2021 CLA CASE COMPETITION

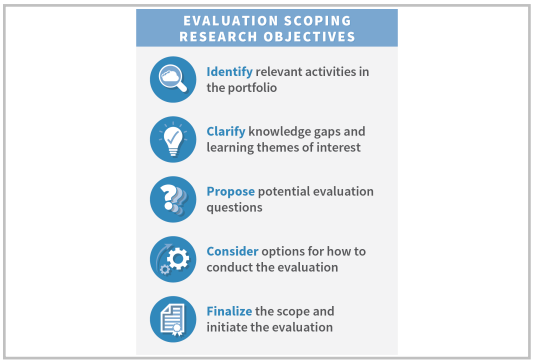
COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Collaborative Scoping Research to Design USAID's Climate Services Evaluation

Name: Jeremy Gans

Organization: Management Systems International, a Tetra Tech company



The core objectives for the scoping research process. Credit: Management Systems International.

Summary:

USAID invests in climate services around the world to help individuals and organizations better adapt to climate variability and change. While the Agency has invested in more than 40 climate services activities since 2012, evidence and learning from this portfolio had not been systematically examined and shared to inform programming decisions. USAID/Washington's Adaptation team wanted to evaluate these diverse climate services investments but was uncertain how best to prioritize its learning interests.

After a year of trying internally to decide on key elements of the evaluation scope, the team pursued a different approach. With the help of Management Systems International (MSI), the team engaged in collaborative scoping research to identify relevant investments, clarify knowledge gaps and priority learning themes, consider potential evaluation questions, weigh evaluation design options, and facilitate final decisions on the evaluation scope. This scoping research included a focused desk review, interviews with likely target audiences, and preparation of a briefing note. A final facilitated group discussion enabled the team to quickly agree on core aspects of the evaluation scope. The process also helped ensured the evaluation would be feasible given limited resources and useful for the target audiences.

The scoping research contributed to the Adaptation team's decision to design the evaluation in interative phases with pause-and-reflect sessions to ensure relevant results and products. The collaborative approach also allowed the Adaptation team to work across different areas of expertise and helped it think further about how CLA approaches can be used when the big-picture questions may be clear but the evidence base is uncertain.

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?

USAID invests in climate services to help individuals and organizations around the world make climate-smart decisions. These investments support the production, transfer, and use of improved data and information so partner countries and individuals can better adapt to climate variability and change. USAID teams in overseas Missions and in Washington have invested in more than 40 climate services activities around the world since 2012. However, the diverse and integrated approaches, evidence, and learning from these recent activities had not been systematically documented, synthesized, and shared to inform decisions for future programming.

USAID/Washington's Adaptation team wanted to evaluate and learn from the Agency's climate services investments. However, the team was unsure how best to narrow and prioritize its interests to ensure a useful evaluation and was uncertain what evidence the evaluation could realistically provide. In general, the team wanted to collect and share results and lessons learned to help USAID staff understand when, how, and under what conditions they should consider supporting climate services. Key useful insights would include what type of results can be expected from climate services investments, what factors are necessary for those investments to succeed, what programming approaches have proven effective, and when and how to scale up promising climate services activities.

While the Adaptation team had a broad vision for the evaluation, team members were uncertain about how best to define the specific target audiences, how they would use the evaluation results, what core questions the evaluation should answer, and what methodologies would be most feasible and useful to obtain this evidence. There are also inherent challenges in assessing and comparing USAID's diverse climate services activities since many of the climate services were integrated into broader programming. These investments vary significantly in terms of the specific climate services provided, the types of partners engaged, the country implementation context, and the existing evidence base.

Because of these challenges, for more than a year the Adaptation team was unable to finalize key aspects of the evaluation's scope, methodology, and on which specific climate services investments it should focus.

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

The Adaptation team wanted to build the technical evidence base for climate services and share learning. However, team members were uncertain how best to approach an evaluation of this diverse portfolio with the time and resources available. Key unresolved decisions included whether the evaluation should look broadly across the portfolio or more narrowly on a few specific investments, and whether it would be possible for the evaluation to provide robust lessons from these investments or instead capture illustrative cases of successes and challenges. The team also needed to clarify who were the key audiences for the evaluation and what information and products would be most useful for their future decision-making needs.

To facilitate a process for reaching agreement on the evaluation scope, the Adaptation team turned to the E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project, led by Management Systems International (MSI), a Tetra Tech company.

The Adaptation team wanted to use a collaborative and evidence-based process to iteratively design the evaluation and was willing to be flexible and creative with the process, including identifying which USAID activities the evaluation should examine, determining the key questions the evaluation should answer, and considering options for the evaluation design.

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.

In late 2019, the Adaptation team worked with MSI to conduct targeted research and reach decisions regarding the evaluation scope. The core objectives of this scoping research were to identify relevant USAID climate services investments and existing evidence regarding them, clarify knowledge gaps and learning themes of interest to the evaluation stakeholders, propose potential evaluation questions, consider options for how to conduct the evaluation, and ultimately finalize the scope and initiate the evaluation. The scoping research took place over approximately three months in late 2019, using a structured process.

First, the team carried out a limited desk review to better understand key USAID climate services activities, potential countries of interest for the evaluation, and observed results and utilization of those investments.

Second, the team conducted interviews with USAID staff from each operating unit that would be a likely key audience for the evaluation. Half of these 14 interviews were with staff in overseas missions and half were with USAID/Washington staff. The interviews aimed to identify priority areas of interest for learning, perceived evidence gaps, and potential challenges to implementing an evaluation of this nature, such as data gaps and local sensitivities.

