2021 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:
Community-led Development (CLD) harnesses the CLA approach: The case of Collaborative Research from 35 MERL practitioners from 23 organizations

Name: Gunjan Veda, Holta Trandafili for Research Team

Organization: The Movement for Community-led Development

Community members get together to voice their views in Kissamey, Benin, 2017.
Credit: The Hunger Project

Summary:

One organization cannot make significant and lasting changes alone. Therefore, when The Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD) began a collaborative research project in 2019 to create a body of evidence about CLD, using a collaborative, learning, and adaptive process was not a question of 'if', but 'how.'

Over the next two years, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) and development practitioners wrestled with questions around what CLD is, current practices, evaluation methods, and potential impact. From this emerged a research report on CLD practices based on 173 programs across 65 countries, and tools capturing the practice and quality of evaluations for CLD programs for public use and feedback. 35 of the reports used in our final analysis came from USAID-funded programs. The research project then took on a life of its own—research arms were added to address gaps, and new organizations, individuals, academics, and funders expressed interest in joining the collaboration. The dedicated research team encompasses over thirty-five MERL and development professionals from 23 organizations.

Our research aimed at building the technical evidence base for CLD ' s impact and effectiveness, and was not intended to be purely academic. Research participants helped direct and shape it. This required unlearning how standard research is produced and who the researchers are. It meant relinquishing decision-making power to a group with varied opinions, skills, and experiences. It required reshaping evidence-building processes to allow experimenting, piloting, failing, rebounding, creating and reinforcing accountability mechanisms that ensure rigor while operating as a movement, not an organization or project.

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?

Community-led Development (CLD) is not a novel idea. Terms like localization, community-driven development, and locally-led development have been part of the development discourse for decades. Yet, questions about impact and efficacy remain for funders, implementers, local partners, academics, and think tanks.

In February 2019, MCLD, a global consortium of 70+ INGOs and over 1,000 local civil society organizations worldwide, embarked on a journey to study CLD in international development. The goal was to systematically review programming to understand where CLD has worked, how, why, and for whom. Discussions with 50+ M&E professionals across numerous development organizations confirmed the need for evidence in the CLD space, but skepticism remained about what documentation, including evaluations, would tell us. As evaluations are often designed in response to donor requirements aimed at measuring tangible and often sectoral outcomes; measuring something as complex as CLD was daunting, especially without a clear or common understanding. To start, we needed to unpack what is meant by CLD, what it looks like in practice, and what organizations are currently doing. This was not a task for a single individual or institution. No one person or organization should define CLD.

To this end, thirty-two organizations shared 400+ program performance and evaluation reports of self-identified CLD projects, which provided the basis for our research. A group of academic and practitioner experts became our advisory group to constantly guide and challenge us and ensure rigor in our work. There was ZERO funding for the study aside from our “ local resources ” and shared vision—mirroring what we often see in local community-led projects. This process allowed us to discover the challenges and rewards of collaboration; build relationships; nurture and expand networks; self-impose and practice accountability; show commitment to rigor and evidence; and pause, reflect, and adapt both what we researched and how.

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

The research process intentionally reflected the CLD practice we aspire to in our development projects. Alignment to the CLA approach therefore happened organically. This may be because CLD practitioners internalize CLA and apply it across their work, but is more likely due to the synergies that exist between CLA and CLD. Both recognize the need for embedding enabling environments and intentionality in the program/project lifecycle. Both rely on honest, open discussions among stakeholders, and intentional and inclusive collaboration—for equal voice and power-sharing in decision-making. Both count on leveraging and mobilizing resources. Both rely on practicing adaptation, considering insights from the project/environment, and challenging assumptions. They both emphasize inclusive, meaningful, learning-oriented M&E and research processes and products.

CLA was critical for the study and contributed to MCLD through:

- Fostering relationships and networks: Sub-group members combined knowledge and expertise openly. We applied democratic and empowering rotating leadership management; members ran various aspects and took turns sharing progress, learning, and findings externally.
- Practicing horizontal and vertical accountability: We welcomed rounds of internal and external feedback. For the study to be rigorous, this type of knowledge distilling and accountability was fundamental.
- Intentionality in cross-organizational collaboration: Our final products reflected a spectrum of organizations and CLD practices. The research report, CLD Assessment Tool, and Quality Appraisal Tool for CLD Evaluations do not belong to any single organization. The tools were launched on January 27, 2021—in just two months, they have each been downloaded 500+ times.

