

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Exploiting Opportunities for Collaboration, Learning and Adaptation in VISTA (Viable Sweetpotato Technologies for Africa)

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

The International Potato Center has set the ambitious goal of reaching 10 million households across 17 Sub-Saharan Africa countries in 10 years to achieve the widespread uptake of sweetpotato to significantly reduce malnutrition among children under the age of five.

CIP is implementing VISTA in 5 countries in East and Southern Africa with USAID Feed the Future support (Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi). The shared goal is to reduce the high rates of poverty and malnutrition through orange fleshed sweetpotato (OFSP) centered nutrition sensitive agriculture. OFSP, in addition to being rich in Vitamin A, has high and stable yields (compared to maize), is short duration, can be planted and harvested throughout the year, and has a low input and labor requirement. VISTA will make a significant contribution to the CIP goal of increasing the production and consumption of OFSP to significantly reduce malnutrition of mothers and young children.

Borrowing from LEARN, we define CLA as follows:

1. **Collaborating**
Collaboration is defined as working together to achieve a common goal. It is the opposite of competition. Often referred to as Integration and Partnership, there are different kinds of Collaboration.
2. **Learning**
Learning is defined as the acquisition of knowledge through own experience or from others. Learning is systematic when there is a plan for reflection, review of assessment, monitoring and evaluation documents and the sharing of what is working and what is not working.
3. **Adapting**
There are two main adaptations. The first is being flexible and making necessary changes for effective collaboration. The second is when learning is applied in real time to make iterative, timely, changes in project implementation.

This case study describes how CLA was planned in each of the six countries, is being implemented and recommends actions to increase learning for project adaptation.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

USAID funding for VISTA contributes to significant OFSP scaling in East, Central and Southern Africa

VISTA consists of a universal set of technologies: (1) to get farmers access to quality planting material of improved OFSP varieties (2) to increase root production for consumption and sale and (3) to support commercial processing of a range of nutritious OFSP products. Recent USAID funding of VISTA in six countries is a significant scaling up for CIP. Informed by the VISTA concept note, these five proposals were adapted to the requirements of the different USAID missions and the different country agroecological and institutional landscapes. Developed independently and sequentially, there is currently no explicit linkage between the six proposals. The 2016 CLA Case Competition provides an opportunity for CIP to pause and reflect on where we are by asking the following questions:

1. What were the most significant adaptations that you made as you developed your country proposal?
2. How are you collaborating in your country?
3. How will learning systematized and shared within and across countries?
4. How can learning result in adapting the direction of the projects?

Based on the discussion on these 4 questions, opportunities to strengthen CLA have been identified and recommendations made.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

Strong USAID commitment to collaborating, learning and adapting is the main driver



Collaboration in VISTA is exceptionally strong and diverse. This includes CGIAR consortia in Kenya and Malawi and integration with other USAID funded projects. The Malawi Integrated Seed Systems & Technology project is led by ICRISAT and includes IITA and CIMMYT in addition to CIP. The Kenya Accelerated Value Chain Development project is led by ILRI and includes ICRISAT in addition to CIP. These two projects are managed by a Project Management Office, supported by a Project Advisory Committee. Both have active M&E teams and in Malawi there are also thematic technical working groups in Nutrition, Seed Systems, Gender and Value Chains, each led by a different center. Over the past year, the CGIAR Country Collaboration process has been initiated (referred to as 'Site Integration'). This has affirmed the consortia in Malawi and Kenya. However, in countries without consortia, this has not yet had a significant impact (Rwanda, Tanzania, Mozambique).

With clear encouragement from USAID, all VISTA projects are integrating with relevant USAID projects.

- In Malawi, this is supported by the USAID 3 C's of Co-Location, Collaboration and Coordination (S. Menard. Experiment in Integration to Foster Collaboration and Improve Programmatic Decision Making. 2015 CLA Case Competition). USAID Integration meetings resulted in collaboration with PERFORM (Protecting Ecosystems and Restoring Forests in Malawi) and EGRA (Early Grade Reading Initiative).
- In Tanzania, VISTA is collaborating with Mwanzo Bora that seeks to reduce maternal anemia and child stunting
- In Rwanda, VISTA is working with CHAIN (Community Health & Improved Nutrition)
- In Mozambique VISTA is collaborating with SAFRA (Strengthening Agribusinesses and Fostering Rural Alimentation) that seeks to strengthen agricultural value chains and improve the nutrition of mothers and young children
- In Kenya, VISTA is working with APHIAplus (AIDS, Population & Health Integrated Assistance) to scale up dissemination of nutrition messaging and counselling related to OFSP

These and other collaborative agreements, though sometimes mentioned, were not explicitly planned in the proposals. Therefore, in implementation, there was a need to adapt to accommodate collaboration. This required back and forth negotiation, with support from USAID.

Currently, learning is embedded in the PMEP (Performance Monitoring & Evaluation Plan). Complying with PMEP requirements required intense learning – learning that appeared to have benefited by being a member of a consortium as in Kenya and Malawi. In these two consortia, a strong and vibrant, cross center, M&E team was created. The initial focus was on PMEP compliance, with attention now turning to learning.

Within CIP, learning is supported through established CIP thematic Communities of Practice (CoPs) that include: (1) Seed Systems & Crop Management (2) Marketing, Processing & Utilization and (3) Monitoring, Learning & Evaluation. Through these CoPs, VISTA project managers and staff can interact and learn with a cohort of practitioners.

