

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.

Walking the Talk: An Iterative Approach to Developing the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Maturity Matrix

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

USAID established Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) as an area of practice in 2009, building on existing work within USAID on knowledge management, organizational learning, and adaptive management.

While CLA is not new to USAID missions, it often does not happen regularly or systematically and is not intentionally resourced. In 2014, USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) awarded the LEARN (Learning and Knowledge Management) contract to support USAID missions and operating units as they integrate collaborating, learning, and adapting principles and approaches more intentionally throughout the Program Cycle. At the same time, the Bureau was planning to update USAID guidance (the ADS 200 Series) to emphasize the importance of learning and adaptive management practices to delivering more effective development assistance. Given that ADS updates would affect USAID missions most directly, it was critical to consult mission staff at the forefront of CLA integration to better understand how PPL and LEARN could better support them.

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

In 2015, PPL and LEARN conducted a stocktaking exercise with 14 USAID missions that had been early adopters of CLA. One of the key takeaways from this exercise was the lack of granular understanding about what CLA is and how it can be meaningfully integrated into Program Cycle processes. One interviewee told us, “Mission staff don’t get CLA. The first inclination of staff is ‘Where’s the application?’ and ‘What’s the mechanism?’ They grapple to find something concrete.”

Moreover, even those missions with active CLA champions faced institutional challenges. These included:

- Perception that adapting was not possible given earmarked funding and contracting requirements;
- Mission cultures that were not conducive to learning and adapting;
- A lack of appropriate resources, including time, to enable CLA integration.

But an opportunity also emerged—PPL was planning to require missions to integrate CLA in their work in the updated ADS 200 guidance (scheduled for release in September 2016). This policy shift was based on feedback from missions that only requirements get prioritized (given time and resource constraints). But because of the institutional challenges mentioned, PPL and LEARN were concerned that CLA would become a box-checking exercise rather than an intentional, systematic, and resourced approach to designing and implementing better development programs. With these concerns in mind, PPL and LEARN carefully considered the following questions:

- How do we establish an approach to CLA integration that is **easy to understand** so it is clear what CLA is and how it supports better development?
- How do we create an approach to CLA integration that provides **structure** but also enables **flexibility** so each mission can determine what CLA approaches make sense in its respective context?

And how do we create a **participatory process** owned by the mission—not Washington— so CLA integration is something people see value in rather than something they feel forced to do it?

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

To address these challenges, PPL and LEARN decided to create a maturity matrix tool about Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting. The process of creating the CLA Maturity Matrix is an example of the PPL and LEARN team ‘walking the talk’ and applying the principles and practices of CLA in our own work.

So first, what is the CLA Maturity Matrix? Now an easy-to-use set of cards (though this was not always the case; see more below on the iterative process of developing the tool), the CLA Maturity Matrix offers illustrative examples of what CLA looks like at different stages of maturity. The purpose of this tool is to help missions think more deliberately about how to tailor a CLA approach to fit



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their specific contexts and needs. USAID staff can use this customizable deck of cards within missions, as well as with implementing partners (IPs), to both assess current practice and plan for incremental improvements in CLA practices.

The CLA Maturity Matrix consists of two decks of cards corresponding to two dimensions of CLA: CLA as part of the Program Cycle and the enabling conditions for implementing CLA.



- **CLA in the Program Cycle:** By using the matrix cards to guide a conversation, teams can explore how well CLA is incorporated into the planning and implementation processes throughout the Program Cycle in order to improve their effectiveness.
- **Enabling Conditions:** The cards also encourage discussion of the conditions that can significantly influence how CLA shows up at a mission, including daily operating processes, organizational culture, and resourcing.

Within these decks, the matrix covers 16 sub-components of CLA (those in the inner circle of the diagram to the right).. Each has one key concept card and five matrix cards that describe how the sub-component might show up in your work along a spectrum of practice ranging from *Not Yet Present* to *Institutionalized* (see example below).



tool.