Third, based on the desk review and interviews, the team prepared a short briefing note. It included a list of 29 possible evaluation questions, organized thematically by 9 overarching topics such as best practices, sustainability, usage, results, and gender. The briefing note also identified key climate services activities interviewees discussed that the evaluation might focus on, potential evaluation methodologies and their tradeoffs, and other preliminary findings from the interview data that USAID should consider in finalizing the evaluation scope.

Fourth, a facilitated group discussion was held with the Adaptation team to review the research findings and reach agreement on core aspects of the evaluation scope. The session allowed participants to discuss how the evaluation could best serve the core audiences, prioritize the potential evaluation questions, and consider the practical implications of various evaluation methods the briefing note identified. The discussion also explored which regions and sectors were of particular interest, and how to balance the different information needs of critical audiences.

The briefing note and facilitated discussion also allowed the Adaptation team to review the climate services activities that interviewees identified and what investments may have been missing from that list that should be included in the evaluation. MSI documented the discussion, including the questions of interest that participants shortlisted, and shared these notes with the Adaptation team for further reflection.

Finally, the team drew from the scoping research and group discussion to quickly complete the evaluation scope. This included narrowing down the 29 potential evaluation questions to 3 core questions and defining the evaluation purpose and target audiences. The Adaptation team decided not to have the evaluation look at national country contexts or include other actors supporting climate services investments, since the scoping research clarified that those efforts would likely be very challenging and resource intensive. The team did, however, agree that it wanted to have the evaluation capture the kinds of results that can be expected from different types of investments along the climate services value chain.

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?

Using a collaborative, research-based approach enabled USAID's Adaptation team to complete an evaluation scope in a matter of months, following a year of efforts to do so by traditional means. Furthermore, the collaborative and iterative process produced an evaluation scope that was appropriate to provide useful and relevant information for the target audiences and avoided being too expansive. This approach also gave the evaluation team a more informed perspective as it designed and ultimately conducted the evaluation, since it participated in the scoping research and understood the audiences, activities, and challenges to data collection.

The Adaptation team also found that this collaborative scoping approach helped it work across different areas of expertise. The team's initial challenges to define what evidence and lessons an evaluation of this kind could provide were addressed by working in close coordination with external evaluation specialists. By drawing on this expertise, the Adaptation team's climate experts were able to more effectively evaluate a new and uncertain programming area.

Using this collaborative and interactive approach to complete the evaluation scope also directly led the Adaptation team to pursue on an iterative evaluation approach in which the evaluation team gathered and reported to the Adaptation team on the evidence collected throughout the course of the evaluation, rather than just at the end of the study. This design approach was essential for navigating any uncertainty and challenges encountered during implementation of the evaluation, and ultimately helped ensure the relevance and usefulness of the study results.

The experience also helped the Adaptation team think further about how CLA approaches can be used in circumstances in which the big-picture questions may be clear but the evidence base is uncertain. These approaches have shown the team how it can think more flexibly about evaluation approaches and learning efforts.

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?

The scoping research process helped the Adaptation team progress from a year of protracted discussions about the evaluation scope to having a final set of evaluation questions, a completed statement of work, and the development of an evaluation design in three months. The evaluation was subsequently completed in 2020, with a final report and dissemination products that provided USAID with the relevant evidence and lessons learned that would help Missions and other operating units decide when and how to make future climate services investments.

The scoping research also contributed to the Adaptation team's decision to build an interative, multi-phase approach into the evaluation design. This approach was also adaptive as it allowed the Adaptation team and the evaluation team to pause and reflect after each phase to ensure the evaluation approach, evidence collected to date, and proposed products were still relevant and practical. When the COVID-19 pandemic derailed the possibility of conducting field research, USAID and the evaluation team were able to quickly pivot to remote data collection activities and adjust the evaluation approach to focus on stakeholders who would be accessible remotely, rather than in-country respondents who would be more challenging to reach. This quick pivoting was possible since the Adaptation and evaluation teams clearly understood the priority learning interests of the target audiences for the evaluation.

With the current administration's prioritization of responding to climate change, this evaluation will inform the next generation of climate services programs by helping staff understand what benefits can be gained through effective climate services programs as well as consider where and how to invest in climate services.

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

Key to the success of this scoping research process was the openness of the Adaptation team to explore new ideas, consider tradeoffs of potential approaches, and embrace input from an external party. The team's willingness to hear from the wide range of evaluation stakeholders, and to let an external partner inform and guide decisions, was critical in finalizing the evaluation scope and settle on an approach that would prove very useful to those stakeholders.

In addition, this research process was intentional, transparent as to its ultimate objectives, and budgeted as part of the evaluation design process. Especially in the context of evaluating complex, multi-country and/or multi-mechanism portfolios, such a structured scoping research process was very cost effective. Only a small portion (less than 10 percent) of the ultimate evaluation budget was expended as the Adaptation team considered potential evaluation questions and weighed methodological options. This approach helped ensure that time and resources were not wasted during the main evaluation implementation stage.

While this collaborative approach had many positive aspects, it did face a challenge in terms of ensuring all relevant stakeholders were engaged and would ultimately buy into the decisions reached. With more than a dozen important audiences for the evaluation, not all stakeholders involved ultimately had their ideas and interests included in the final evaluation scope. An evaluation of this nature is also simply not able to look at all relevant activities, sectors, countries, etc., and leaving anything out risks alienating some of those audiences. By being transparent and inclusive about the approach used for determining the evaluation questions, objectives, and methods; and by recognizing the advantages and limitations of the selected approach, these sorts of challenges can be mitigated.

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

While the CLA approach to carry out scoping research to inform the co-creation of an evaluation scope was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted in Question 5, the subsequent evaluation of USAID's climate services investments was affected by the pandemic. Because of the CLA approach, the evaluation was better able to pivot from field data collection activities to remote efforts since the evaluation objectives were clearly defined and the evaluation adopted an iterative and flexible approach.