2018 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Learning (in the) Lab: Building a Model for Cross-bureau Collaboration and Adaptation

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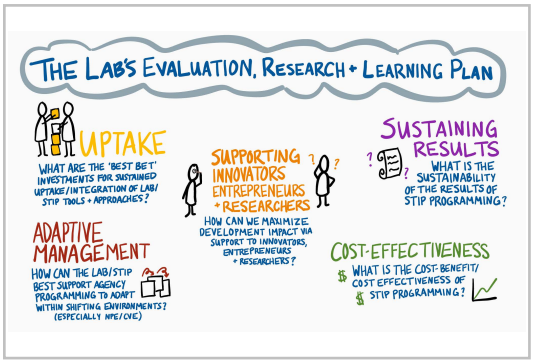

The U.S. Global Development Lab's Evaluation, Research, and Learning Plan Priority Questions. Credit: Amy Leo, USAID LEARN

Summary:

Established in 2014, the U.S. Global Development Lab ("the Lab") serves as an innovation hub within the U.S. Agency for International Development, helping the Agency harness advances in science, technology, innovation, and partnerships (STIP) that promise to accelerate development impact. The Lab's two-part mission is to produce breakthrough development innovations and accelerate the transformation of the development enterprise. In support of this mission, the Lab generates, captures, shares, and uses evidence that helps us to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. By 2017, while the Lab had made marked progress in building the technical evidence base around STIP, no bureau-wide strategy or operational processes existed for coordinating these commitments. Internal collaboration and knowledge management remained largely siloed within Centers, with adaptations relegated to program or activity levels.

The Lab's Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment (EIA) took the lead in facilitating a solution, embarking on a CLA-driven process to develop and implement a cross-bureau learning agenda - the Lab Evaluation, Research, and Learning (ERL) Plan. Both a process and series of products, the ERL Plan is organized around five priority learning questions, and 1) prioritizes, coordinates, and resources cross-bureau ERL activities aligned with the Lab strategy, 2) centrally documents evidence relevant to STIP and the Lab, and 3) translates this evidence for use informing Lab decision-making and action. The ERL Plan has not only facilitated getting evidence into action, but also improved CLA integration and organizational effectiveness in the Lab, including stronger internal collaboration, broader application of adaptive management, and more robust engagement around continuous learning and improvement.

1. Which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Framework are reflected *most* in your case (select up to 5 subcomponents)?

- [x] Internal Collaboration
- [ ] External Collaboration
- [x] Technical Evidence Base
- [ ] Theories of Change
- [ ] Scenario Planning
- [ ] M&E for Learning
- [ ] Pause & Reflect
- [x] Adaptive Management
- [ ] Openness
- [ ] Relationships & Networks
- [x] Continuous Learning & Improvement
- [ ] Knowledge Management
- [ ] Institutional Memory
- [x] Decision-Making
- [ ] Mission Resources
- [ ] CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

2. 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?

Established in 2014, the U.S. Global Development Lab serves as an innovation hub within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), helping the Agency harness advances in science, technology, innovation, and partnerships (STIP) that promise to accelerate development impact. The Lab's two-part mission is to produce breakthrough development innovations and accelerate the transformation of the development enterprise.
In support of this mission, the Lab generates, captures, shares, and uses evidence that helps us to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. We apply what we learn to inform the design and implementation of new programs, operations, and strategies, and improve existing ones. We experiment to identify, and promote wider uptake of, the most promising tools and approaches.

By 2017, while the Lab had made marked progress in building the technical evidence base around STIP, emphasis was on the generation of assessments and internal evaluations for accountability purposes. Limited resources were allocated to external evaluations, and no bureau-wide strategy or operational processes existed for coordinating commitments to evidence generation, dissemination, or use. Internal collaboration and knowledge management remained largely siloed within Centers, with adaptations relegated to program or activity levels.

The Lab's Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment (EIA) took the lead in facilitating a solution. Embarking on a process to develop and implement a cross-bureau learning agenda - the "Lab ERL Plan", EIA sought to align financial and technical resources toward priority learning efforts, and ensure that knowledge being generated is designed for utilization. Drawing on practice-based evidence from our Agency peers, and armed with the findings of a rapid literature review, the EIA team set out to leverage CLA approaches that could ultimately facilitate the use of high quality evidence within and across Lab programs, operations, and strategies.

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

The Lab has long recognized the value of CLA in development, and has worked on its own, and in close partnership with PPL, to experiment with operationalization of CLA tools and approaches; particularly in the adaptive management space. However, the majority of the Lab's CLA practices and resources were focused on applications to programming. Attention to continuous learning and improvement across the bureau's operations and overarching strategic objectives remained rare, beyond semi-annual Portfolio Reviews or specific senior leadership efforts. Data from quarterly Lab Organizational Health surveys pointed to staff demand for greater internal collaboration, more cohesive knowledge management, and more transparency around how data and technical evidence were being used to inform leadership decision-making.

