



COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

## CASE COMPETITION

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) have long been a part of USAID’s work. USAID staff and implementing partners have always sought ways to better understand the development process and USAID’s contribution to it, to collaborate in order to speed and deepen results, to share the successes and lessons of USAID’s initiatives, and to institute improvements to programs and operations. Through this case competition, USAID and its LEARN mechanism seek to capture and share the stories of those efforts. To learn more about the CLA Case Competition, visit the USAID Learning Lab at [usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition](https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition)

# Complex Problems Needs Simple Solutions

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### What is the general context in which the story takes place?

This was a midterm evaluation for the Project for Local Empowerment (PLE), a project whose focus is to provide health, education, food security, and protection support to internally displaced persons inside Burma and to displaced persons who have crossed the border into Thailand. For more than 25 years, instability, conflict, and governance fragility have resulted in extensive internal displacement, displacement across international boundaries, and other outward migration by populations from southeast Burma.

USAID has a long history of providing humanitarian assistance along the Thai-Burma border. PLE also operates within a strategic paradigm, reflected in the idea of **convergence**. Convergence is defined as the need to “adapt to new opportunities to promote linkages and convergence between PLE and USAID/Burma’s existing strategies and program activities; between PLE’s ethnic social service providers (border-based) and the Government of Myanmar and CBO network inside Burma.” Key evaluation questions related to convergence are outlined below.

### Key Evaluation Objectives for Convergence

1. *Is the convergence strategy relevant considering the changing situation in Burma?*
  - 1.1 The extent that convergence interventions can realistically be linked and/or transferred to available systems and/or interventions in Burma
  - 1.2 Key factors that support or obstruct the convergence, as mentioned in 1.1
  - 1.3 Additional support that might be needed to ensure the success of the convergence and how to gain such support
  - 1.4 The extent to which the PLE’s convergence strategy and interventions can serve as a “pull factor” for return and reintegration
  - 1.5 Perception of beneficiaries in Burma toward the convergence
  - 1.6 Whether and to what extent the convergence strategy affects male and female beneficiaries differently
  - 1.7 Geographic areas and/or targeted groups that should be prioritized to ensure convergence in Burma
  - 1.8 Geographic areas and targeted groups in Thailand that should be prioritized after PLE’s completion, and the rationale



**What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA activity?**

At the outset, the evaluation team interviewed several project custodians to try and understand the real meaning behind convergence. They discovered that the idea of convergence was largely seen as a process that was agreed upon by implementation partners, whereas the overall strategic purpose of convergence remained contested, with multiple implementation partners regarding it as ultimately supporting national reconciliation, more effective service delivery, or greater integration of humanitarian assistance investments provided on both sides of the border.

**What was the CLA approach or activity you employed?**

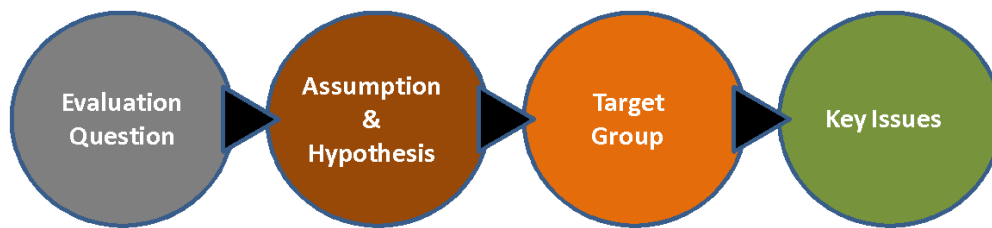
Based on the initial interviews it was clear that convergence, as a concept, had different meanings to different people. This presented challenges for creating suitable questions for the quantitative and qualitative research. We also sensed a risk if our own interpretation of the concept was based on preconceived ideas that may not have been truly objective or valid.

The evaluation team decided to conduct a workshop (the **CLA activity**) involving participants from all of the PLE consortium partners, as well as USAID staff. The workshop was carefully planned and can be summarized as follows (see also flow chart below with examples):

1. Workshop introduction, including clarification of objectives.
2. Participants were then divided into smaller (mixed) groups.
3. Each group was given a set of convergence objectives and asked to review them and come up with what they thought the underlying assumption or hypothesis was for each one. They were also asked to provide input on which target groups would be appropriate to interview.
4. Each group summarized their ideas on sticky notes (one idea per note), which were posted under each objective (on separate flip charts) for everyone to see.
5. Each group then presented their ideas to all participants, and the sticky notes from different groups were sorted and grouped for logic.
6. Finally, an open discussion was held to identify and agree on the underlying key issues related to each convergence objective. The outcome was a short-list of issues for each objective.

## Participatory Process

How to overcome the issue of objectives that don't translate into direct questions



**EXAMPLE**

**To what degree are PLE activities serving as a "pull factor" to Thailand for those who are not victims of conflict?**

**DPs are coming to Thailand to receive services not available in Burma.**

**CBOs in Thailand  
DPs in Thailand (inside and outside camps)**

**Main reason for DPs to come and to stay in Thailand?**

**Do DPs have access to services?**

*Note: DP is displaced person; CBO is community-based organization.*



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**Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?**

We considered and planned for the following:

- We wanted a mixed group of people who may have had different experiences and exposure to convergence.
- The workshop was held on premises outside of USAID to take place on more neutral ground.
- Participants were informed that we were interested in hearing all views on convergence, whether people were in agreement or not. We made it very clear that *all* ideas were welcome.
- Groups in the workshop were mixed up to reduce “halo” effect as much as possible.
- Materials included a whiteboard, flip charts, sticky notes, and pens. We used a multimedia projector for the introductory presentation about the process and objectives.

**What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?**

- The key issues agreed in the workshop really helped the evaluation team formulate suitable questions.
- The workshop also served as a “buy-in” process that was needed, given the sensitivities surrounding the PLE evaluation.
- The most significant outcome was the result of the research itself and how the evaluation team came to realize that convergence is not an objective in itself (as is often inferred) but a process. As stated in the evaluation report, “The data suggest that convergence is not a ‘goal’ or ‘objective’, but rather refers to a ‘process’ or the ‘means’ through which to achieve the aim of greater integration of border activities within community-based and [governmental] systems inside Burma.” Although the answer may seem self-evident, the result clearly showed that different people understood convergence differently depending on their relationship to the PLE program.
- Upon presenting to the USAID/Burma mission, the analysis and conclusions regarding convergence were well received. The recommendation was that “all USAID stakeholders should have a commonly held and agreed definition of convergence so that it can be more easily integrated into program objectives and progress measured against the defined concept.”

**What were the most important lessons learned?**

- It was not easy to put the workshop together, as some participants did not see an immediate benefit. The learning from this challenge was that CLA activities can sometimes be seen as threats, so it is important to clearly outline the objectives beforehand and make sure to fully understand the background to any criticism.
- Workshops are not a new method, but the process used for exploring and clarifying the evaluation objectives was a new approach adapted by Rapid Asia. It turned out to be very useful and has now become a regular approach we use to simultaneously achieve participation, buy-in, and learning.
- Some of the more critical participants during the workshop later became some of the most collaborative. This highlights how participation can lead to buy-in, even when there is disagreement. It may be that the workshop was the only real opportunity for some people to vent some of their frustrations; although the criticism may have sounded harsh, the CLA exercise fulfilled its purpose.
- For monitoring and evaluation, it is fair to assume that CLA activities will come into play at the end of an evaluation, when it is time to think about how best to implement the recommendations. In this case, CLA happened much earlier, during the inception phase, demonstrating that CLA can have a broader application than what is commonly believed.