2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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**Case Title:**

# Adapting and Improving Graduation to Resilience in Uganda


**Name:** Elizabeth Stahl

**Organization:** American Institutes for Research (AIR)

Cohort 1 participant Janet and her husband prepare to dry their produce on a mat. Credit: AVSI


**Summary:**

The USAID/BHA Graduating to Resilience Activity is implemented by AVSI Foundation with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Trickle Up, with the goal of graduating 13,800 extremely poor refugee and Ugandan households in Kamwenge district from conditions of food insecurity and fragile livelihoods to resilience. With impact evaluator Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Activity team is testing variations of a comprehensive approach to improving vulnerable household resilience over two implementation cohorts, employing group and individual coaching; asset transfer; referrals to local services; and psychosocial support. Because the Activity comprises several experiments and is as complex as its operating context, we built CLA into the Activity design from the outset to be able to consciously learn and adaptively manage activities as they progressed. The Activity has fueled learning with formative research assessments, scenario planning, performance and context monitoring data, and two refinement periods for reflection. This learning has enabled flexible, evidence-driven adaptations to aspects of operations like the allocation of participants to coaches and to the length of cohort implementation, and to aspects of the Activity theory of change and design such as the inclusion of psychosocial support in Cohort 2. The Activity team has shown a commitment to a culture of learning by readily offering feedback, identifying challenges, and embracing adaptations as they have evolved, and as such, adaptive management and positive outcomes from Cohort 2 are anticipated to be even stronger than Cohort 1.


**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 USAID/BHA Graduating to Resilience Activity is implemented by AVSI Foundation in a consortium with the AIR and Trickle Up, with the goal of graduating 13,800 extremely poor refugee and Ugandan households in Kamwenge district from conditions of food insecurity and fragile livelihoods to resilience. The seven-year Activity uses a Woman+ household approach, with women and/or youth selected as the primary activity beneficiaries and points of entry to extremely poor households.

Some of the development and contextual challenges around the Activity include:

• The Activity works with the distinct, interrelated communities of refugees and Ugandan nationals. The interventions do not distinguish between host community and refugee status, but take into consideration each population's unique needs, and the possibility of differential outcomes between groups.

• Relationships between the host population and refugees are generally positive, but relationships among the refugee populations are more strained and fragile, and the number of people entering Uganda is growing, causing national policies regarding refugees to change rapidly.

The Activity is testing a comprehensive approach to improving vulnerable household resilience over two implementation cohorts, employing group and individual coaching in skills like financial management and launching a household agricultural or livestock business; asset transfer including cash and mobile phones; referrals to local services; and psychosocial support. The Activity's graduation approach is an adaptation of the Standard Graduation Approach developed by BRAC, implemented to address the underlying causes of food insecurity and vulnerability by layering and sequencing mutually reinforcing mentoring, seed capital and assets, access to financial services, and consumption assistance that build resilience sustainably and cost-effectively. Led by external evaluator IPA, the Graduating to Resilience consortium tested, through a randomized control trial, three variations of its Graduation Approach in Cohort 1 to determine the most cost-effective and efficient strategies.

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

Because the Activity and operating context are complex and the Activity comprises several experiments, we built CLA into the Activity design from the outset to be able to continuously learn and adaptively manage activities as they progressed. The Activity created a comprehensive CLA plan during start-up comprising an integrated approach to program-level learning-while-doing, that includes:

Refine and Implement Approach: The Activity incorporates the Food for Peace refine and implement (R&I) approach, allowing for one year to learn and plan before implementation and another six months of refinement between Cohorts 1 and 2.

Learning Agenda: The team devised, collaboratively, a learning agenda and roadmap at the outset of Cohort 1, which helped generate buy-in from all team members in collaborative and learning activities.

Scenario Planning: The Activity relied on Scenario Planning because the theory of change incorporates development challenges that hinge on specific but uncertain outcomes. During the initial refinement phase, the Activity identified situations that may affect program design and developed mitigating adjustments accordingly.

Formative Research: During the refinement period following Cohort 1, AIR carried out five assessments to delve into gender dynamics, market opportunities, nutrition and WASH practices and barriers, youth engagement and aspirations, and value chain mapping. The team used the assessments to identify, synthesize, and contextualize key learnings from Cohort 1, so that this learning could be easily digested and utilized to refine optimal adaptations to Cohort 2.

Resources: The Activity set aside both financial and human resources to ensure that CLA would be successful. This includes a Learning Team that works closely with the M&E team and the Technical Advisors leading each aspect of programming to carry out CLA that ensures management is maximally responsive to program results and context.

**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.**

By the end of the second refinement period, the team made more than ten significant adaptations to operational and design aspects of the Activity based on learning from the implementation and formative research activities described above. Below are four examples of the Activity's adaptive management approach in action.

1. During Cohort 1, the Activity assigned each Group Coach to be responsible for six groups (150 participants), while Individual Coaches worked with 25 participants each. While reviewing quarterly monitoring data and routine touch point data for primary participants, the M&E team discovered that nearly 30% of participants were not being reached regularly by coaches. Project Management team members worked with the coaches to plot out their daily activities and discovered that Group Coaches could only realistically reach four groups per day, four days a week. Individual Coaches were better able to reach their targeted participants, often reaching about seven each day. The Technical Steering Committee used the monitoring data, feedback from coaches, and GPS mapping of households to support the decision to reduce the Cohort 1 caseload of Group Coaches from six to four groups. The Committee also agreed that activities be delivered four days a week, with the fifth day of the week dedicated to weekly meetings in which Program Officers offered additional training and mentorship to coaches.