Based on these insights, benefiting from the CLA Toolkit and Evidence Base for CLA literature review, and through participation in an intra-Agency working group convened to share experiences of CLA first-hand, EIA staff were poised to intentionally infuse the Lab ERL Plan - both a process and series of products - with this thinking from the outset. With the support of Lab leadership - who recognized the need for an iterative, systematic, and participatory approach to learning that engaged staff, without overburdening them with additional duties - EIA contracted support from the LEARN mechanism to consult on the ERL Plan design, iteratively implement the process, and document and act on learnings from this bureau-wide model for getting evidence to action via CLA.

4. 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 Lab Evaluation, Research, and Learning (ERL) Plan is a process, as well as a series of products, that strengthens the bureau's ability to learn and continuously improve its programs, operations, and strategy. Facilitated by the Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment (EIA), the Plan is holistically informed by - and serves to further institutionalize - CLA across the bureau. This effort benefits from the Lab's values, including openness to (insistence upon) new ideas and a bias toward action, as well as the multi-year resource commitments made by Lab management to CLA building blocks.

Beginning in 2015, the Lab defined theories of change, results frameworks, and M&E plans for each of its operating units ('Centers'); collectively documented and approved in early 2016 as the Lab Strategy and Performance Management Plan. EIA played a key role supporting these efforts, as well as collating and synthesizing the technical evidence base around the broader contributions of STIP to development outcomes through an internal evidence contest and funding the creation of a STIP Evidence Gap Map. By late 2016, the Lab faced a new challenge, as Centers had collectively identified over fifty learning questions linked to their theories of change and related assumptions; far too many to sufficiently resource.

In 2017, the EIA team set out to tackle this challenge by designing and implementing a series of activities that would ultimately: 1) prioritize, coordinate, and resource cross-bureau ERL activities aligned with the Lab strategy, 2) centrally document evidence relevant to STIP and the Lab, and 3) translate this evidence for use informing Lab decision-making and action. The team looked across team and Center learning questions, as well as planned, ongoing, and completed evaluations, research, and assessments, and coded to identify common themes. Five clusters were identified, from which priority questions were recorded:

1. What are the "best bet" investments for sustained uptake/ integration of Lab/ STIP tools and approaches?
2. How can the Lab/ STIP best support Agency programming to adapt within shifting environments?
3. How can we maximize development impact via support to innovators, entrepreneurs, and researchers?
4. What is the cost-benefit/ cost-effectiveness of STIP programming?
5. What is the sustainability of the results of STIP programming?

In consultation with the Lab Program Office and M&E points of contact across Centers, EIA developed a multi-stage adaptive process for exploring these questions; evolving the approach based on participant feedback. Each question was assigned to an EIA Content Coordinator, who serves as the liaison to activity managers of linked Lab ERL efforts; captures, synthesizes, and disseminates a rapid review of the technical evidence base and institutional memory informing the question; and facilitates internal collaboration amongst Lab staff (and other Agency stakeholders, as relevant) to drive action on findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Semi-annual gatherings called Strategic Learning Reviews (SLRs) - open to the entire bureau and select Agency guests - are a key part of ERL Plan implementation. Reinforcing the Lab's existing accountability and M&E for Learning efforts, the SLRs complement semi-annual Portfolio Reviews; creating a quarterly cadence for bureau-wide reflection and adaptation based on data and evidence.

In the first year of implementation, SLRs were held for questions 2, 3, and 5 in March 2018, with plans to review questions 1 and 4 in September. To avoid gaps between dissemination and action, further events and outputs are scheduled following each set of SLRs, including a recommendations prioritization workshop and subsequent options memo; an action memo detailing which actions have been committed to, by whom, and on what timeline; and ongoing tracking and review of adaptations and instances of CLA integration. A holistic application of CLA, the ERL Plan is not only helping the Lab achieve further integration of CLA; but promises to contribute to its evolution as an evidence-informed organization.

5. 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?

With strong foundational commitments to continuous learning and improvement, the Lab's organizational effectiveness has only been further improved by mainstreaming CLA via the ERL Plan. Select examples include:

Internal Collaboration: Previously siloed within teams and Centers, and often disconnected from adaptation beyond the immediate activities or operations, findings from the Lab's ERL activities are now shared across the bureau in a manner that intentionally connects key stakeholders for each of the priority questions - no matter their organizational affiliation. The Strategic Learning Reviews have served to build relationships across Lab operating units, and reinforced capture of often-tacit institutional knowledge.

Technical Evidence Base: The ERL Plan ensures that the bureau's investments in building the evidence base around STIP are additive and coordinated. Previously limited to reliance on ad hoc or official annual reporting mechanisms to understand what studies were being conducted, and what resources had been committed to ERL activities, the Lab now has a cohesive set of investments linked to its learning priorities, and a process through which its actions can be better informed by this evidence. Signaling leadership commitment, EIA has benefited from continued resource allocations in support of internal and external research linked to the questions.

