COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

This technical note is an overview of how CLA was built into the USAID Uganda Community Connector (CC) Project and describes the key principles for bringing this approach to life: CLA design, knowledge-driven systems, and organizational culture.

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Community Connector
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INTRODUCTION

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) framework for intentional planning and processes to help implementers become more nimble, knowledge-driven and responsive to the evolving root challenges that programs and projects face in achieving development objectives.[1] With CLA, the causal pathway to desired program outcomes is continuously assessed and adjusted to yield the most effective course of action.[2] Thus beyond the routine program review, fine-tuning and monitoring and evaluation, CLA calls for a project to establish and maintain innovative, outside-the-box systems, habits and attitudes that weave the CLA agenda into all aspects of the project from start-up to close-out. CLA has been practiced and embodied by USAID at several levels over in recent years, and many of the concepts that underpin the approach are not new to implementers or USAID. In fact they often encompass how partners work together. However, implementing programming with the CLA framework as an implicit and active part of the program design is still quite new.

The Community Connector (CC) project is Feed the Future's (FtF) flagship integrated nutrition and agriculture project in Uganda, provides innovative, multi-sectoral solutions to support comprehensive improvement in household food security, income and nutrition. USAID designed CC to place learning and adaptation in the foreground and catalyze the discovery and assimilation of new ideas and best practices for greater impact and sustainability. CC was the first project in Uganda for which the CLA framework was placed front and center: a high degree of emphasis on CLA is explicit throughout the award mechanism, the technical design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

HOW DOES COMMUNITY CONNECTOR DO CLA?

In the sections below, we will describe the systems and structures that are part of the **CLA design** (the award mechanism and project's management structures that support CLA), structures that are part of **knowledge-driven systems** (information that guides the project's learning agenda) and structures that are part of the project's and surrounding stakeholder's **organizational culture** (how we create an enabling environment for CLA). We will also highlight some of CC's successes and challenges in implementing CLA.
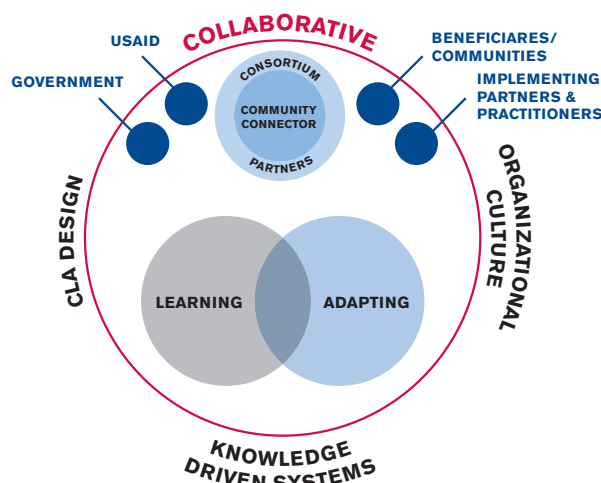
[1] http://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/media/StorylinePublished/story.html

[2] USAID Uganda Country Development Cooperation Strategy, 2011-2015. Ver. Dec 17, 2010. http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1860/Uganda_Country_Development_Cooperation_Strategy_2011-2015.pdf.

Project Design

A number of unique project components contribute to its effective implementation.

CC uses a **modular approach** to planning, learning, adapting and implementing through six Program Modules (PMs) for "Learning" and "Implementation" that lay the foundation for CLA's iterative cycle (see Diagram 1). Learning Modules are comprehensive and collaborative situation analyses that examine the status and key determinants of undernutrition, food insecurity, gender inequity and poverty in targeted districts.[3] Data are collated rapidly and shared with program staff, implementing partners, local government and other stakeholders to foster collaborative design intervention strategies and packages and/or incorporate real-time feedback into existing workplans and budgets for the Implementation Module that immediately follows. Any necessary program adaptation occurs through the regular and ad hoc refinement of partner scopes of work, technical and management strategy design, CC staff job descriptions and quarterly implementation plans in response to feedback.

CC has **multiple and frequent feedback loops** for continuous learning. CC established and maintains several mechanisms for project staff, local government stakeholders and community, district, and regional and national beneficiaries to communicate and channel feedback regularly. Several of these are small-cycle mechanisms, such as community field days, monthly visits to community-based volunteers from sub-county CC and local government staff, monthly regional meetings with sub-county staff, quarterly meetings with national partners and stakeholders, and ad hoc meetings with project stakeholders. Large-scale assessments and evaluations are conducted during Learning Modules using external technical experts and project stakeholders over a six-month review period. All mechanisms focus on frank and open sharing and listening, recognizing that learning from failures sometimes offers the greatest opportunities to improve. To be effective, the data collection, meetings and reporting activities that enable these mechanisms to be active are explicitly planned and budgeted.