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.

Member organizations were asked to submit reports of programs practicing CLD (self-identified). We received 400+ reports from 32 MCLD partners and started by answering the following questions: What are organizations doing as part of their CLD programming? How does the nature of CLD programming vary with context?

The research was an exercise in ‘learning by doing.’ We constantly adapted how and what we investigated, considering findings, progress, and feedback. For example, our initial task was reviewing reports and providing a landscape of CLD, but we quickly realized we needed a shared understanding of what CLD is and how it manifests in the project life-cycle. To address this gap, we created a rubric with 11 CLD characteristics (Participation, Inclusion, Voice, Local Resources, Sustainability and Exit Strategies, Accountability, Responsiveness to Context, Collaboration, Working with Sub-national Governments, Monitoring and Evaluation Processes, Facilitation). The process of finalizing these characteristics was riddled with discussions and delays, and also opportunities to collaborate, learn, and adapt before the tool finalization. Once developed, we could map the characteristics across a project/program’s life-cycle. We felt triumphant upon clearing the first step.

It soon became apparent, however, that the documents we received were not all designed to report on CLD or its impact. For example, several reports evaluated social capital and community mobilization, but none measured the extent to which an initiative was "community-led" or how that impacted development outcomes. Even if a program was community-led, the report would not necessarily emphasize this unless the funder specifically required it. One solution could have been to contact program staff for additional information/clarifications. Without any external donor support, we did not have resources to do so. Our options were to discontinue the research or adapt and plan for follow-up. We opted to acknowledge that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.' We shifted how we used the findings from a summary of what works, where, and among whom, to pointing out where gaps and inconsistencies exist in practicing and measuring CLD. The report on the landscape of CLD practice includes an analysis of 173 project or program evaluation and management reports across 65 countries.

We shared the findings publicly to challenge ourselves as implementers, our funders (including USAID), and our local partners (including governments) to better align their approaches with how CLD programs are designed, implemented, evaluated, and reported. Only then could we address issues around impact and effectiveness—what originally drew us together. We provided two tools to assess and improve CLD program design and evaluation reports: the CLD Assessment Tool and the Quality Appraisal Tool for CLD Evaluations. Both have broad applicability for funders, implementing partners, and local civil society organizations (CSOs).

Our process took much longer than anticipated. Instead of reaching concrete findings, gaps in evidence and insights brought about through repeated feedback loops caused the scope to grow. The expansion of scope impacted momentum, requiring commitment from the volunteer MERL and CLD practitioners over an extended time. The solution came from another 'pause and reflect' moment, accelerated by COVID-19. We learned to meet people where they are. We opened our group, allowing new people to contribute when able. We prioritized investing in collaboration over pressing deadlines. This adaptation was not easy, as deadlines are important, but this ultimately expanded ownership of the products and mobilized more CLD advocates than anticipated. Opportunities to pause and recharge increased the dedication and motivation of group members to improve our research output. We learned to view the CLA process in the context of CLD—as a relay model where each carries the torch as long as they can, then another team member takes over.

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?

Our group was undoubtedly transformed through this two-year research process. We fostered a culture of learning that each member has carried to their organizations, providing an example that could be replicated. In the beginning, each group member focused on what they brought in (different perspectives and expertise). In the end, each member had been transformed into a CLD advocate, determined to improve the CLD practice not only within their own organizations, but also more broadly in our development community. We are hopeful that this is the beginning of a shift in the sector's use of CLD, creating solidarity among actors as we jointly invest in practicing and measuring its impact and effectiveness.