The process of creating the CLA Maturity Matrix is an example of the PPL and LEARN team ‘walking the talk’ and applying the principles and practices of CLA in our own work:

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting: The CLA Maturity Matrix was co-created between PPL and LEARN, PPL’s contractor. Team members from both organizations shared ownership of the design process and responsibility to create the

We piloted the tool with a number of stakeholders to get feedback and used that feedback to iteratively improve the tool and approach. Feedback sessions were held within PPL as well as with other bureaus, missions, and implementing partners. We first introduced version 4 (our minimum viable product) in West Africa. Based on the feedback and experience there, we then created version 5, which was used in Uganda and the Regional Development Mission in Asia. These experiences confirmed we had a viable product and gave us important feedback that fed into version 6, the



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version still currently in use. We used version 6 in an additional 5 missions—DRC, Cambodia, Southern Africa, India, and Ethiopia—and are tracking feedback received from these experiences to inform version 7, which will come out with the ADS revisions in the fall of 2016.

Culture, Processes, and Resources: The creation of the tool was made possible because of enabling conditions within PPL and LEARN. Those working on the tool had a collaborative partnership where an open flow of feedback was the norm. We were also given space by our leadership to experiment. From humble origins as a boring matrix in a Google Sheet, it eventually transformed into a deck of cards that enabled participants to interact with the content in more dynamic ways.

Knowledge management was also critical throughout the process. Feedback from stakeholders was synthesized and reflected upon constantly to improve the content of the cards and the facilitation experience. We have also kept a change log throughout the process to document significant adaptations to the tool and what led to those changes. The core team creating the tool was small and decision-making roles within the team were clear, avoiding delays in adapting the tool as feedback flowed in. We were provided resources to have the cards graphically designed to make it a richer, more interesting experience for participants, and team members were given the time necessary to devote to working on and completing multiple iterations of the tool.

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

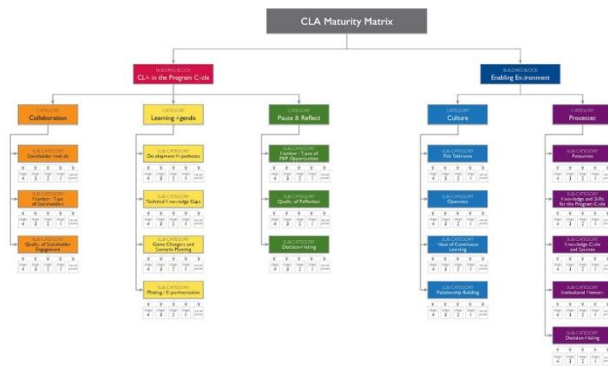
One of the unique characteristics of this initiative was not knowing what the tool would ultimately be or look like. We did not start out with a clear blueprint and did not have a clear sense of how long the process would take. Because of the flexibility given to us by leadership, we were able to update plans as we went and did not have specific deadlines in mind. From there, the matrix took on a life of its own. Deadlines emerged because of upcoming technical assistance trips to missions, which prompted us to want an updated version of the matrix based on the feedback we had received up to that point. For those working on the tool, this lack of clarity was not problematic. Rather, it provided freedom to take the tool where it needed to go based on stakeholder input.

Another example of this is the creation of the CLA framework out of the CLA Maturity Matrix. When we started creating the matrix, we knew we needed an organizing framework, but we did not set out to create one as an explicit aim. However, in creating the matrix, a clear framework emerged. The version 4 and 5 frameworks (see below) were simply organizational charts used by our graphic designer to understand the content and provide updated designs. And we defaulted to using this visual to explain the framework when piloting the matrix out in the field. We quickly heard from participants that this representation gave the impression that aspects of CLA were siloed rather than integrated. We then began thinking about how we could represent the framework in a way that presented a more holistic view of CLA and the interconnected nature of the framework components, resulting in today's version 6 framework graphic. We now use this framework to organize CLA trainings, update to how Learning Lab is organized, and in thinking about the tools and resources we need to provide to support greater CLA integration.



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Version 4 (left) and Version 6 (right) of the CLA Framework

Another key challenge has been moving teams from the excellent conversation generated by the self-assessment process to action planning (and actually executing those action plans). In many cases, we first had difficulty getting missions to the self-assessment sessions due to a lack of time and uncertainty about the process. Then, once people came, they found the conversation incredibly engaging, useful, and relevant (and when asked, almost all say they would have devoted more time to the process after having experienced it). But by that point it can be too late to leverage the self-assessment discussion for action planning—the team visiting the mission may not have any additional time in their schedule to facilitate action planning or mission staff may not have time while the team is still in country. Even in the few cases where missions have allocated sufficient time for both the self-assessment and action planning portions of the matrix process, staff find it difficult to find the time and mental space needed to execute those plans. This is, to a great extent, to be expected given how challenging organizational change can be.

