Community Cadre providing training to women self help group members on nutrition sensitive agriculture_USAID Advancing Nutrition_Photo Credit-Mr. Srikanth Kolari Sridhar for John Snow India Private Limited

Case Title:

Using CLA to create a quality, sustainable model for nutrition-sensitive agriculture trainings for female producers in rural Northeast India

Name:

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USAID Advancing Nutrition

Summary:

SUMMARY SECTION:

The USAID Advancing Nutrition project in India works with Women Self Help Group (WSHG) members to promote increased agricultural productivity for enhanced incomes and dietary diversity. The project implements nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA) trainings through its local implementing partner (IP) who provides trainings to community cadres of Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) who are responsible for training and counselling the WSHG members. In addition to promoting the adoption of nutrition-sensitive behaviors, a key objective of the NSA activity is to develop a scalable model that can be recommended and replicated by the government across the state.

After four months of implementation of the NSA trainings, the project implemented a series of pause and reflect and CLA activities to inform adaptive management including a Google survey, an in-person pause and reflect event, and remote meetings to reflect on the successes, challenges, and opportunities. These CLA activities helped prioritize a series of actions including reducing the training target to focus more on quality rather than reach/numbers, revise the training module to reduce training duration and simplify the content, completing community sensitization activities before the NSA trainings, as well as removing a USAID indicator that was too cumbersome to collect.

By embracing a CLA approach, the project gathered perspectives from local partners, identified several challenges affecting quality implementation, and took corrective action to build a training model that could be recommended to the Government of Assam. The process also helped to recognise the necessity of integrating adaptation mechanisms into the work plan and implementing them before expanded implementation.

1. **WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) or opportunities prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?**

The USAID Advancing Nutrition project in India aims to promote dietary diversity and create opportunities for increasing income for approximately 35,000 women from WSHGs in three districts in Assam, India through the implementation of nutrition-sensitive activities. The project implements NSA trainings that aim to increase productivity and consumption of safe, nutritious foods and increase incomes of socioeconomic disadvantaged households. In order to build local capacity and ownership, the project implements these activities through Seven Sisters Development Assistance (SeSTA), a non-government organization in Assam and the project's local IP.

SeSTA conducts NSA training of trainers for community cadres, the last-mile service providers from ASRLM, who are responsible for providing training and counselling to WSHGs on agriculture. After four months of implementation, the USAID Advancing Nutrition team in India recognized the need for a pause and reflect session with SeSTA, as they had heard of challenges from the SeSTA team that deserved attention before implementing the next round of training. Additionally, SeSTA was new to NSA and the promoted training approach, therefore, the project team wanted to identify how they could further support SeSTA to be successful and understand what challenges they were facing.

Therefore, after four months of implementation, the project undertook several CLA activities, most notably a pause and reflect to assess progress, identify challenges, and adapt activities. Following the pause and reflect, the project, with SeSTA, identified several actions that needed to be taken to improve the quality of implementation and enable the project to have a model ready for handover to the Government of Assam. Specifically, the project dropped several activities that would take away from the time required for ensuring quality of the NSA training and added activities to improve the quality. (e.g., revising the NSA training manual and material, refresher training for community cadres).

2. What two CLA Sub-Components are most clearly reflected in your case?

Please Select a Sub-Component:

Pause and Reflect

Please Select a Sub-Component:

Adaptive Management

3. HOW: What steps did you take to apply CLA approaches to address the challenge or opportunity described above?

The project implemented CLA activities to understand the successes and challenges of the NSA training with our local implementer, SeSTA. We used the conclusions from the pause and reflect to practice adaptive management.

During quarterly CLA action-planning, the MEL Specialist from the India project identified the opportunity to implement a pause and reflect activity with SeSTA. From February-March, the MEL Specialist worked with the CLA and technical backstopping team of USAID Advancing Nutrition to discuss approaches for implementing pause and reflects, drawing from USAID's CLA Toolkit. The team decided to take a phased approach, first implementing a Google survey, followed by a series of in-person and remote meetings, to gather insights from SeSTA. The project opted for an initial Google survey as SeSTA's field staff, who have first-hand knowledge of the trainings, but are dispersed across Assam state. The initial Google survey probed for reflection on successes, challenges, and opportunities for improving the quality of the NSA training. The online Google survey was completed by 15 of SeSTA's staff. The findings from the google survey included:

