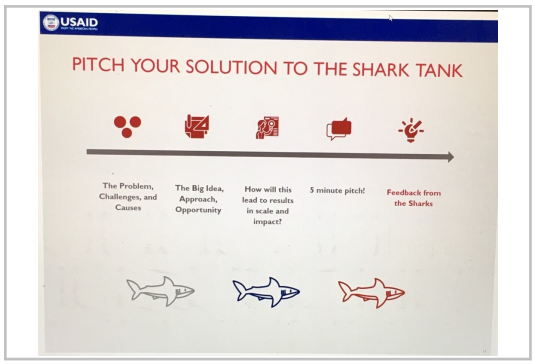
2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Building a Women's Empowerment Strategy and Coalition through Co-Creation in Egypt



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Organization: USAID/Egypt (Office of Democracy and Governance)

Summary:

USAID/Egypt's ODG and OAA offices designed and facilitated a co-creation process in May/June 2021 in order to develop a more effective approach to women's empowerment in Egypt. The Mission identified a need to collaborate more deeply with a broader array of national and international stakeholders to fill gaps in internal knowledge, strengthen the quality of applications for funding and create a culture of learning and openly sharing solutions. While the co-creation workshop lasted for four days, the process initiated a much longer period of forming coalitions of diverse stakeholders vested in the same goal.

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?

Only 23% of Egyptian women are in the workforce in a country of 100 million people. Determining how to design an activity that is improving women's empowerment while scaling lessons learned to shape government policy creates a very challenging environment for USAID and other donors to operate in. USAID needed to find solutions based on collaboration with stakeholders. However, these conversations would be most productive if held in an open-minded, collaborative and active listening environment and that is difficult online. How can USAID/Egypt design a co-creation online and set the stage for a creative and honest conversation on such a difficult topic?

Building trust and gaining traction on complex and sensitive topics including women's rights, rule of law, human rights and others presents a challenging and highly politicized operating environment in Egypt. Access to unbiased and current information is a major challenge and does not allow the Mission to regularly rely on literature to make informed decisions.

The Mission struggled to engage grassroots organizations who did not meet the requirements to receive USAID funding. The ODG team acknowledged a gap in their own internal knowledge and understanding of the needs and potential solutions and they identified a need for broader input and learning. When brought together by the Mission, IPs and other development organizations do not share their expertise openly, as there is little incentive to share knowledge and creative ideas. Furthermore, the previous manner in which USAID/Egypt collaborated with the Government of Egypt (GOE) brought these stakeholders into the design process too late: they did not have a true platform to drive the agenda and own the way forward.

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 ODG team recognized that they didn't have sufficient information to design an effective national-level development strategy. For example, they could not answer several key questions, such as How can we address ODG's three IRs in one activity? How do we achieve meaningful scale in a country as big as Egypt?" "How can we create a holistic approach at the governorate level? ” ODG and OAA decided to try a CLA practice called co-creation for several purposes. First, USAID could validate what they thought they knew. Second, a co-creation approach had the power to leverage Democracy & Governance experts to generate thought around the knowledge gaps ODG identified. ODG wanted organizations to form coalitions to improve the quality of the proposals received by the Mission. They recognized that collaboration between the partners would improve the applications (concept notes and proposals), implementation and thus impact.
The ODG team is the smallest technical office in the USAID/Egypt Mission and their self-awareness, commitment to " getting it right ” and humility laid the foundation for co-creation to build a stronger strategy and trust among a community of thought leaders, policy makers, development professionals and service providers.

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 May and June 2021, the ODG and OAA teams facilitated a co-creation process with a community of D&G stakeholders including GOE, civil society, USAID, IPs and grassroots organizations. The planning team knew they had to remove some initial assumptions to set the stage for participants to collaborate openly and meaningfully. IPs in particular are often guarded and do not readily share their ideas with potential competitors. Many stakeholders in Egypt understood co-creation to refer to co-creating a new project design with an expectation of funding to implement the project. As ODG intended for this process to be the precursor to a new design (more information and ideas were needed before a project could be conceptualized), ODG communicated repeatedly about the need for and purpose of this particular co-creation and clarified that USAID wanted to listen and not evaluate or judge IPs and local organizations for their ideas.

As this process occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the co-creation was designed to use an online platform. Participation was limited to two members from each invited organization and breakout rooms were created to prompt collaboration through conversations aimed to trigger information and experience sharing from all participants in a non-threatening, small group environment.

Two decisions were critical for the success of the event. All participants were invited to a pre-event where the tone was set, the participants got to know each other better as well as hear USAIDs intentions and expectations. The pre-event agenda included sound and tech check, a speed-dating session on zoom when participants met in small groups of three to chat for five minutes before next chat with new people randomly selected. The intention was to break the ice, set the stage for partnerships, laugh together and demonstrate the informal tone needed for sharing ideas in a bilingual setting with very unequal opportunities to win a big USAID award. The speed-dating was followed by a very intentional and thoughtful session with the partners that had never worked with USAID about “How to do Business with USAID.” All participants left the pre-event knowing that USAID wanted the participants to partner with each other and build consortia, local expertise will be valued, and USAID expects the applications to provide solutions to scale, market-based approaches and long-term impact.

