2021 CLA CASE COMPETITION

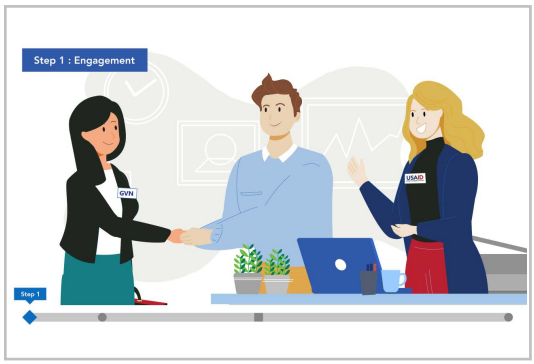
COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Made in Vietnam: From Bureaucratic Standstill To Diplomatic Breakthrough

Name: Brownell, Fentross, Gelband, Le, Le, Salib, Trippe

Organization: USAID/Vietnam and Social Impact, Inc.



A scene of USAID introducing the implementing partner to the government from the instructional animation video.
Credit: Clickable Impact Consulting Group

Summary:

Vietnamese regulation requires all donor assistance to obtain project approval from a relevant Government of Vietnam (GVN) counterpart. Despite a strong U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship, USAID and its implementing partners (IPs) experience substantial delays in obtaining project approval, which delays critical implementation and reduces overall program impact.

To inform adaptation with evidence, USAID commissioned a study to understand where IPs are facing the biggest challenges in the approval process. USAID and USAID Learns built targeted collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approaches into the study process to increase the likelihood of utilization and organizational change. USAID Learns held a validation event with USAID and IPs to collectively make sense of the study results. The feedback informed a series of practical, interactive tools, including handouts and an animation video that highlight how to better collaborate with GVN. The Mission then held a utilization workshop to help USAID staff incorporate recommendations throughout the Program Cycle. As a result of these conversations, the Program Office updated the Mission Order and design process, and the Office of Acquisition and Assistance (OAA) instituted a new protocol to better align awards and GVN priorities, with five co-creation processes currently underway.

The application of CLA methods shifted the culture of how USAID engages GVN across its Program Cycle, moving from perfunctory to mutuality. The new Mission design process is systematically integrating stakeholder voices into designs, ensuring that the GVN is on board. This ultimately means that USAID can undo some of the downstream effects of delayed project approval and achieve greater program impact.

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?

Vietnamese regulation requires every USAID/Vietnam implementing partner (IP) to obtain project approval from a relevant Government of Vietnam (GVN) counterpart before activities can begin in earnest. Despite a strong U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship, USAID and its IPs experience substantial delays in obtaining project approval from the GVN, most of which stretch two years or more. During this time, IPs are constrained in their ability to implement, representing exponential downstream effects: delayed implementation in critical areas, cost inefficiencies, and ultimately, reduced program impact.

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

Within this context, the Prime Minister of Vietnam recently issued a new project approval regulation, presenting an opportunity for USAID to study the changes, identify ways to ease the project approval process, and, most importantly, use that learning to improve the partnership with the GVN and ensure more locally-owned development programming.

A targeted collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach was necessary to carry out a sound study and engage USAID and IP staff in the process of making sense of the findings. This was built into the study process from the start to increase the likelihood of utilization and organizational learning.

This approach was further supported by Mission leadership. With a new Front Office and relatively new heads of key offices (Program Office and Office of Acquisitions and Assistance [OAA]), there was renewed interest in addressing the project approval challenge.

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 order to inform adaptation with evidence, USAID first commissioned USAID Learns—implemented by Social Impact, Inc.—to analyze and provide actionable recommendations throughout the Program Cycle to reduce delays, including a study to understand where IPs are facing the biggest challenges in the approval process. Interviews with IPs also captured best practices on how to work with government counterparts throughout the process. USAID Learns held a validation event with USAID and IPs to collectively make sense of the study results and jointly develop recommendations. This CLA approach supported them to internalize the evidence and own the way forward. (Technical evidence base, pause & reflect, adaptive management)

The feedback informed the final report and a series of tools for design teams, OAA, Agreement and Contracting Officer's Representatives (A/CORs), and implementers that distill the information in practical, easy-to-digest formats: 1) How To, Tips, and FAQ handouts that visually highlight who, when, and how to better collaborate with GVN throughout the process; and 2) an animation video to make the best practices widely accessible and create a forum for interactive discussion via comments. The FAQ handout also includes a Quick Response (QR) code, allowing IPs to add and see new questions as they undertake project approval, supporting real-time learning and sharing. (Knowledge management)

In hearing from IPs, it was clear that the challenge with project approval post-award started much earlier; it began during the design phase within USAID. To address this issue, the Mission held a utilization workshop to help USAID staff integrate the recommendations into the Program Cycle and consider enhanced strategies to engage with the GVN prior to award. Specifically, staff identified how they can adjust their approach through strategic alignment (through Limited Scope Grant Agreements or sector-specific Development Objective Agreements) but also during the design and procurement phases as a pathway to shorten the project approval process. (Internal collaboration, pause & reflect, continuous learning & improvement)