Adaptive Management: The ERL Plan has aggregated common challenges faced across Lab teams who are experienced in adaptation, creating momentum to address outstanding Agency barriers to further integration of these practices. Further, he Lab's investment in a Developmental Evaluation on Sustainable Uptake (related to ERL Plan Question 1) was expanded from two team evaluations to four, leading to increased applicability findings, and data-driven strategic and operational adaptations amongst more Lab teams. When the Agency redesign efforts were announced, EIA was able to quickly pivot implementation to more strongly incorporate elements of knowledge management and recalibrate deliverables to suit an expanded Agency audience.

6. 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 Lab's work consists of both direct programming and providing technical assistance and expertise to the Agency on STIP approaches. Through the collation of evidence and data to address ERL questions, the Lab is able to indirectly influence the design and the implementation of USAID programming, leading to more effective and efficiently achieved results. For example, one of the early findings from the ERL Plan is that innovators and entrepreneurs are more likely to succeed when receiving business consulting services alongside capital investment. Programs across two Lab Centers are refining the delivery of their business consulting services, and a third Center is adding this capability to new procurements.

The Lab can contribute to development outcomes directly in two distinct ways. First, the Lab ERL Plan has helped direct Lab strategy and investments to development solutions that have been demonstrated to be effective. Second, the Lab ERL Plan has identified approaches and methods that improve feedback loops to encourage adaptive management and ensure that programming is continuously refined during implementation. One adaptive management approach that the Lab is applying is Developmental Evaluation, as part of the effort to answer Questions 1 & 5. The findings from the Developmental Evaluation have led participating programs to refine their theories of change to identify measurable "tipping points" for when the systems they are working in achieve sustainable results. These programs are now developing intentional exit strategies so that the discontinuation of funding or TA does not lead to collapse of the gains that were made.

7. What factors affected the success or shortcomings of your collaborating, learning and adapting approach? What were the main enablers or obstacles?

Enablers:
- At the outset of the ERL Plan, the Lab was already bought in to, and actively practicing many of the cultural enablers of CLA; particularly 'openness'.
- Commitment and resourcing for the ERL Plan (and thus CLA integration) was driven by senior leadership, including the Executive Director, who signaled the initiative's legitimacy and importance to Lab staff.
- Dedicated leadership by EIA Content Coordinators - CLA champions with a cross-bureau mandate, strong connections to Agency practice on learning agendas, and robust technical and facilitation skills - has been vital to maintaining the cross-cutting focus of the effort.
- Consulting with other internal stakeholders, and building trust and collaborative working relationships over time has proven critical to our ability to engage staff across the bureau.

Obstacles:
- As much of the Lab's work is focused on innovation, it often lacks a robust technical evidence base at the outset, leading M&E resources to be biased toward accountability at the cost of learning. M&E for learning is often viewed as an 'add on', requiring its own separate resources; rather than an integral part of programming.
- Inconsistent knowledge management practices across Lab Centers and teams meant that in some cases "missing" evidence did exist...but only in heads and hard-drives, which limited the application of that knowledge to other relevant work. Centralizing production of outputs on each of the cross-cutting ERL questions provided the impetus to bring "hidden" learnings to light.
- The small team implementing the ERL Plan struggled with limited bandwidth to dedicate to this effort, which slowed momentum and sometimes made collaboration challenging.

8. Based on your experience and lessons learned, what advice would you share with colleagues about using a collaborating, learning and adapting approach?

- Don't: Re-invent the wheel! (Or… the Framework, as it were.) Draw on existing Agency or external resources - technical and human - to inform the design, implementation, and adaptation of your CLA approach. Define a theory of change for how CLA will influence your process and subsequent development outcomes, and get feedback from experienced colleagues. Collect participant or end-user feedback throughout the process, and use pause and reflect opportunities to consider whether your assumptions hold.

- Do: Generate interest and enthusiasm among the staff stakeholders through a consistent communications campaign. Using a less formal, more fun brand for the Lab ERL Plan - including themed communication updates (with GIFs!) to all Lab staff - helped differentiate these efforts from typical accountability initiatives. A light-hearted tone and cartoon-style graphics conveyed a sense of collaborative work-in-progress that invited staff to stay engaged and keep contributing as the process evolved.

- Don't: Assume it's always necessary to engage people outside the group directly responsible for executing the CLA approach. Collaborate strategically - choose (and adapt) the timing and framing of interactions to ensure that people understand how the engagement will (potentially) benefit them, and address an existing interest or issue, without overburdening people who are already busy. Tying ERL Plan outputs to pressing decisions such as budgets and strategy issues was one way the Lab was able to achieve this.

- Do: Provide entry points and roles for leadership and staff, and use communications to help participants understand 'what's in it for them'. Support natural 'champions' of the process by facilitating quick wins with them, and maintain enthusiasm by highlighting work they've done that already aligns with desired outcomes.