programs in development. Second, we expect to observe changes in how researchers and practitioners collaborate. Third, we expect the use of the ERT model and tools outside of our funded research projects. If we did not use the CLA approach, our development results would be impossible to monitor and measure. The ERT processes we developed in 2020 and continue to adapt, will enable us to collect evidence on the impacts from the projects including challenges and successes.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

There are two key enablers to our CLA approach.
CONTINUOUS LEARNING - A culture of continuous learning and improvement at LASER PULSE enabled our CLA approach. Since our consortium's partners have deep expertise and experience with adaptive management, it allowed for us to value on-going learning. Also, LASER PULSE's USAID partners, including our AOR, advocated for and provided several opportunities to institutionalize learning into our processes, as our technical activity of developing and operationalizing the ERT model was unique and experimental in nature. Thus, very early on, we established outcome mapping as part of our measurement and evaluation system to collect evidence to learn and adapt our operations based on evidence.

OPENNESS - Another enabling factor was a culture of openness among LASER PULSE partners. The openness enabled our CLA approach because it fostered a deep collaboration among our consortium partners, especially within our ERT working group. We experienced an environment of mutual trust and respect in valuing different ideas as the working group was a safe space to discuss and deliberate on topics collaboratively. This culture allowed for inclusion of all consortium partners in a shared decision-making process.

However, one obstacles inhibited our CLA approach.
KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT - We learned that finding the right balance between being truly collaborative and being agile in our adaptive management is challenging. We established knowledge management processes, yet to make data driven decisions, we need to systematically collect knowledge and analyze data from stakeholders, which is time and resource intensive. Then, introducing new changes to processes and operations after learning new evidence is also time and resource intensive. We would advise others to budget resources and establish clear, iterative decision making processes to apply distilled knowledge for program improvement.

7. Was your CLA approach prompted by a response to the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how?

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the need for CLA approaches. We already used CLA to operationalize the research translation model, and the pandemic altered our operations substantially.

COLLABORATE - Since the LASER PULSE consortium has partners from across the United States and Uganda, we conducted most of our operations virtually even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the CLA supported our response to the pandemic because it encouraged us to strengthen our culture of openness, relationships, and learning within our consortium. Like everyone dealing with the pandemic, mental health issues impacted all our consortium partners. The stress of the disease, family deaths, and constant uncertainty was very challenging. The consortium grew stronger as we listened to alternative perspectives, and we developed more trusting relationships.

ADAPT - After the pandemic started in early 2020, we canceled our extensively planned Research For Development (R4D) conferences in Vietnam and Ethiopia. These conferences were our avenues to convene academic researchers and practitioners, disseminate our ERT model, and foster collaborations for research projects. However, using the CLA approach, especially with our USAID partners, we adapted our original objectives to conduct pre-award conferences and now plan for a post-award conferences.

LEARN - The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted our awarded research projects. Many research teams in our awards changed work plans or even research methodologies. Due to lock downs, some teams postponed or canceled field work. The LASER PULSE team responded rapidly to learn about the challenges and adapt our management of the awards to their changing needs. Furthermore, we conducted interviews virtually with researchers and practitioners in Ethiopia to draft the request for applications for our awards there.