The second key decision that was critical for the success of the event was the choice of the methodology. The planning team called it the “shark-tank methodology” after the popular American television show. The workshop was organized by objective so the first day the participants talked about how to achieve scale and impact for women’s inclusion in the workforce. Two government representatives kicked off the day by explaining the GOE’s strategies throughout the country. The participants were then sent to breakout rooms to design an approach or a solution to a few key questions that had been sent to participants in advance. Each group had representatives from applicants, USAID and GOE. They had 70 minutes to build their approach and prepare a pitch. It was short of time, but just enough to allow for ideas to be shared, thoughts to be voiced and some debating that gave new perspectives to old assumptions.
After a ten-minute break, it was time for the “shark tank”. Each approach only had 15-20 minutes to be pitched and receive feedback from USAID, GOE representatives and the rest of the participants. The purpose was to bring out feedback on what works and what might not work that is specific but still general enough for the participants to think about when they develop their proposals. The workshop ended with a quick open-ended survey where all participants provided the answers to the key questions discussed in the groups to further collect and express the collective knowledge and ideas of the group for future use. In total, the workshop was a 3.5 hour long interactive exercise lasting four days that maximized sharing of ideas, partnership formations and information from USAID and Government counterparts.
The methodology allowed the participants to -under time constraints – openly share, compromise and collaborate around plausible solutions while getting to know each other and each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The participants could also discuss needs and limitations with local stakeholders and assess their willingness for partnerships. Finally, the shark tank methodology allowed the applicants to hear USAID stakeholders talk about their pain points and response to solutions the participants brought to the table. The interactive approach generated new knowledge while forming networks and awareness needed for improving the design and the bids.

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?

Adopting an inclusive approach engendered a new appreciation for co-creation and collaboration throughout USAID/Egypt and amongst many of the Mission ' s primary stakeholders. Other USAID offices and teams have considered following a similar method in cases where internal knowledge is lacking and USAID recognizes a need for a stronger coalition of experts. The " buzz " from the ODG co-creation experience generated momentum and there is a very high new expectation from Mission leadership that projects will be designed, implemented and adapted in an equally collaborative manner. This expectation requires Mission staff to be humble and admit when they do not know something – not an easy feat for development professionals with decades of experience.
Due to the remote posture of the USAID/Egypt Mission for the past 2+ years, it is difficult to capture the full impact of this experience at an organizational level; however, USAID has positioned itself as a collaborative and open-minded partner that wants to make a sustainable impact in Egypt. And they want to do that together with the local stakeholders. The buy-in and the interest of the GOE will have ripple effects beyond the activity. CLA is at its best when USAID is brave, intentional and innovative.

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 co-creation process had a clear role to ensure a collaborative and innovative approach to tackling complex and sensative development priorities and to help applicants develop the best possible applications. Collaborating with the right stakeholders has allowed the Mission to build trust between government, civil society and USAID. This collaboration leads to an even greater collaboration going forward: this event was not a single activity, but a process that will culminate in five years - from co-creation to project design to implementation of a major activity. USAID set the tone for how to engage external stakeholders and the culture of problem-solving and learning together.

The purpose of the activity was to allow USAID to be more deliberate in involving others in problem identification and ensures that the activity will be better informed by the local context with increased local ownership, but several unexpected outcomes were observed. By involving GOE stakeholders from such an early stage in the process, they were felt included and more readily bought-in to the thinking behind and subsequent action once a new activity was designed and awarded. In working together with the GOE on the co-creation process, identifying problems, solutions, and ensure local ownership, USAID built a stronger partnership with the GOE counterparts and improved the bilateral dialogue. Broad engagement also benefitted the Mission's development impact by reaching grass root level local organizations who USAID previously did not have a channel of communitcation with. Their experience and innovative strategies were brought to light and they were seen as viable partners to address complex issues. Many joined consortiums that received subsequent USAID awards. An unexpected outcome of the co-creation event was that it had the effect of fast-tracking implementation and accelerating action by key stakeholders. The National Council for Women walked away from the workshop with so much enthusiasm and energy that they immediately began to coordinate similar design workshops and lead activities in a more proactive and collaborative manner.

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?

The Egyptian culture, which is centered on community and talking through ideas, contributed to an enabling environment for the co-creation process to take root. Co-creation places a high value on stakeholder engagement and reaching a consensus, and many local stakeholders expressed their satisfaction in being included and given a tangible avenue to learn and form new partnerships. Through the exchange participants were able to hear which of their ideas were landing or not landing based on USAID rules and regulations, resources constraints and other obstacles, which was ultimately helpful in managing expectations once a new project was designed. In addition, the ODG team demonstrated a great deal of humility, self-awareness and willingness to take risks by experimenting with the co-creation approach for this purpose. That openness and humility expressed itself in the form of “ please work with and help me ” which partners appreciated and were motivated by to share their best ideas more openly. A virtual format presented obstacles to meaningful relationship and trust building. With virtual platforms participation is often wide (individuals can join from anywhere), but lacking in depth. By limiting participating to two members of each organization and designing prescriptive breakout room sessions ODG was able to observe high quality dialogue and learning across participants located around the world.