2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Applying CLA in a Global Multi-sectoral Nutrition Project during a Pandemic

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Woman holding baby consults with expert on feeding while following precautions adapted for the COVID-19 pandemic in Jalal Abad, Kyrgyz Republic. Photo Credit: USAID Advancing Nutrition

Summary:

USAID Advancing Nutrition is USAID's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project. We strengthen the enabling environment for and support country-led scale-up of effective, integrated, and sustainable multi-sectoral USAID-funded nutrition activities (primarily supporting USAID mission buy-ins and USAID-funded bilaterals). We collaborate with diverse partners on multi-sectoral nutrition programming, including guidance development, research, capacity strengthening, and implementation. While collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) has been part of our approach since the project launch, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated CLA implementation, as effective remote work required adapted planning, implementation, and monitoring. We formed a COVID-19 task force and established feedback loops, allowing us to rapidly adjust to virtual work while maintaining strong collaboration through developing engaging meeting formats and scaling-up the use of online tools. We expanded our learning toolkit by developing processes and monitoring tools. Project-wide quarterly pause and reflect sessions strengthened collaboration and identified areas for improvement. We applied learning to inform adaptations to processes and systems, including work planning, gender integration, virtual and hybrid trainings, and dissemination efforts. Our CLA approach supported technical pivots in response to the pandemic; enabled reflection and changes to operational processes and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices; and facilitated cross-team collaboration, local engagement and ownership. Our global project has documented over 50 lessons and adaptations. This has contributed to achieving our deliverable targets, expanding our country work, and supporting over 90 organizations in low and middle income countries (LMICs).

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?

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project. As a multi-sectoral project comprising ten partner organizations, we work across sectors and systems—including health systems, early childhood development, food systems, social and behavior change and capacity strengthening—in development and humanitarian contexts. The project works with USAID colleagues from the Bureau for Global Health, Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, Bureau for Resilience and Food Security, and the Center for Children in Adversity, as well as Mission staff, implementing partners, and the global nutrition community through 12 countries and one regional buy-in. Further, we collaborate with a range of actors globally, from nongovernmental organizations working in low-income countries to national and subnational government officials and United Nations agencies.

The complex and flexible nature of this project has required creativity in collaboration, continual learning, and adaptability as we have grown and responded to USAID and global priorities, established new multi-sectoral work streams, and navigated how to maintain and adapt our work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also needed to improve cross-team collaboration to implement multi-sectoral activities, such as by building a team with combined social and behavior change (SBC) and micronutrient expertise to design strategies, or monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and health systems collaboration to design data collection methods for studies. The need to adapt was particularly relevant as our project added ten new country buy-ins from USAID Missions since the start of the pandemic. The scoping, work planning, hiring and onboarding, and start-up of these ten teams occurred remotely. We also have had to adapt how we support other USAID implementing partners to provide remote or hybrid support, such as for learning workshops (in Kenya), learning activities (in DRC), and capacity strengthening support (in Kenya and Burkina Faso).

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

In the first year, the project created a CLA plan to help address two key challenges:

1. Collaborating with a diverse set of partners and external stakeholders: Our project's eight technical teams have work plan activities funded by multiple bureaus and Missions and they support each other's activities and Mission buy-ins. To respond to USAID bureau and Mission priorities, teams need to collaborate effectively, with regularly scheduled time for reflection to determine needed adaptations.
2. Implementing a wide range of activities, reflecting the breadth of USAID's Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy and the needs of diverse stakeholders: Critical gaps in the nutrition evidence base and implementation challenges facing multi-sectoral nutrition require continual learning and translation of evidence into action in a manner accessible to all stakeholders.

In the project's second year, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted us to quickly reassess and adapt our programming in response to global uncertainty. We amended much of our work plan to provide virtual support with country buy-in scoping and start-up, technical assistance of activity implementation, baseline household surveys, and nutrition training and counseling. Because CLA provides a framework for learning and adaptive management, we built on our existing CLA plan to help us adaptively respond to the "new" way of working required by the pandemic.

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.

In our first project year, we developed a blueprint outlining the principles and processes for CLA. Key elements included pause and reflect sessions and processes for continual learning and improvement.

Pause and reflect sessions for learning and internal collaboration: Quarterly project-wide pause and reflect sessions are a core component of our CLA approach. We use them to sensitize the project about CLA, share CLA tools and resources (e.g., learning activity planning, CLA implementation tracker), reflect on and identify priorities to improve project and team functioning in the next quarter, build meaningful working relationships, and improve collaboration across the project's eight technical teams. Particularly in light of virtual work, it has provided a space to reflect, share, and build community. In each pause and reflect, we focus on a different relevant topic related to implementation (e.g., DEI, learning approaches, collaboration approaches), or technical approaches (e.g., women's diets).

Continual learning and improvement to adapt to COVID-19: Our project's response to the pandemic—using existing evidence and developing guidance and tools to support change—has accelerated and institutionalized adaptive management approaches that have helped staff persist as the pandemic has evolved. We formed a COVID-19 Task Force to assess needs, monitor emerging data and evidence, and provide guidance to support decision-making. Working groups monitored emerging information, synthesized best practices for virtual engagement, and developed guidance for remote data collection. We used online surveys to assess United States-based staff needs and experiences and routinely monitored the changing context in countries with project offices. The task force developed principles for remote work, offering opportunities for informal engagement and relationship building, and created a COVID-19 risk assessment tool to guide adaptation and planning in-person activities. We continue to update this risk assessment tool as the pandemic evolves. Platforms like project-wide pause and reflects and quarterly chief of party meetings help us understand and explore COVID-19 related experiences and needs.

