Measuring the Contribution of CLA to Organizational & Development Outcomes: What have we learned?

REFLECTIONS FROM COUNTERPART

What did we set out to do?

USAID funded five partner organizations to examine the question: does a systematic, intentional and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes? And if so, how and under what conditions? Each partner used their $100,000 grant to design and implement a study in response to these questions over 20 months ending in April 2018. Given the documented challenges associated with measuring the contribution of CLA to organizational or development outcomes, each grant was an investment in piloting and learning from measurement approaches, creating a safe space for trial, error, and ultimately improving current and future attempts at similar research.

This document describes the key findings from one learning network member, Counterpart. Counterpart's study was designed to measure the application of knowledge in the Participatory Responsive Governance – Principal Activity (PRG-PA), a USAID-funded activity implemented by Counterpart International. PRG-PA works in four regions in Niger with a goal to improve collective responsiveness (government and non-government) to priority public needs in order to increase citizen confidence in the state. As part of this study, Counterpart measured how facilitators of the staff and community-government dialogues used learning from CLA activities and how those activities affected meeting participation quality. Specifically, Counterpart analyzed if a facilitator's increased use of knowledge from CLA activities results in greater feelings of empowerment and engagement from participants in the government-community dialogues.

What did the research reveal?

1. **Evidence from the study supports the notion of strategic collaboration.** PRG-PA's implementation of community-level stakeholder dialogues is tied to their grant-making process. Collaboration in the grant process (i.e., five people involved at each stage), this wasted resources, delayed implementation, and caused staff frustrations. Yet the AA-KR reflection activities showed that staff felt positively about collaboration once they started making changes to their roles and responsibilities in the process and had more experience with the grant mechanism. As such, staff viewed collaboration as both a barrier (at first) and an enabler (once they gained more experience) depending on whether it was strategic or not.
2. **There was no significant relationship between the types of knowledge sources facilitators used and the quality of participation in their dialogues.** (Types of knowledge sources included: general knowledge, external sources, directions from a colleague/manager, prior experience, and knowledge from CLA activities). We did not find a significant relationship between the *type of knowledge* used and effects on *participation quality outcomes* of

community multi-stakeholder dialogues, nor did we see a significant relationship between the types of knowledge used by facilitators *over time*. But because of the small sample size (due to changes in implementation), further research is needed to validate these findings. However, the data showed a significant relationship between *use* of a knowledge source and how facilitators *value* it (consistent with research on credibility of sources). For example, facilitators were more likely to use directions from a valued colleague/manager over their own prior experience.

3. **Organizational culture is an enabling condition for whether the organization can effectively take on a CLA approach.** Analysis showed program staff viewed an individual leader as less influential when team culture allowed for staff to determine and adapt processes. Interviews with staff and AA-KR notes revealed that staff viewed the Chief of Party as only one influence among many, and pointed to team culture (openness to discuss and make changes) and staffs' perception of their roles, responsibilities, and relationships as the main influencer on the grant-making process. For example, staff committed to and used the AA+KR activity even through changes in leadership.
4. **Externalities in the political context affect uptake and measurement of CLA.** Immovable external factors, such as the Nigerien government indefinitely postponing elections, shift program implementation plans and timelines. Given our CLA research approach was closely tied to a sequential or process-driven activity, we had to adapt our research in response to changes in the context.

What methods and tools were used?

The study focused on the PRG-PA grants cycle, on how the project team and grantees acquired and applied knowledge, and on how this knowledge application affected project outcomes.

As the PRG-PA project changed, the study design also changed from a single-focus study on the application of learning by facilitators to also include a study of the PRG-PA staff's application of learning in the grants process. For this concurrent triangulation we used the quantitative and qualitative data to cross-validate and corroborate findings. The quantitative methods analyzed the facilitators' application of knowledge and the outcomes. The qualitative data collection and analysis supplemented the study by 1) providing information on the context in which the facilitators were operating and 2) analyzing the grant process (a key project operation) which affects project implementation more broadly and, therefore, the development outcomes.

Four key tools were used during the research project for purposes including:

1. Data collection/training:
    a. **Facilitator Knowledge Source Assessments** (KSA) (quantitative, self-assessment) is a paper-based survey with a visual measurement tool for facilitators to self-report their knowledge sources, which are categorized as: general knowledge, external source, prior experience, directions from a colleague/manager, and CLA activities. Facilitators indicated the extent to which they used each of the five types of knowledge sources during each activity, assigning each source a value as a fraction of the total sources used. Facilitators also reported how much they valued the knowledge sources and basic information about the dialogue and their perceptions of their role as facilitator.
    b. **To improve validity and reduce bias** in the KSA, we used two rigorous stages of orientation and sensitization with participants. To mitigate bias, we brought in a statistician (from outside the program and Counterpart) who used quantitative data from the research questions or construct statistical analysis. In our qualitative analysis, we used an alternative hypothesis approach to test assumptions around our conclusions.
    c. **Staff key informant interviews (KII)** (qualitative, interviews) were not part of the initial design, but added in response the program's delayed grants process (which meant researchers had fewer facilitated dialogues to study) to capture qualitative data about application of CLA activities and knowledge sources.
    d. We gave **instructions on the CLA Practitioner's Guide** to the facilitators and provided a training video (used by Counterpart) to ensure consistency in data collection training. These tools combined with having the facilitators complete their baseline KSA under supervision of PRG-PA staff helped create our baseline.

e. **After Action + Knowledge Reviews (AA+KR)** (qualitative, discussion) were introduced during the orientation and performed by program staff after most dialogues to learn from the facilitators. The program team adopted AA+KR for their social partnership and advocacy grants processes, not just the dialogues.

2. Analysis
   a. We used **NVivo, a software-assisted content analysis tool**, to analyze qualitative data from interviews, AA+KR notes, and other meeting notes. NVivo analysis allowed our researcher to do unstructured data coding and analysis through keyword analysis, comparing source responses, and visualizing content relationships.

What else did we learn about integrating CLA?

- **CLA practices are more effective when they are interconnected and support on each other.** Our study pointed to the idea that a basic foundation in leadership (managers as well as competent staff who "lead" regardless of rank), culture, processes, clearly defined roles, etc. makes space for "learning" and/or "adapting" as a way of working. A team that embraces the principles and tools of CLA in *how* may be a foundation for using CLA tools in implementation and pursuing development outcomes. An area for future investigation could be the interplay between an organization or project with an adaptive learning mindset and whether this is a necessary condition for integrating CLA tools into programmatic activities.
- **There was inconclusive evidence about how genders valued and used knowledge sources.** The qualitative data indicated that females placed high value on team reflection activities, while males valued more highly their prior experience. Understanding how gender differences matter to valuing and using knowledge sources would be an interesting area of study.
- **Future researchers should allocate resources and time to test and customize CLA tools and run activities that build knowledge and comfort with the tools for program staff and partners.** For example, if CLA activities are tied to facilitated community-level multi-stakeholder dialogues, researchers should invest time and resources to test and customize tools based on feedback from the facilitators and program staff to ensure that the tools are responsive to local context and staff capacity.
- **Future researchers should use several data collection methods and include flexible tools like KIIs.** When we used the KII tool with facilitators (our group of study for adoption of CLA tools) and dialogue participants (the group who we hypothesized would experience better outcomes as a result of CLA tools), KIIs were a source of depth and context to complement quantitative analysis.
- When CLA activities are tied to grant-making processes and to complex activities like community-level multi-stakeholder dialogues, **future researchers should plan for expanded timelines and allocate sufficient resources to adapt the research process**.