CC always **conducts collaborative learning**. CC creates time and space for internal and external stakeholders to participate in project learning, formulate questions, and

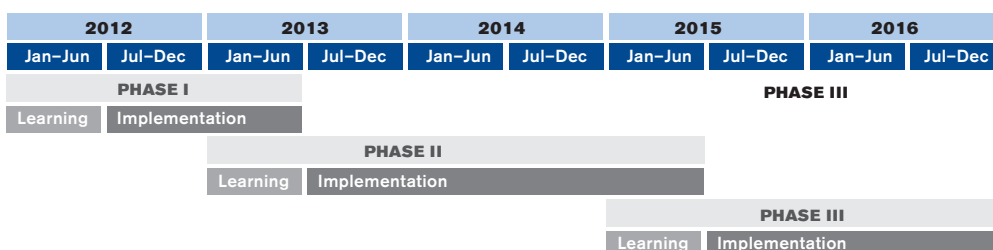### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE LEARNING?

CC has encountered two major challenges: a) gaining consensus among multiple and diverse stakeholders takes time, and this sometimes results in delays to programming; and b) project staff, beneficiary communities and other stakeholders are also new to CLA programming, and may not initially be comfortable with major shifts the project seeks to make. To mitigate these challenges, CC ensures that stakeholders are involved in formulating CLA questions from the beginning, and manages expectations and communicates regularly and openly regarding the need to potentially modify interventions further down the road based on new information and learning.

problem-solve together, encouraging transparent discussion around performance feedback, new learning, innovations, risks, challenges and changing conditions. Project planning is done district-by-district with all stakeholders involved in CC: district and sub-county local government leadership, CC staff working at sub-country level, CC volunteers working at parish and village levels and others. To the greatest extent possible, decision making is done collectively by the funder, project and these stakeholders.

CC has a **nimble and adaptable award mechanism** that avoids diversion of staff time and resources away from the CLA agenda. Under CC's fixed-price contract (FPC), the prime (FHI 360) is paid based on achieving specific project milestones or deliverables. This allows CC flexibility to allocate and re-allocate resources in tandem with program learning and adaptation, while saving the project many of the award management and administrative procedures typical of other acquisition (e.g. cost-reimbursable contract) or assistance (e.g. cooperative agreement) mechanisms. Also, the FPC generally results in greater incentive for the implementers to reach project targets while offering some leeway on how these are to be achieved within the overall price.

CC contract includes a **performance-based award fee** system that allows USAID influence in priority-setting and the fine-tuning of programming based on learning. At the beginning of each PM, USAID, together with the program implementers, sets specific goals for each PM that are above and beyond the contract deliverables and that speak to the CLA agenda and other technical and program management aspects of the project. CC is incentivized by the award fee to achieve these goals. The structured process of

DIAGRAM 1: MODULAR STRUCTURE OF CC

2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
Jan–Jun	Jul–Dec	Jan–Jun	Jul–Dec	Jan–Jun	Jul–Dec	Jan–Jun	Jul–Dec	Jan–Jun	Jul–Dec

PHASE I — Learning / Implementation
PHASE II — Learning / Implementation
PHASE III — Learning / Implementation

[3] These are conducted under the leadership of the two universities, Gulu University Department of Food Science and Post Harvest Handling in Faculty of Agriculture, and Mbarara University of Science and Technology Department of Community Health.

CASE STUDY

CLA was key to CC's testing and eventual redesign of the village saving and loan association (VSLA) approach for generating community and household assets. During the project's first year (2012) CC registered 1,269 community groups, of which approximately 40% were already participating in VSLA or were supported by CC to form new VSLAs. Through the VSLA approach, group members were saving funds over the year and then receiving those funds back as a lump sum at around December. Despite the goal of increasing the members' ability to acquire productive assets and/or other inputs for business or entrepreneurial ventures, it was reported that households were spending the funds primarily to celebrate the December holidays, that is, the funds were not benefitting the household for the long-term. This feedback was presented by CC sub-county level staff (called Community Connector Officers, or CCOs) during monthly regional meetings. These meetings with CCOs provide an opportunity for those working directly with communities to have frank discussions regarding what is working and what is not and channel feedback up to program decision makers. As a result, CC conducted a mapping exercise to examine the saving and spending patterns of VSLA members and held focus group discussions with VSLA members to document feedback directly. This information, along with a desk review of external literature evaluating VSLA mechanisms, was presented at a meeting with local government to share the findings, learn and develop an adaptive solution together. A new approach, termed "Saving With a Purpose" (SWAP), was developed and rolled-out to all CC districts from June 2013 onwards. SWAP replaces the previous VSLA approach and features the following: 1) group member disbursements of funds now coincide with planting seasons and the school year for purchase of agriculture inputs and/or school fees; 2) members are required to come up with saving goals, such as saving toward the purchase of a household productive asset, or for a business investment; and 3) members must sign a commitment card for their goal to encourage group members to hold one another accountable for how funds are spent. Initial feedback gathered from CCOs indicates that SWAP is well-received, with many groups taking initiatives to make further adjustments to this savings practice to better address their needs.

administering the award fee is also useful in providing a formal time and space for USAID and project leaders to review, discuss, and adjust technical and program management strategies.