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

LEARN has established monitoring protocols to determine if the CLA Maturity Matrix sessions at missions lead to tangible results. While the challenge of executing action plans remains a concern, we have identified a number of positive outcomes and results based on feedback from missions and other testers:

- Based on after action reviews with missions and follow-up protocols in place, we know from mission staff that the tool itself is engaging, interactive, and useful. Participants have indicated that their understanding of and interest in CLA increases as a result of working through the matrix self-assessment. Specifically, staff have highlighted how the tool brings many enabling conditions (particularly within the culture component) to light that they had not previously considered when thinking about Program Cycle processes. They have also highlighted how the tool helped clarify what CLA is and is not in a way that effectively socialized CLA within the mission.

- In the case of one mission, we have a tangible outcome as a result of their self-assessment and action planning session. The team decided to integrate CLA into their annual program statement as part of the evaluation criteria (within the technical approach). This could have a ripple effect, leading to greater integration of CLA among implementing partners and changes in how programs are implemented. Another mission told us, “the CLA TDY was one of the best we’ve had because it led to immediate changes in how we operate.” Further follow-up is needed to get details on what specifically changed at that mission.
- USAID staff in Washington have indicated (anecdotally) an improved understanding of CLA since the release of the framework and maturity matrix. We have received requests from various USAID operating units to talk to them about the framework and maturity matrix. It has also made it easier to find points of collaboration with other operating units (including a new collaboration under development between PPL, DRG Center, LocalWorks, the Lab, and Forestry and Biodiversity) on measuring the effect of collaborating, learning, and adapting approaches on development.
- Implementing partners are also seeking more guidance and information from PPL and LEARN on CLA as a result of engaging implementing partner focus groups in matrix testing. Some implementing partners have asked about using the matrix with their AORs/CORs as a way to discuss how CLA can be better integrated in their mechanisms. In addition, other organizations are considering applying the CLA Maturity Matrix or creating a similar tool specific to their organizational context. Other contractors who work with missions on strategic planning and CLA integration are also using the framework and matrix to inform their technical support to missions.
- The profile of CLA within the international development field has also increased and is being referenced by thought leaders in the organizational learning and adaptive management fields. This could be due to a number of factors, but one of them is likely the creation of a CLA framework and maturity matrix that clearly defines what CLA is and what CLA practices look like.



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What were the most important lessons learned?

- **An iterative approach was critical:** The tool would not have been as successful or as high quality had it not been for the iterative approach to its development. The constant feedback loop meant the tool was consistently improved. In addition, telling participants and users that this is a work in progress (that we were on version 4 or 5 and planning more versions) increased their comfort in giving us candid feedback. They knew we needed it to improve the next iteration.
- **Flexibility and freedom from leadership made the difference:** Not having higher level leadership expecting certain results was incredibly valuable, and is a generally uncommon experience. It gave us the freedom to operate slightly under the radar and create something that was innovative in design and approach.
- **The point is to have a conversation that sparks learning, not to assign numerical value or judgments to current CLA practice.** A key challenge was creating a tool that did not feel like a 'test' to users. When mission staff were initially told about the pilots, many were concerned their colleagues would feel 'audited.' This was the exact opposite of the effect we wanted to have. The point was to start a conversation about CLA practice—the actual stage of practice was less important. As a result, we removed numerical values (0-4) assigned to the maturity stages after version 4. Speaking and dealing in numbers made it difficult for people to focus on the learning coming out of the conversation. However, based on feedback, we heard that the labels in version 5 still felt too judgmental. In version 6, we adjusted these labels to be more neutral and even optimistic in outlook (*Nascent* became *Emergent* and *Developing* became *Expanding*). Thus far, we haven't received any suggestions or requests to change the labels in version 6. This was an important lesson learned for creating similar organizational assessment tools.



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