OVERVIEW

USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning and its LEARN support contract are working to integrate systematic, intentional, and resourced Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) throughout program planning and implementation to achieve more effective development programs.

As part of this effort, USAID is exploring several approaches to understand whether and how strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management make a difference to organizational and development outcomes. To begin this work, we have undertaken a foundational literature review of academic and gray literature to answer our key learning questions:

> ➢ Does an intentional, systematic, and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting contribute to development outcomes?
>
> ➢ If so, how? And under what conditions?

The five key findings, mapped to the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework on the next page, are described in greater detail below.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

➢ *Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) are positively and significantly associated with achieving development outcomes when incorporated into program management and designed to support learning and decision-making.* A June 2016 World Bank study analyzed large sets of data to determine if there was a correlation between the quality of M&E and project outcomes. It found that good-quality M&E that informs decisions during and after implementation is positively and significantly associated with achieving project outcomes. In addition, several cases in the literature underscored the importance of using evaluation for learning to enable adaptive management and improve performance.

IMPLICATION FOR USAID STAFF: *Design and invest in M&E systems and approaches that enable learning and thereby inform programmatic decision-making.* This means determining whether your M&E systems are merely serving a reporting function, and if so, re-designing them to enable learning to be applied in real time. This is why USAID's updated ADS 201 guidance (page 108) highlights the need to integrate monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), starting with a CLA plan in the PMP and extending to the creation of MEL plans at the project and activity levels. For more on effective learning, see here.

➢ *Taking the time to pause and reflect on our work is critical to learning and improving performance.* Harvard Business School researchers found that "…purposeful reflection on one's accumulated experience leads to greater learning than the accumulation of additional experience." This means that to learn, we can't just consume information and then turn around and implement it. We have to stop and ask ourselves how our efforts are progressing, why, and what we should do differently to learn and be more effective.

IMPLICATION FOR USAID STAFF: *Build in reflection points throughout all phases and levels of the Program Cycle.* We often feel we are too busy to pause and reflect on our work, but not reflecting and making necessary changes can affect our performance and ultimately prove more costly. That is why, for example, USAID's updated ADS 201 guidance (page 50) requires missions to conduct a mid-course stocktaking of their country- or regional-level strategies. USAID staff can also operationalize this finding by facilitating portfolio reviews so they move beyond "what is happening" into "why" and "what should we change and how." For more on pause and reflect, see here.

➢ *Strategic collaboration improves performance.* In 2009, McKinsey and Company found that private sector companies with better collaborative management capabilities achieve superior financial performance. This has implications for overall effectiveness for organizations in all sectors, including NGOs and government agencies. Collaborative organizations were found to be more successful because collaborative relationships among individuals and groups are important for innovation and the creation and distribution of knowledge. By collaborating effectively, groups and teams develop "transactive (or shared) memory systems," which enable better group goal performance. However, research also shows that collaboration is not a panacea. It has to be strategic, or else it can lead to wasted time, high interaction costs that can slow decision-making, interpersonal conflict, and loss of motivation.

IMPLICATION FOR USAID STAFF: *Identify areas of strategic internal and external collaboration.* Based on the literature, the aim here is not to get USAID missions to collaborate more often with more organizations or stakeholders, but rather to think more strategically about collaboration: who should we be collaborating with, why, and what form should that collaboration take. A Collaborating, Learning and Adapting plan, as part of the PMP, is a good starting point for the Mission to consider how to strategically collaborate with others (ADS 201 guidance, page 128). For more on strategic collaboration, see here.

➢ *Donor staff success linked to using locally led approaches.* Emerging research emphasizes the need for approaches that are embedded in the local context and negotiated and delivered by local stakeholders. This type of development emphasizes learning partnerships between donors and local actors that are based on trust and transparency and where differences in power between actors are acknowledged and addressed.

IMPLICATION FOR LEADERSHIP AND STAFF: *Facilitate, rather than create, development.* Locally led development has far-reaching implications for USAID staff and partners. It begins with adjusting our expectations about how quickly results can be achieved in order to allocate the time required to build relationships and facilitate local actors in defining their agenda. And it requires greater collaboration with local actors during the early stages of project/activity design to ensure approaches are locally driven, as emphasized in the updated ADS 201 guidance (page 12). It also means taking a facilitative approach—one that focuses on indirect interventions at strategic points within a system—during implementation to ensure sustainability of results.

➢ *Leaders are essential to creating a learning culture, the foundation of learning organizations.* The literature discusses how organizations that encourage honest discourse and debate and provide an open and safe space for communication tend to perform better and be more innovative. Leaders are central to defining culture, and "learning leaders" are generally those who encourage non-hierarchical organizations where ideas can flow freely.

IMPLICATION FOR USAID STAFF: *Mission and implementing partner leadership must model strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management.* As we know from experience and confirmed by the literature, leaders are essential in creating an "enabling environment that encourages the design of more flexible programs, promotes intentional learning, minimizes the obstacles to modifying programs, and creates incentives for learning and managing adaptively" (ADS 201 guidance, page 11). But achieving this enabling environment begins with leaders who truly lead by example and create the space for staff to collaborate, learn and adapt more effectively. Leadership training and coaching can help leaders at all levels within the organization improve their skills and create a culture that supports CLA.

You can find the full literature review as well as additional citations here.

Leaders are essential to creating a learning culture, the foundation of learning organizations.

Taking time to pause and reflect on our work is critical to learning and improved performance.

M&E are positively and significantly associated with achieving development outcomes when incorporated into program management and designed to support learning and decision-making.

Strategic collaboration improves the bottom line.

Success of donor staff is linked to using locally led approaches.
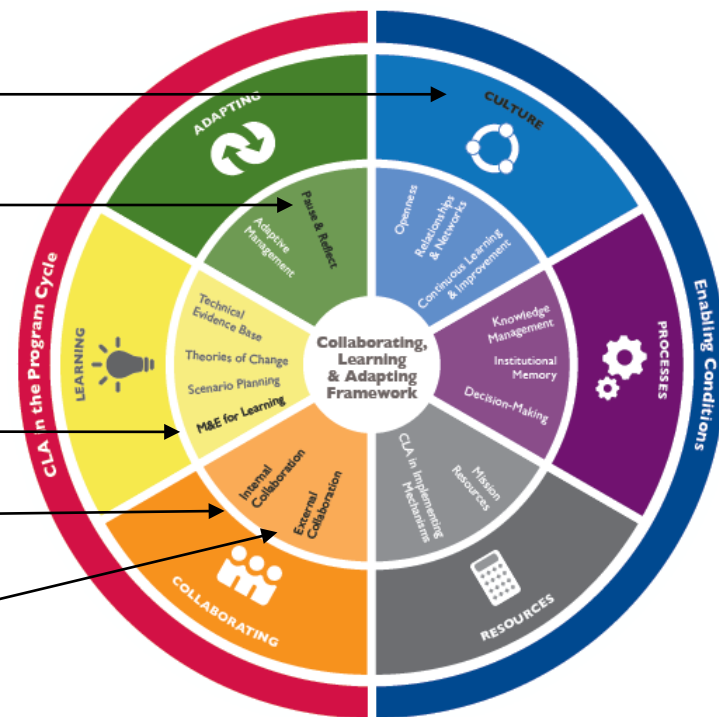
WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK

Are you also gathering evidence to answer the key learning questions on the front of this page? Does this evidence make a difference to your work and team? If so, we want to hear from you. Please contact us at info@usaidlearninglab.org with the subject line: Evidence Base for CLA. Or, if you would like to share your feedback publicly, leave a comment on this blog.