Knowledge-driven Systems

To conduct CLA, CC has developed robust, knowledge-driven systems that not only collect, utilize and disseminate data and evidence effectively, but **generate the "right" sort of learning questions** for CC to investigate.

The right learning questions challenge project thinking and underlying development hypotheses or assumptions made during project design at multiple levels, e.g. "If we establish vegetable gardens, the result in higher household incomes or savings." Learning questions also investigate operational assumptions and practices to refine day-to-day field techniques, e.g. "If CC provides small grants to community groups, they will be motivated to reach non-group members and expand the reach of interventions." The questions – and the process of answering them – ultimately push the project to find more effective ways to reach beneficiaries, adapt to the changing context, and pave the way for sustainable impact. Asking the right questions also provides opportunities for diverse stakeholders to come together for mutual learning.

To answer the many and evolving CLA questions, CC has invested significant time and effort in establishing an **M&E system that uses innovative technologies to collect and make data readily available to decision makers for quick action**. Community and sub-country project volunteers and staff use mobile devices to record data at the point of intervention where it is also triangulated with GIS mapping. Data are then uploaded to a central hosting system where they are web-enabled and made available in

real-time to implementing partners and USAID. CC regional staff verify the data, also through mobile phones, and present it back to CC implementing partners and staff during regional meetings for early identification of trends and fine-tuning of

OTHER CLA QUESTIONS THAT HAVE GUIDED CC PROGRAMMING

Reaching more vulnerable and poor households in remote communities: Based on continuous feedback CC obtained from the community, the project has identified and fine-tuned project Learning Sites and Field Days as effective ways to reach vulnerable populations, especially youth, who were not being reached through community groups only. Learning Sites and Field Days attract a wide array of community members by offering valuable resources and information on WASH, livelihoods, and health service referrals.

Effectively and sustainably reaching farmers with agribusiness extension services: As a result of lessons learned during a site visit in 2013 organized by USAID for Uganda Feed the Future partners to Eastern Uganda/non-CC districts, CC began engaging private Agriculture Service Providers (ASPs) to provide agricultural inputs and services (e.g. animal immunizations, improved seeds) as well as business mentoring services (e.g. in apiary) to groups that were not being reached through local sub-country government extension services. Through engagement with the CC project and an initial upfront grant or contract, ASPs are able to extend their business networks and sustain the sale of goods and services to previously untapped markets, while farmers in more remote areas benefit from the free ASP services that CC supports.

systems or implementation. National data and findings are also collated, analyzed and presented to USAID, with a focus on transparency so that successes are not overly emphasized at the cost of more negative feedback that might spur learning.

CC also conducts periodic **qualitative assessments and detailed household surveys** to comprehensively profile and track household changes in CC targeted areas. **Rigorous evaluations of project interventions** consolidate and package what CC has learned over the years for the benefit of future projects. In both cases, the M&E system's ability to rapidly collect and channel data allows CC to do both the small-scale, more targeted surveys to answer specific learning questions (e.g., are households adapting a new technology?), as well as the larger-scale surveys that assess project performance among all beneficiaries.

Finally, CC plans to regularly produce **"project notes"** to build the evidence base for integrated programming and document the process of CLA for stakeholders. Field Notes will spread good practices among field staff. Technical Notes will document promising project strategies or interventions. Operational Notes will document major operational/management lessons. Development Hypothesis Notes will summarize the results/evidence on effectiveness of CC interventions, answering major questions related to the projects overall theory of change. All of these will discuss project successes, challenges and lessons learned and provide practical advice where applicable.

Organizational Culture

Critical to the success of CLA in CC is the **shared commitment among staff, partners, communities, stakeholders and USAID** to question the status quo, share ideas and thoughts candidly and take risks and try new approaches. CC partners and staff also contribute to CLA on individual and organizational levels, and so are actively supported to challenge themselves and do their own learning. CC has taken steps to recruit a project team with diverse skills and perspectives so that staff challenge one another to develop more holistic approaches to learning and adaptation. CC also allocates resources toward training field and partner staff on CLA and engages them in regular project reviews to share lessons and generate ideas for improvement. In encouraging open and frank communication about one's work, the project leadership plays a key role in cultivating the organizational culture of CLA.

CLA would also not be possible without the **full support provided by USAID**—spurred by an appetite for progress and innovation—for open dialogue about challenges and the willingness to make regular and sometimes major (risky) changes in project design. This enabling support is apparent in the project's interactions with USAID who, primarily through the Contracting Officer's Representative (COR), is actively involved in the project and participating in the CLA agenda.

Finally, CC **welcomes scrutiny** from USAID, stakeholders, consultants and other external parties on project interventions and the CLA agenda.