2. In the last six months of Cohort 1 implementation, using group activity monitoring data, the M&E team flagged that participant dropouts were increasing rapidly; these were the highest rates yet, at 35% of participants in the final months. The Activity leadership commissioned an additional assessment to understand the phenomenon better. The M&E team, working with coaches, followed up with all participant dropouts and found that the primary reason for dropout among refugees was relocation, while another significant reason was loss of interest in the Activity after graduation from extreme poverty. While the Activity completed the 30 months of Cohort 1 with a 22% dropout rate overall, the team elected to reduce Cohort 2 delivery to 24 months, the point by which most households had graduated in Cohort 1.

3. The gender assessment and Cohort 1 participant feedback revealed that although mobile phone use among participants increased over the course of Cohort 1, ownership and decision-making around mobile phone use was largely driven by male household members. Specifically, although mobile phones are typically shared within households, women reported being less likely to be the one responsible for deciding to own a mobile phone when compared to men. In addition, female participants were also more likely to report facing barriers to using mobile phones such as limited understanding of the devices and of technology vocabulary. Participants noted that access to mobile phones could improve women's ability to participate and manage household funds, given that Activity asset transfers are delivered via mobile money, and could enhance women's farming and business activities by facilitating access to information about extension services, crop and input prices, and weather. In Cohort 2, the Activity distributed mobile phones to all participant heads of household.

4. Finally, Coaches and Activity staff had observed evidence of trauma and psychological difficulties among participants, and IPA's baseline and endline data on key mental health indicators among Cohort 1 were aligned with these observations and with global and national statistics on the mental health challenges facing refugees. IPA found that 40 percent of participants (Host, 37.9% and Refugee, 42.5%) registered poor or fair mental health status at endline. Refugees had worse results than the host populations across all the mental health parameters. This discovery led the Activity to incorporate group interpersonal therapy into the support offerings for Cohort 2, and the Activity is conducting a randomized control trial for Cohort 2 to test the impact of mental health support on the success of graduation programs.

**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?**

Because the comprehensive adaptive management approach has been integrated into the Activity since it began, it is difficult to imagine where the Activity would be without it. However, it is clear after three months of implementation of Cohort 2 that having specific, actionable learning capture from Cohort 1 has contributed to smoother Activity start-up and a strong overall Cohort 2 design. The culture of learning within the Activity team has also been strengthened. Feedback loops and opportunities for reflection during Cohort 1, and the importance placed on capturing all staff feedback during the refinement period, illustrated the value of learning to staff, and reinforced the utility of staff participation in learning processes like informal reporting to Program Officers in addition to the routine monitoring data collection. The adaptations made during and after Cohort 1 reinforced the commitment by the Activity's Technical Steering Committee to collect information and use it to inform programming—not just at the middle or end of the project, but in real time. Cohort 1 served as a proof of concept for adaptive management within this Activity, and the team is focused on strengthening this learning culture further in Cohort 2.

**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?**

It is too early in Cohort 2 to be able to capture the results of all the adaptations made to the approach. Below are some of the anticipated effects of adaptations made to Cohort 2 based on related evidence from Cohort 1 and refinement. The Activity anticipates:

• improved participant household retention rates based on the shorter implementation period;
• stronger relationships between coaches and households due to the increased interaction time between each coach and their participants, resulting in maintained or improved graduation scores and completion rates;
• improved knowledge of and positive behaviors around key issue areas like public health guidance, on the basis of expanded coaching materials covering COVID-19 protections and other best practices;
• increased access by participants to needed psychosocial support, and improved mental health; and
• increased access to information and better control over household assets by women and youth heads of household, facilitated by mobile phones the Activity has distributed, resulting in better crop yield, increased household income, and improved participation by women.

## 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?

In addition to having an embedded culture of learning, a key enabling factor of the Activity's use of judgment and evidence to promote adaptation was support from USAID. USAID demonstrated flexibility and trust in the Activity team, allowing for adaptations in the midst of Cohort 1 based on emerging evidence and learning, despite the fact that the start-up refinement period had concluded with approved work plans. Activity technical and programmatic staff were also essential in this process, sharing observations and concerns as they arose, demonstrating resourcefulness in the face of implementation challenges, and taking an active role in shaping learning for Cohort 2, despite their heavy workloads and the fact that they are not members of the M&E or Learning teams.

One of the challenges in the Activity's adaptive management approach is that, despite broad participation in learning processes, feedback indicates the processes of analyzing emerging learning and making decisions to adapt could have been more inclusive of programmatic staff. Program implementation staff shared that they wanted to be involved in the discussions about how to adjust programming approaches, rather than consulted only for their input about the problems prompting the adaptation. Some staff also shared they did not always know what happened after they shared feedback or raised issues. Reflecting on the process of managing adaptively for Cohort 1 as a whole, the team agreed that there is room for improvement in the way the Activity is capturing the details of the adaptive management process, as well. Because not every insight or learning necessitates adaptation, tracking adaptations alone is insufficient, so the team is devising for Cohort 2 a learning and decision documentation process that will be accessible to all Activity staff, facilitating transparency.