2022 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

It's So "Refreshing": Using Adaptive Management Tools and a Focus on Enabling Conditions to Support a Complex USAID

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Organization: Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning, and Training (KDLT) activity,

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Summary:

The Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning, and Training (KDLT) activity partnered with the Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS) Program Office over nearly a year to help design and implement the process to "refresh" the Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS-R). The GFSS is a complex, whole-of-government effort guiding $2 billion per year of Feed the Future assistance to promote global food security, resilience, and nutrition. Several dimensions of the refresh process - a tight timeline, wide breadth of stakeholders and equities, and high-profile nature of the effort - demanded that KDLT and the Program Office adopt CLA approaches to maximize efficiency and develop a transparent consultative process. The KDLT team leveraged deep experience with multi-stakeholder process consultation, designing and leading online events, facilitating pause and reflect activities, developing effective knowledge management strategies, and conducting qualitative data analysis to drive decision making to support the Program Office and RFS. The GFSS-R process concluded on time and is now seen by many within the Agency as an example of how to effectively implement consultative processes to revise large-scale policies and strategies.

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 Feed the Future Knowledge, Data, Learning, and Training (KDLT) activity launched in 2019 to support the former Bureau for Food Security (BFS), which later was reorganized into the Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS). KDLT is designed to support RFS in becoming a premier learning organization that successfully captures, analyzes, and shares go od practices and data, and uses this knowledge to learn and adapt, helping RFS to achieve its mission of improved nutrition, strengthened resilience, and reduced poverty in countries supported through the U.S. Government's (USG) Feed the Future initiative.

In late 2020, the RFS Program Office (PO) sought support from KDLT to help design and implement the process to "refresh" the Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS-R), a complex, whole-of-government effort guiding $2 billion per year of Feed the Future assistance to promote global food security, resilience, and nutrition. The existing five-year strategy was set to expire at the end of September 2021. As the lead Feed the Future agency, USAID was well-positioned to lead the 12 USG Feed the Future agencies through the GFSS-R process, based on ten years of implementation and amid the changing global context of the COVID-19 pandemic, regional and global conflict, climate change, and challenges to equity and inclusion.

Several dimensions of the situation demanded that KDLT and PO adapt CLA approaches to ensure the success of the refresh process. The key challenges included the tight timeline, wide breadth of stakeholders and equities, and high-profile nature of the effort.

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

CLA approaches are core to how KDLT functions as a support mechanism. To support the refresh process, the KDLT team leveraged a comprehensive understanding of RFS activities and processes, along with deep experience with multi-stakeholder process consultation, designing and leading online events, facilitating pause and reflect activities, developing effective knowledge management strategies, and conducting qualitative data analysis to drive decision making.

CLA tools were going to be crucial to achieve the GFSS-R goal. To maximize efficiency and communication, the core KDLT/PO planning team was established with a "one team" mindset. The tight timeline of less than a year to revamp the strategy demanded that the team define clear roles and decision-making authorities, engage in watertight knowledge management (KM), and emphasize healthy working relationships. The team needed to engage in rapid prototyping, learning, and adaptation to identify and mitigate errors and build from what worked. We knew, for example, that the large-scale consultations conducted in the spring of 2021 would need to be repeated later that year. That made it even more important to develop replicable methods that would yield the needed results. The breadth of involved stakeholders called for a consultative approach that would meaningfully engage all parties and surface clear, actionable inputs that could be incorporated into the GFSS-R. Finally, the KDLT/PO team needed to remain flexible to adjust to emergent priorities - that required honesty and trust, which we practiced in each interaction.

The GFSS-R process concluded on time and is now seen by many within the Agency as an example of how to effectively implement consultative processes to revise large-scale policies and strategies.

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.

The initial phase of the GFSS-R utilized CLA-informed start-up processes. KDLT began by conducting scoping conversations with the PO to clarify the level of support needed, required deliverables, and proposed timelines built on an intentionally phased approach. The information was captured in a shared Scope of Work (SOW) document and Gantt chart. These living documents were iteratively updated as the process evolved. For instance, we started with several unknowns about the first phase of consultations with stakeholders, including the timeline, number of participants, and outputs. The KDLT/PO team managed adaptively with respect to resourcing and deadlines and revised the SOW over time. KDLT and the PO also immediately each identified a lead Point of Contact (POC); these two POCs were in constant contact throughout the GFSS-R process and were empowered to make day-to-day decisions to keep the work moving forward. Flexible foundational documents, an easy-to-use, intuitive document filing system, and clear roles laid the groundwork for a successful joint effort.

KDLT began working closely with the RFS PO in January 2021 to design and implement a consultation process to solicit feedback on suggested revisions to the strategy from nearly 500 internal and external stakeholders. KDLT and the PO designed a pilot consultation - a two-hour, participatory, online session with one USAID region - and immediately held an after-action review (AAR) to identify what worked and what should be adapted for the next consultation scheduled for later that week. The AAR resulted in important adjustments; the updated format — including preparation sessions for consultation facilitators and notetakers — was deemed so effective in generating the feedback needed that it was repeated in subsequent consultations with USAID/Washington pillar and regional bureaus, field-based Feed the Future staff (USAID and interagency), the private sector, and partner organizations.

To demonstrate a commitment to collaboration and evidence-based decision making, the KDLT/PO team developed transparent methodologies to collect and analyze inputs from stakeholders. In the spring of 2021, KDLT processed the robust discussion notes from the initial consultations using the qualitative analysis platform Dedoose. This platform allowed KDLT to surface themes — vetted with technical subject matter experts to ensure feedback was appropriately categorized — that would help inform the first round of revisions to the strategy. After RFS released the initial revised strategy to stakeholders for comment in July 2021, the KDLT team took the lead in categorizing and organizing recommendations, questions and concerns elicited from the nearly 1,100 comments received. This data, and information collected in solution-focused dialogues throughout the process, helped shape the final version of the strategy.

