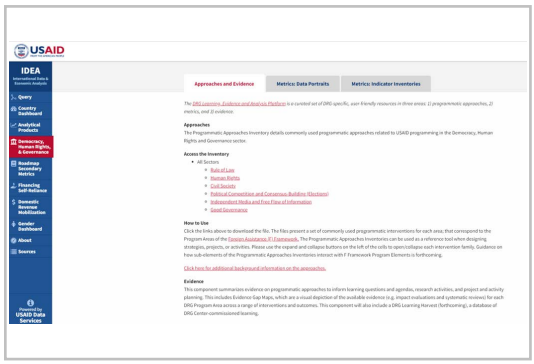
2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

LEAPing in to Improve USAID DRG Program Design



Screenshot of LEAP Website Platform, Credit: USAID/MCIO.

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Summary:

Using systematic, intentional and adaptable facilitation approaches, the DRG Center's Evidence and Learning team facilitated and co-developed the DRG Learning, Evidence and Analysis Platform (LEAP) with end users to create a curated set of core resources related to DRG programming that USAID officers and implementing partners can use throughout the Program Cycle. The platform includes user-friendly resources in three areas: 1) DRG programmatic approaches, 2) DRG metrics, and 3) evidence. The LEAP has already been used by USAID staff and implementing partners more than 5000 times in support of improved DRG programming design and implementation.

Which two subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case? Please 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: 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?

The Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) leads USAID's DRG programming and focuses on applying policy, evidence, and programmatic best practice to enable impactful foreign assistance programming in USAID's offices abroad. The DRG Center has been recognized across the Agency for its leadership related to learning agendas and impact evaluations. With this emphasis on rigorous learning, the DRG Evidence and Learning (E&L) Team developed and launched the Learning, Evidence and Analysis Platform (LEAP), a curated set of core resources related to DRG programming that USAID officers and implementing partners can use throughout the Program Cycle. The platform includes user-friendly resources in three areas: 1) DRG programmatic approaches, 2) DRG metrics, and 3) evidence. The LEAP's content is organized according to the six DRG Program Areas of the Foreign Assistance Framework: Rule of Law, Independent Media and Free Flow of Information, Civil Society, Human Rights, Political Competition and Consensus-Building, and Governance.

DRG LEAP recognizes that development professionals and partners face a perennial challenge of having to spend too much time searching for resources to inform project and activity design, and there is often limited time to use and apply key technical resources. For example, until now, there was nowhere an officer could easily go to find the full range of important DRG indicators related to all six subsectors. It often felt difficult to impossible to find and understand evidence related to program design. This limits the utilization and integration of appropriate programmatic approaches, relevant indicators, third-party metrics, and evidence into USAID DRG programs, which in turn hinders their efficiency and effectiveness. DRG LEAP collates and curates these critical resources in a coordinated and efficient way on behalf of and for the benefit of the DRG assistance community.

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

The DRG Center has long recognized the value of CLA in development, including most notably in its signature DRG learning agenda initiative -- a dynamic collection of research questions that serve to guide the DRG Center's and USAID Field Missions' analytical efforts. CLA approaches are predicated on employing an intentional, systematic and resourced approach. The Evidence and Learning team used an iterative, systematic, and participatory approach to learning that engaged staff and implementing partners in formulating the components of DRG Learning, Evidence and Analysis Platform (LEAP). Evidence tells us that collaborating with decision makers in the process of generating and analyzing evidence is critical to uptake, so the E&L team used an approach that drew on its in-house personnel to manage the process with support from the Center's GROW contract for training and leadership facilitation and its learning partner, NORC at the University of Chicago. The formulation of resources used a common approach that was adjusted over time using informal and formal feedback loops. For example, we developed a workshop approach to collate and curate feedback on programmatic approaches and on the evidence gap map framework and indicators. In addition, the process itself benefited from adapting to the challenges of a virtual working environment. The team had to adjust its original approach which was predicated on in-person convenings to virtual meetings, briefings and workshops. Structured internal collaboration, technical evidence base and knowledge management practices remained largely confined to within teams. DRG LEAP's approach therefore offered an opportunity to create a set of accessible products but also to create a process through which the benefits of internal collaboration could be leveraged into other learning initiatives.

3. How: 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.

Each component was developed through a separate process with the EL team coordinating regularly with DRG Center staff and sequenced beginning with the Rule of Law sub sector. This posture allowed for adaptations to be made to the process before we proceeded with other program areas.

Programmatic Approaches Inventory: Beginning in 2019, for each program area, a list of activities active during the period FY15-FY17 was compiled by our learning partner NORC, relevant program documents reviewed, and interventions extracted and grouped into categories. NORC used a systematic approach to search for and find as many activities and program documents as possible, reaching out to a wide range of implementers. This initial mapping was then workshopped by the relevant teams to improve the accuracy and completeness of the programmatic approaches inventory for each DRG sub-sector. The Rule of Law inventory was the first to be completed in March 2020 with the remaining inventories completed in December 2020. Following a set of internal discussions facilitated by the Evidence and Learning Team, this final version was aligned with the most commonly identified interventions to provide a pattern. The draft approaches were then shared with an advisory group of external partners who provided feedback. Following this workshop, teams made final revisions to the Programmatic Approaches Inventory. During this process, a number of adaptations were made; for example, after the first external workshop, we made adjustments to the facilitation plan to allow more time for feedback on the draft inventory and provide an open comment period following the workshops.