Facilitating and documenting learning to improve programming and build the nutrition evidence base: CLA approaches and principles have helped us to improve technical learning and adaptation. We use a CLA implementation tracker and a qualitative indicator to document internal learning and adaptations made in response to emerging lessons or context changes. Learning case highlights capture lessons and insights in detail for application or adaptation in future activities. For example, the experiences and insights of staff on conducting a remote scoping visit for Ghana improved subsequent virtual visits to inform program development and work planning. For another, we interviewed team members with experience in conducting training workshops under "hybrid" conditions in which training participants were present in-person and through online/virtual platforms. We shared the learning with USAID to inform future hybrid workshops and design subsequent trainings. Project wide, we also developed three learning agendas to help build the nutrition evidence base and improve USAID's programming on women's diets, wasting programming across food and health systems, and capacity strengthening support to local nutrition organizations.

CLA for DEI and localization: CLA approaches also support the reflection and improvement in DEI and localization efforts. An internal learning activity supports implementation of our gender strategy, including staff surveys, gender analyses, and a pivot tracker. Spurred by widespread racial justice protests in the summer of 2020 and the growing conversation about decolonizing international development, we adapted our hiring practices and started working groups to develop principles and guidance to improve understanding of and respect for DEI in our communications, research practices, and implementation. A learning agenda on capacity strengthening for local nutrition organizations will help us learn and improve our capacity strengthening strategies, particularly with New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) grantees.

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?

CLA has helped us adapt and improve operations in several key ways:

- Organizational improvement: Surveys and pause and reflects have helped staff to share, reflect, and identify solutions to improve extended remote work and helped project leadership to better support the technical teams to succeed virtually. This has helped management to understand technical and operational staff concerns and challenges and be able to develop solutions (e.g., new guidance, change processes, adjust meeting structure). We conducted a learning activity to reflect on work planning. These activities helped us make midstream adaptations and improve the work planning process the following year, making collaborative planning for over 100 deliverables with four USAID bureaus more efficient and effective. This is particularly important given the rapid growth we experienced; we grew the project from 70 to 125 staff and added seven new country buy-ins last year.
- Streamline COVID-19 adaptations: CLA approaches allowed us to streamline, organize, and efficiently implement adaptations in rapidly changing environments. This included making the tools and guidance referenced under question 2, holding after-action reviews, and documenting learning to help teams more efficiently and effectively make changes.
- Successfully provide remote or hybrid support: While in-person meetings and travel are preferable for relationship building, it is not necessary all the time. We adapted various start-up activities to become remote and hybrid, such as M&E training (in Tanzania) and baseline surveys (in Kyrgyz Republic) with excellent results. This reduced costs and emissions, while achieving the intended results. We also have adapted support to partners to be remote or hybrid, such as learning workshops (in Kenya), activities (in the Democratic Republic of Congo), and capacity strengthening support (in Kenya and Burkina Faso). These adaptations allow us to provide technical assistance while engaging local actors as the primary providers and owners of the work. Between October 1, 2021 and September 30, 2022, we trained 3,056 people, supported 191 organizations, and held 51 evidence-sharing events.

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?

CLA has helped support effective, timely, and robust implementation of a large number and scope of activities amidst significant challenges and change:
- While meeting deliverable targets for our core-funded work, we started-up new country buy-ins and expanded country work. We trained over 1,300 individuals on nutrition related topics and supported over 90 organizations in LMICs in the planning, assessment, or design of nutrition programs or strategies.
- Twenty-one activities adapted during the first year of the pandemic. Last year, we had 33 entries in our CLA implementation tracker, including 15 pause and reflects (project-wide and team- or activity-specific), and 8 internal learning activities.
- The COVID-19 Task Force developed a COVID-19 risk assessment tool so our country offices have been able to ensure events engaging with diverse stakeholders remain as low risk as possible.
- The Capacity Strengthening and Knowledge Management teams synthesized lessons learned and shared best practices to help virtual and hybrid events run smoothly and keep participants engaged.
- In the Kyrgyz Republic, the team completed baseline and midline surveys through phone surveys. They recruited and trained more than 1,000 community activists online on exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding, adapting the approach as they expanded to different geographies. The majority of caregivers contacted through phone spot checks answered questions about the messages accurately.
- A cross-team working group shares and synthesizes learning across over 20 activities on how to improve women's diets through nutrition programming. This collaborative approach helps inform the design and implementation of multi-sectoral programs and identify evidence gaps that we hope will influence future research and investment priorities of USAID and other key stakeholders.
- Pilots and evaluations improve tools and guidance documents that we create. For example, the SBC team tested COVID-19 breastfeeding counseling cards and a behavior prioritization tool before finalizing and disseminating them.

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?

There have been several enablers to our CLA implementation. The existence of a CLA Plan prior to the pandemic provided a strong foundation, including USAID support, which allowed us to expand and deepen our approach. The project has a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team member responsible for facilitating CLA, and project leadership has championed CLA throughout.

At the same time, we have faced several constraints. The CLA approach, including terminology and processes, were new to many staff. The project more than doubled its staff and tripled its country buy-ins during the pandemic, which has required continual sensitization and skill building. To address this, we started including CLA in country MEL orientations and created a CLA-focused Slack channel to share tips and reminders. From a technical perspective, we have found it difficult to identify and prioritize learning and adaptations that cut across the project's diverse multi-sectoral portfolio with dozens of independent activities. Due to the large number of activities United States-based staff support, they do not always have sufficient time and bandwidth to engage in CLA, particularly for one-year activities. It has been particularly challenging to consistently incorporate CLA into our country programs. These have expanded rapidly, have distinct teams and work plans, and face many competing priorities. Our adaptations to mitigate these constraints could be useful for future projects—integrating CLA into staff orientation, incorporating CLA considerations into work planning processes and templates (prioritizing multi-year activities), and developing a consistent process to facilitate action planning during the design/start-up phase.