As a result of these intentional conversations, several changes have occurred within the Mission: (Adaptive mgmt)
1. The Program Office updated the Mission Order and integrated actions into design support, activity design planning, and the activity approval memo templates to highlight the importance of engagement with GVN early and often. The Mission Order requires that design teams aim to have an identified, bought-in GVN counterpart. During activity design planning, USAID now urges design teams to work with GVN to co-create designs to ensure agreement on key parameters of the activity. This builds broad support for the design and minimizes the chance of significant roadblocks after the award, in effect decreasing the time to obtain project approval.

2. During activity design analysis, USAID now recommends design teams conduct institution and stakeholder mapping to identify potential GVN partners. In line with this recommendation, a collaboration mapping exercise was recently completed for a new activity under the Environmental Security Development Objective. (External collaboration)

3. OAA instituted a new protocol to better align acquisition and assistance (A&A) awards and GVN priorities. This co-creative technique during the procurement phase creates the foundation to expediting project approval. Once a presumed winner is identified, USAID goes back to the GVN counterpart to gain additional feedback and consensus on activity methods prior to award. By instituting an opportunity prior to award for the GVN counterpart and implementers to meet, collaborate, and enhance the relationship, buy-in by the GVN is realized. There are currently five co-creation/alignment processes underway. The Director of OAA stated, “It’s the dawn of a new day in bilateral engagement.”

4. Contracting is more mindful now, urging IPs to build out the administrative infrastructure for successful operations, so that when programming starts, this early pause will be less detrimental to the overall work plan. The study’s Team Leader is also providing ongoing advisory support to USAID and IPs to help navigate specific approval processes. (Knowledge management, continuous learning & improvement)

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?

Illustrative of the many immediate changes highlighted above, during one activity design, USAID and potential GVN counterparts met with the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI)—the focal point for development assistance in Vietnam—to discuss expectations and explore potential challenges to project approval and implementation after the award is made by USAID. MPI considered this a breakthrough in the process to renew the USAID-GVN collaboration, since this never happened in the past.

Bigger picture, the application of CLA methods shifted the culture of how USAID engages GVN, moving from perfunctory to more meaningful engagement based on mutuality. The institutional, systematic adaptations to better engage GVN throughout the Program Cycle create designs that are more responsive to the priorities of Vietnam. The process of project approval is as much about developing a lasting partnership with GVN counterparts as it is about building consensus on mutual objectives. Together, these factors are foundational to the success and sustainability of program results. This change within USAID will better support more locally led development, USAID procurement reforms, and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

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?

While it is too early to see an improvement in the likelihood and time it takes to obtain project approval, at a minimum, the new Mission design process is systematically integrating stakeholder voices into all new designs. This will ensure USAID activity designs are better aligned with host-country visions, priorities, and plans and that the GVN is on board with the designs prior to award, which USAID believes will ease project approval post-award. If project approval is faster, then implementers can actually implement earlier in their award period than they have typically been able to. This means that activities will more quickly realize progress and achieve results, or realize that something is not working and adapt accordingly. This ultimately means that USAID can undo some of the downstream impacts of delayed project approval mentioned above and achieve on-time implementation, cost efficiency, and greater and more sustained program impact. Using baseline data on how long it took implementers to obtain project approval, USAID will be able to monitor expected efficiencies in the approval process.

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

The first factor enabling such a strong cultural shift was the consistent interest and support from Mission leadership. This included Front Office, Program Office, and OAA leadership. Despite the transition of Front Office leadership, USAID Learns was able to garner this continued support by grounding the structural changes in evidence (through tailored out-brief presentations and analytical briefs, depending on the audience) and then widely socializing and involving USAID and IPs in the shaping of best practices. In total, it required three out-brief presentations to old and new Front Offices, two learning events, four IP events, four handouts and analytical briefs, and one animation video.

Taking a CLA approach required time and diligence to create the space for multiple perspectives in the development of resources such as the How To, Tips, and FAQ handouts. They have undergone more than five public, formal revisions to reflect the ongoing changes in context and deepened opportunities for utilization as more audiences became exposed to the content. Utilization had to be built in from the onset, tailoring the evidence base to meet the needs of a wide range of actors. Together, USAID and USAID Learns demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and diligence to customize tools for each target audience.

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

Our approach was not prompted by a response to the pandemic, but in some ways, it allowed us to be more inclusive in our process. The validation event and utilization workshop would have been in-person events in Hanoi. Due to COVID-19 flare ups in Vietnam at the time of both of these events, we pivoted to conducting them virtually. This allowed USAID staff and IPs based in Ho Chi Minh City to join, in addition to staff that were outside Hanoi conducting site visits and implementation work.