The KDLT/PO team utilized reflection questions and AARs throughout the GFSS-R process. KDLT objectively asked critical questions that PO staff said they didn’t always ask themselves about deadlines, accountability, and measures of success. Weekly touchpoints and dedicated pause and reflect discussions led to more intentional learning and adaptive management, allowing the team to consistently improve and refine the process. For instance, as the PO looked ahead to the country selection process, KDLT recommended holding a Before Action Review (BAR) with a key staff member who had previously participated in country selection for the expiring strategy. This BAR discussion surfaced several learnings that were incorporated into the GFSS-R country selection process.

KDLT and the PO established a shared, user-friendly GFSS-R Google drive that all involved staff were asked to use, without exception. This centralized KM structure proved invaluable as the number and scope of related materials expanded over time. It saved critical time and effort during an already intense, timebound effort. Staff have continued to use the drive (and have replicated the structure for other efforts) over the past 15 months and mine it for templates, slide decks, email language, trackers, and other resources. These materials have been repurposed and integrated into follow-on worksteams, saving resources and reinforcing tested practices.

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?

The prior GFSS process saw less intentional record-keeping, resulting in fewer resources to build on for the GFSS-R process. Commitment to the centralized KM structure, and rigorous documentation and file organization, allowed RFS to more effectively organize and capture the overall GFSS-R process. The success of the GFSS-R effort established a tried-and-true model, including a set of good practices and lessons learned, that can be used to inform similar activities in the future.

For example, the GFSS-R Secretariat, which was formed in late 2021 to organize GFSS-R implementation workstreams, initially had independent file structures to house their materials. KDLT reinforced the need for centralized KM and encouraged the RFS offices working separately on each workstream to combine their separate working folders into one shared drive. The new structure has helped staff across workstreams more easily share, reference, and leverage relevant materials. KDLT helped to reimagine the weekly Secretariat meetings to improve coordination and clarify communication across workstreams. Building on best practices from the GFSS-R, KDLT worked with Secretariat leadership to iterate on the meeting agenda and seek feedback from participants on what would make the meeting most efficient and effective. The KDLT team and Secretariat leadership engaged in rapid prototyping to test agenda elements and refined them over the course of two meetings to land on a streamlined structure that minimized meeting length and emphasized focused dialogue to maximize coordination and joint decision making.

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?

Utilizing CLA approaches in the GFSS-R process was essential to the update of the strategy. The clear SOW and iterative planning approach between KDLT and the PO ensured that the team could remain nimble to respond to changes in priorities, rather than be stuck with a rigid set of deliverables. Establishing broader categories of support, and regularly revisiting them, allowed KDLT to scale its support as needed. KDLT's ability to capture consultation input in a clear manner helped USAID and the broader interagency group to address almost all significant suggestions and concerns that emerged. This demonstrated inclusivity and built goodwill across all stakeholders.

The KDLT/PO team developed highly organized meeting agendas to document discussions, decisions and next steps, allowing the process to efficiently move forward. Some consultative efforts lack clear processes for making and documenting decisions, leading to the relitigation of previous decisions. This can waste time and dampen engagement. In contrast, the clear documentation and open communication throughout the GFSS-R process allowed the PO team, and those leading follow-on work, to provide the rationale behind key decisions.

Regular, clear communication bolstered internal collaboration on deliverables to revise the strategy. The first drafting process, begun after the initial consultations, started with a kickoff meeting and continued with weekly check-ins with the drafting working groups. This communication made it possible to rapidly address emergent challenges without compromising on deadlines.

Other staff within RFS and across USAID involved in strategy and policy revision processes have contacted the RFS PO to learn more about best practices gleaned from the GFSS-R. Key topics have included how to lead large-scale consultations, coordinate drafting working groups, design breakout groups for consultations, support breakout room facilitators, and effectively capture notes. One USAID Operating Unit has adopted the GFSS-R's streamlined facilitation materials to support AAR processes.

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 challenges that inhibited our CLA approach included short timelines, uncertainty around the process, and — given that 12 U.S. departments and agencies were involved — a sensitive political context. These challenges often elevated stress levels and complicated already full workloads for those contributing to the GFSS-R. While agility is important, it is also draining to have to constantly shift. Managing inputs from across branches of the USG demanded flexibility and political savvy, along with offline conversations to resolve differences. Some decisions did not enjoy unanimous approval, leaving some dissatisfied with aspects of the finished strategy.

Among the most important factors enabling our CLA approach were empowering team members with decision-making authority and developing a positive working culture. Unclear decision making authority can undermine any collaborative process. The PO delegated authority to allow certain everyday decisions on issues such as scheduling and file organization to be made without layers of approval. Each person on the KDLT/PO team had a clear role, which clarified who to go to for what information or support.

The KDLT/PO team brought its democratic approach to its interactions with other USAID and interagency partners. All voices were heard, which helped people worry less about their status, organization or hiring mechanism and more freely raise issues. Understanding that the GFSS-R was a marathon, not a sprint, made it that much more important to invest in positive relationships and networks. After the completion of the new strategy, those who were deeply involved in driving the process met one evening in person. Two group members created funny certificates of appreciation for everyone, a gesture that spoke volumes about the value placed on each person ' s contribution. It would have been easy for this intense process to have germinated a toxic culture, but instead, the group nurtured a positive enabling environment for a lasting impact.