- Considering the duration of implementation, the targets for number of trainings and program participant reach were too high, resulting in pressure on the IP and community cadres to achieve targets at the expense of quality.
- There was too much to accomplish during the three-hour trainings and the community cadres were overburdened trying to singlehandedly conduct the trainings, collect survey data, and perform crowd control duties. Specifically, the surveys took one-third of the total training time to complete, which decreased time for the technical training components. Specifically, there was difficulty completing the economic survey, which contributed to the Feed the Future indicator- 'Number of female participants in US government programs designed to increase access to productive economic resources.'
- The training duration was deemed too long and the content needed to be simplified to make it easier for the community cadres to deliver. Additionally, the community cadres could use additional capacity strengthening to improve their training delivery.
- There was not sufficient community sensitization to introduce the trainings to the WSHG members, their spouses, and other influencers in the community. This resulted in reluctance from husbands to have their spouses participate, as well as low interest to attend and meaningfully participate in the trainings by the WSHG members.

Following the Google survey, the project met internally to discuss the results and plan for the in-person pause and reflect. This step supported the team to prioritize which challenges were most important to address during the in-person pause and reflect with SeSTA, resulting in an agenda focused on identifying adaptations.

The three hour in-person event included five USAID Advancing Nutrition staff and 13 SeSTA staff. During the pause and reflect, the team recapped the challenges and successes from the Google survey. In small groups, participants prioritized the challenges and brainstormed potential adaptations to improve program effectiveness. Facilitators encouraged them to think outside of the box and come up with drastic changes. Prioritized solutions included: redesigning the training module, investing more time in sensitizing the community about the training, decreasing the program participant initial target to allow SeSTA to focus on the quality of the trainings, and decreasing the monitoring survey requirements to increase time for training.

Following the in-person pause and reflect, USAID Advancing Nutrition scheduled two follow-up meetings to agree on specific changes to SeSTA's detailed implementation plan and amend their approved budget and scope of work. Additionally, the USAID Advancing Nutrition Project Director discussed the challenges with the USAID/India and submitted a request to remove the aforementioned economic indicator, which USAID approved.

4. RESULTS: Choose one of the following questions to answer.

A. DEVELOPMENT RESULTS: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide?

Following the pause and reflect, the project made several adaptations to enhance the quality of the training program. Improving the feasibility and effectiveness of the training is critical for developing a scalable training model for the state. Considering the adaptations were agreed upon in May, we present here the processes and technical plans the project has put in place to support improved implementation.

- The project dropped the Feed the Future indicator, as sufficient data had already been collected to achieve a representative sample for the expected indicator target and the results of the survey were not resulting in greater learning. This will relieve the time burden on the cadres, allowing them to dedicate approximately 17% more time on the technical training components.
- In order to focus more on the quality of the trainings, the project reduced the program participant initial target from 50,000 to 35,000 and revised the training and community outreach plan. The target reduction was aimed to alleviate the pressure from project staff, enabling them to focus more on the quality of the trainings.
- To address the challenge that program participants are unclear about the purpose and relevance of the trainings, the project developed a sensitization plan. The sensitization plan articulates the steps that SeSTA and the community cadres can take to better introduce, garner interest in the activity, and receive buy-in from women's husbands for the women to participate.
- The project is refining the training modules to decrease the overall content and to better highlight the key messages for program participants to take away from each session.
- To support SeSTA in providing mentoring support to the community cadres, the project developed a "capacity strengthening for improved training" checklist that SeSTA can use to identify which capacities could be strengthened.

5. **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 enabling conditions that supported the project included the project culture, processes, and mission support. First, the project team has fostered an open and collaborative work environment, which provides team members with a safe space to question the status quo. For example, the USAID Advancing Nutrition India Project Director opened the in-person pause and reflect noting the importance of openness and our shared goal to improve the project, and led by example by highlighting where he thought the project was having challenges. Further, the India project team identified the opportunity for the pause and reflect as part of a routine, facilitated quarterly CLA action planning process done by country programs on USAID Advancing Nutrition. The India MEL Specialist had received internal training on pause and reflects and was able to access institutional knowledge and support from the USAID Advancing Nutrition CLA backstopping team. The backstopping team supported the in-country team in the design of the google survey, planning for the in-person workshop, and supporting programmatic adaptations. Lastly, the activity manager from USAID has continuously stressed quality implementation and encouraged adaptation. His support enabled the project to be more adaptive and empowered the project team to make bolder decisions.

We found that time constraints were an obstacle in implementing quality CLA practices given the other demands on the project team and SeSTA. Without the open culture and shared ownership for improving technical implementation, as well as follow-up from the backstopping team, CLA processes may have been less successful. To other projects, we would recommend building adaptation mechanisms into the work plan and implementing them after the first round of implementation or before scaling up. During the adaptation phase, the project recognized that it should have piloted the training model in a controlled setting and documented the observations before scaling it up.