In January 2021, at a USAID-funded event releasing the report and the tools, Dr. Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi and winner of the 1997 Africa prize, said, "Community-led Development is a formidable task because it requires not just having a deep respect for communities but the courage to step away, relinquish control and see the power of sustained transformation emerge." We believe the same is true of collaboration. It necessitates that we relinquish control. For the successful completion of our research, we had to shed egos and logos and create products representing big and small, local and international organizations. This is a substantial change, especially for implementers who rely on branding for more funding.

The Movement's organizational structure and purpose is a highly supportive environment for CLA processes. The success of this collaborative research which applied a CLD/CLA approach has strengthened our belief that 'process matters' and shapes deliverables for the better. Currently, the Movement is applying a similar approach (smaller scale) to "InCLuDE (Impact of Community-led Development) on Food Security"—a grant from USAID (through IDEAL).

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?

It is too soon to tell how our research products created in a CLA/CLD environment contributed to improvement in development outcomes. However, we believe that the CLA/CLD-like process produces CLA/CLD-like products and results. Our research process developed robust tools that balance high evaluation standards with implementation feasibility, which we expect to strengthen the practice and reporting of CLD.

Already, the tools have had over 900 cumulative downloads. Several MCLD members have started applying them to ongoing projects. For example, One Village Partners used our CLD Assessment tool to assess their programs' CLD status and create dialogue among local actors on improving implementation and taking their CLD practice to the next level. They described its use as "a humbling exercise," and emphasized its value: "it's very important that these types of tools exist to do these self-assessments."

Susan Wong, the Global Lead for Community-Driven Development at the World Bank, noted that our research: "is a remarkable achievement and much needed." Evidence of the extent our tools will contribute to improvement in development outcomes will take time to build, but it is clear that this work has strengthened MCLD itself. At the outset, one of our research advisors said, "As you forge ahead, there will be many times when you will be frustrated with the pace. When you will miss deadlines. But always remember the biggest product of this research will not be the results but the process. It will be how you together add momentum to this Movement." Two years later, these words still ring true. For us, in the research team, the real achievement is the collaboration and the relationships we created, the growth and learning we experienced. As with CLD, the completed road or hospital building is wonderful, but the real change is how the community views itself.

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

Our shared purpose enabled our research study. Having people from various sectors and sizes of NGOs made our group diverse. Including different perspectives and blends of expertise was essential. Yet despite our diverse backgrounds, expertise, and skills, we all believed communities should own their development—and we used our passion and commitment to CLD to shape (and adapt) our research process.
This shared purpose and commitment were vital unifiers that we often defaulted to when ideas clashed. Disagreements often led to extended meetings and deadlines. This portion of the research—the landscape of CLD practice—was meant to last four months, but lasted almost two years as the scope expanded. Learning to pivot when progress was not going according to schedule was an initial challenge to overcome. As the project progressed, we became more flexible. The research started with no funding and the assumption that using secondary data would merely require time volunteered from MERL and development practitioners. We soon learned, however, that funding would have catalyzed shared learning (e.g. payment of conference fees) and more in-depth primary research to ground our learning through empirical evidence.

Learnings from our challenges:
1. Shared Purpose: This is the glue that holds any collaboration together. Create manageable milestones towards this shared purpose.
2. Adaptability: We should meet people where they are and adapt to changing circumstances. Sometimes, this may mean a minor change, like a timeline. And sometimes, this could mean changing the way we work.
3. Respect and Mutual Accountability: Not everyone will be able to do an equal amount of work or put in an equal amount of time. Yet, if each person commits to his/her best and is open about our limitations and delivers on promises, the relationship will succeed.

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

Our CLA approach was not prompted by the pandemic, though it certainly was affected by it. On a positive side, and at the Movement level, the pandemic shed further light on the need for localization. More members worldwide were able to join virtual calls and events, creating a larger forum for our research team to share progress and periodically collect feedback.

At the research level, flexibility for our volunteer research team who live across multiple countries and time zones was critical during the pandemic. Letting members determine the pace of the work has been central to our CLA process. We set deadlines according to the comfort of the group and were open to revisiting them. Early in the pandemic, we completely paused our weekly meetings to give team members time to adjust to changed personal and professional circumstances. Later, we began to meet, albeit with reduced frequency. This helped our volunteer members to remain part of the research and keep the passion and commitment going.