Metrics: This component features tools for measuring DRG outcomes, including:
the Democracy Metrics Inventory: a searchable collection of all publicly available (third party) country-level DRG outcome and context indicators, sorted by Program Area. In addition, the E&L team curated a set of sample Program Indicators, a collection of program indicators culled from USAID DRG programs, across the six DRG subsectors. Beginning in March 2020, this inventory was produced by our learning partner, NORC at the University of Chicago, which was then shared with relevant DRG Center teams for feedback to improve its quality. Following this, a set of DRG Country Data Portraits were generated for all USAID partner countries by USAID's M/CIO Data Services team. These two-page data portraits capture the most important third party indicators (quantitative and qualitative) to summarize the country-level DRG situation, with portraits for each Program Area and one portrait that captures DRG overall. From summer 2020-spring 2021, the E&L Team and NORC consulted with the relevant DRG Center teams to select the most relevant and appropriate metrics for each Program Area and then produced a set of drafts for feedback before finalizing the portraits. The portraits will be completed by late summer 2022.

Evidence: This component provides evidence summaries on programmatic approaches to inform learning questions and agendas, research activities, and activity and project planning. Leveraging the programmatic approaches, USAID worked with its learning partner, 3ie, to put together a set of definitions and a framework outlining the intended outcomes for each programmatic approach to develop study protocols for Evidence Gap Maps (EGMs). These were then workshopped with the DRG Center technical teams to refine and iterate. In coordination with USAID teams, an advisory group of external experts was established to review the gap map methodology and provide feedback. Following three rounds of feedback from the advisory group and teams, 3ie conducts an extensive literature search, then screens and reviews relevant studies. 3ie creates an interactive web-based EGM matrix that maps impact evaluations by intervention sector and outcome of interest for each topic with links to abstracts and/or full papers. The EGMs process began in spring 2020 and were completed in April 2022. Each has an accompanying set of sub-sector and cross-cutting practitioner briefers selected based on clusters of evidence and key programming areas and a user guide to connect the maps with Program Cycle processes. In addition, we developed a set of standardized filters on the gap maps that allow exploration of the evidence across factors such as region, level of democracy and specific marginalized and vulnerable populations. We also developed the Learning Harvest, a compendium of evidence and research commissioned by the E&L team that is updated approximately twice annually.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: 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 DRG Center's organizational effectiveness has only been further improved by mainstreaming CLA practices through the processes and products of the DRG LEAP.

Select examples include:

Internal and External Collaboration: Coordination and collaboration can be challenging at the best of times. During the virtual telework, this connected set of activities have facilitated an ongoing set of engagements within and between staff in the Center to foster collaborative working environments. In addition, engagement between USAID staff, learning partners and implementing partners has been critical to ensure a higher quality of product through a series of facilitated convenings. Technical experts who initially expressed skepticism over this work eventually found that the collective learning that resulted from internal and external collaboration improved their understanding of the state-of-the-art in their areas of expertise and opened up new conversations and partnerships on key technical issues.

Technical Evidence Base: Curating evidence in one place to improve likelihood of use and uptake is critical. The DRG LEAP provides a set of curated and collated documents disseminated through a set of differing modalities to meet users where they are in terms of time available. The DRG LEAP resources combine evidence across a wide range of Program Areas, geographies and research methodologies. When the former DRG Learning Division Chief started in that role, she asked the team, "What have we learned through our formal learning efforts thus far?" In response, the team sent her a few one-page briefing documents for Agency senior leaders (that covered a miniscule piece of the overall research undertaken by the DRG Center in recent years) and plopped a large volume of research

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: 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 Center's work consists of both direct programming and providing technical assistance and expertise to the Agency on DRG programming. Since the LEAP site launched in summer 2021 the resources have been downloaded more than 5000 times. Through the collation and curation of programmatic approaches, metrics and evidence, the Center is able to more comprehensively and accurately support the design and the implementation of USAID programming, leading to more effective and efficiently achieved results. For example, DRG Center staff have shared these resources and used them when designing activities to support more informed decisions about the type of programming and related indicators.

The DRG LEAP is now being used to inform sector specific learning priorities and questions and these will be added over time to the DRG Learning Agenda that prioritizes questions that address the most common technical approaches and current gaps in evidence. In addition, the formulation process will review previous findings and learning topics from past Learning Agendas. The formulation and implementation of the learning agenda incorporates lessons learned from these processes including ongoing consultation with DRG Center teams and DRG officers as well as relevant external stakeholders.

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

Enablers:
- Commitment and resourcing for the DRG LEAP was driven by senior leadership signaling the initiative's legitimacy and importance to DRG Center staff.
- Dedicated leadership by the EL team leads and team members as well as DRG LEAP "champions" within the Center.
- 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 Center.

Obstacles:
- Limited time and availability of DRG Center staff to engage requires patience and pauses to enable the teams to balance their own commitments without losing their important insight to improve the DRG LEAP products.
- Inconsistent knowledge management practices across the DRG Center meant that certain areas had a 'head start' over others due to gaps in staffing and coverage.