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



Obstacles to effective collaborating, learning and adapting in VISTA have been identified

In the process of writing the CIP CLA Case, we identified obstacles that need to be addressed, including:

1. Lack of incentive and slow start to CGIAR Site Integration
2. Lack of critical capacity in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in non-consortia countries
3. Insufficient emphasis on Learning and no strategy for adaptation
4. Doubtful role for Consortium Advisory Committees
5. Potential role of Consortium Technical Working Groups

The USAID mandate for CGIAR consortia and encouragement for integration is effectively driving collaboration. Though still early, we are not seeing the CGIAR Country Collaboration process having the same impact. We recommend that the CGIAR invest in the MISST and AVCD consortia to learn how to collaborate, identify problems and make changes to improve consortium effectiveness.

It is clear that multi-center consortia enable a critical mass of M&E staff paying an effective role in learning how to design and manage USAID Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Plans. VISTA can support our M&E staff in the non-consortia countries by ensuring that they participate in the CIP M&E Community of Practice and within the CoP, create a USAID PMP Special Interest Group.

It is understandable that the focus to date in M&E has been on ensuring compliance with USAID reporting requirements. This emphasis might have come at the expense of Learning. Though learning is mentioned in conjunction with monitoring and evaluation it needs to be embraced. We recommend that VISTA use a Utilization-Focused Evaluation approach (Michael Quinn Patton. 2008). This means that this will be internal and formative, managed by VISTA staff who will ensure that learning results in adaptation.

The MISST and AVCD Consortia Advisory Committees are not yet created. This might indicate that Advisory Committees are perhaps not the right vehicle for fostering collaboration and learning. Being external to the projects, the risk is that they will not be able to contribute to learning and might become bureaucratic. MISST and AVCD should be encouraged to rethink the need for Advisory Committees.

Though also slow to start, the MISST Technical Working Groups have potential and should be encouraged and monitored. The following groups are proposed:

- Seed Systems – led by ICRISAT
- Nutrition – led by CIP
- Gender – led by CIMMYT
- Value Chains – led by IITA

Where appropriate, these should be linked to the CIP thematic CoPs.



With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

CIP has identified three ways to strengthen VISTA Collaboration Learning and Adaptation

These are:

1. Partnership Assessment to strengthen Collaboration
2. Utilization focused evaluation to link learning and adapting
3. Empowering VISTA Project Managers to lead CLA

VISTA embraces a partnership approach to scaling OFSP that is convergent with the USAID commitment to Integration and Collaboration. This requires us to develop partnerships that are mutual and not exploitative and are organization rather than project based. CIP can learn from the MISST and AVCD projects to assist in moving the CGIAR Site Integration process forward. We propose to modify and employ a tool to assess and strengthen partnerships in the VISTA countries (Spinks & Merrill-Sands. 1999. Successful Collaborative Partnerships: Key Elements of a Self-Assessment Inventory). The result will be effective and sustainable collaboration.

Learning and then linking learning with iteration and adaptation requires that the project staff take the lead via a user focused evaluation approach. This means that learning is internal to the project team, led by the M&E staff and championed by the Project Manager.

In the process of discussing and reflecting on CLA in VISTA, it has become clear that Project Managers play a critical role in leading and also in learning. We feel there is a need for an OFSP Project Manager Learning Network. This network would be facilitated by a learning specialist grounded in project management. The network would be open to other OFSP project managers working in DFID and Irish Aid funded projects. Initially it would be a virtual learning network, with the anticipation for a need for face to face meetings in the future.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

The anticipated outcome will be evidence of more effective implementation from informed iteration within specific country projects and then sharing between VISTA projects.

Anticipated results include the following:

1. Increased understanding of partnering and stronger partnerships
2. Increased investment in learning in VISTA M&E and more effective M&E
3. Better understanding of how to manage consortia technical working groups
4. Support for a Project Manager Learning Network contributing to more effective CLA

CIP has not yet developed a tracking system to monitor CLA. It is important to first get endorsement and support for the recommendations contained in this case study and then to develop a CLA plan that includes the monitoring of key indicators – with a focus on the qualitative.



What were the most important lessons learned?

There are five key lessons learned in writing the VISTA CLA Case Study

1. Collaboration has required Adaptation
2. Strong M&E but need to add Learning
3. Consortia have potential for synergy and learning
4. For learning and adaptation to happen, it is critical to plan for and build in time for reflection and review. It will not happen spontaneously!
5. Looking ahead, there is a need to create a facilitator led VISTA Project Manager Learning Network

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

It has been the writing of this CLA paper that has created the space for CIP to look back at the process as it has unfolded over the past two years and to look ahead on how to effectively learn through a collaborative learning network.

CIP is in the process of creating a USAID OFSP Learning Network consisting of the core of the project teams from Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Kenya. This will be facilitator supported and will foster learning through collaboration.

A challenge remains to establish Learning Networks within specific countries where CIP is in a consortium with other international research centers supporting different crop value chains and using different approaches.

Adaptation for Collaboration was successful as it occurred during start up planning and had strong support from USAID. Adaptation from Learning will be more challenging if the needed changes affect the PMP. For this to happen, there has to be support from USAID.

Learning and Learning (PPL) mechanism
by Corporation.

