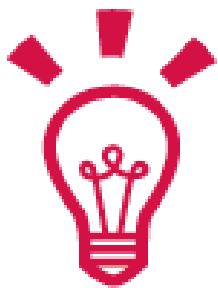# LAB SESSION

# A CLA Dialogue: Missions and partners share experiences and best practices

## Daily Summaries

*The two-day online discussion forum brought together 181 participants to discuss their experiences and ideas related to Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting.*

This event included both a webinar and an online discussion (Lab Session) which took place on USAID's Learning Lab and was open to all USAID staff and implementing partners.

This multi-day online discussion between USAID staff and implementing partners introduced the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) framework and provided examples of how USAID Missions and their partners are working to coordinate and collaborate, while continuously learning and adapting to change in order to increase the impact of USAID's programs.

Participants explored emerging approaches and lessons learned from USAID Missions that are integrating CLA into their strategic plans, project designs, and implementation, and from implementing partners who have participated in longstanding learning networks and those just beginning to grapple with CLA integration in Mission programs.

At the end of each day, facilitators posted summaries of the day's discussion and key takeaways. The summaries are included below. Additional event resources can be found on the Learning Lab website (www.usaidlearninglab.org).

1.  Day 1 Summary by Ann Hendrix-Jenkins and Ioli Filmeridis
2.  Day 2 Summary by Joan Whelan

*Lab Sessions are online discussions hosted by subject matter experts, designed to help practitioners share and learn from each other. They are hosted on Learning Lab at www.usaidlearninglab.org.*

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**JUNE 2013**

**DAY 1 SUMMARY**

**By Ann Hendrix-Jenkins, Director, K4Health Project and CCP KM Unit, JHU Center for Communication Programs, and Ioli Filmeridis, Project Development Officer, USAID/Zimbabwe**

A few summary themes and interesting ideas from Day One.

- CLA-type thinking, framework, lenses, methods and more: once you get what the "package" or "brand" is, typically through seeing the results it can produce, it's incredibly compelling. Many of the simple and easy methods belie real complexity—but how deep one needs to go is really up to him or her. Clearly the crowd that turned out today was interested in both the practical aspects as well as that fascinating rest of the iceberg.

- The feedback - empowerment dynamic. Bringing in stakeholders at all stages can enhance project design, but also be a development practice in and of itself by empowering groups to discuss their experiences, provide feedback and make suggestions.  This fits squarely into CLA and improved development practices.

- The above point also touches on the level/frequency of stakeholder involvement and its importance to CLA. What is a stakeholder? And who's to say we "stakeholders" have shared values? Needs to be a meaningful concept—not a buzzword or box to be checked. Additional point: building productive relationships takes time and distinct effort. Although relationship building may seem nebulous—it's a driving forc in the world. Teddy Roosevelt said, "The most important single ingredient in the formula of *success* is knowing how to get along with people." That goes for organizations getting along too.

 - Interesting concept: 'pausing' to integrate CLA - forward progress does not always mean movement, but taking time to reflect, consider and evaluate the what's next and how do we do it. Leads to an emphasis on incorporating CLA into work processes

- Change was mentioned over and over again, including the concept of change management. Stuart Belle describes customizing this by organization/office and how there's not a one size fits all approach. So while we can share comments and resources, CLA is fundamentally about adapting needs within our organizations and identifying those who can take ownership of the change process. Who and how are key factors in managing change particularly as it relates to CLA integration.

- Incentivizing CLA also was raised: how do we do it?  Providing evidence of its utility and benefits is one way, positioning it as indispensable for improving work and impact, and ultimately applying all of our best advocacy skills and techniques.

- Nancy White asked about the complexities associated with CLA…if there's a chance, we can flesh that out in Day 2. Does CLA get easier, or more complex as it becomes more integrated - and when to apply it at higher, middle and/or lower levels of an organization?

- Okey asked who in a Mission is responsible for CLA, or who can most influence it?  You may have a corps of people invested and dedicated to it, but what happens when they move on? This is where we need to really bring in local staff, who are around for the long term, and can adapt CLA to the local context and even use it as a foundation for their own professional development.

- CLA in the local context wasn't discussed in depth. Conceptually we the forum participants and facilitators are in the global choir, but what does it mean in Morocco versus Afghanistan versus Cambodia? Fodder for Day Two?

- How do we balance (retro)fitting CLA into current systems and ideas, versus employing it to challenge some of these old molds/mindsets which weren't really dynamic and deeply capable of creating meaningful change? How do we speak to different audiences within USAID (which may vary by tenure) and of course, the whole world outside of USAID?

- What are the very specific examples which can be used for advocacy, learning and more?

- FAILURE. Wow—the dramatic concept of failure generates much passion—perhaps tapping into much pent up demand? Yet in reality--"failure" might typically more realistically be known as learning, adaptation, inevitable by-product of innovation, a data point, a facet of a larger portfolio, a component of ambiguity which is the nature of life, part of the bell curve and more. So let's clear the clutter go straight to an ice hockey analogy: if you are not falling down, you are not pushing yourself to the limit of what's possible, and even pushing that boundary out. In short, No guts, no glory. Cue the soundtrack!

## DAY 2 SUMMARY

**By Joan Whelan, Senior Knowledge Management Specialist, Food Security and Nutrition Network/Core Group**

We covered so much ground on Day 2 of our dialogue around collaborating, learning and adapting, that it is simply not possible to do justice to it all.  So many important points around the C, the L

and the A, around procurement mechanisms, work planning and implementation, PREPS and Year Zeros and other models to build in time for reflection and adjustment; around the role of HR, of training, of simple and more complex approaches to collaboration and learning. A few key ideas, though, came to the fore:

 As always, **strategy must be our guiding force**.  We need to understand where we're going, or CLA can lead us astray. But with sound strategies in place, these strategies can help to inform who the right partners are for collaboration, the learning questions we need to focus on, and the adaptation that is warranted and will keep us going where we want to go.

**Relationship building** is the precursor for positive, productive collaboration. It's the glue that holds the process together, a soft skill but a difficult task, entirely central to CLA.  Building relationships though – and the collaboration that is then enabled - takes time and distinct effort.

**Integrating CLA into our core business models** and processes is a necessary first step to CLA growing more widespread. Retrofitting staff practices and approaches to be learning-centered is an overwhelming task one individual at a time.  Successful change management within our institutions can help build CLA into our DNA – with roles clarified in job descriptions and performance reviews, with procurement mechanisms designed with CLA in mind and many other ways existing processes can be modified to facilitate collaborating, learning and adapting.  This will all take, and already has taken, leadership buy-in. There are already stories to be told, about how that buy-in was fostered, and possible lessons for application elsewhere.

And while we've already come a long way, we still have work to do in terms of **defining and developing standards for CLA activities**, the normative branding process. What are the priority activities that will take us to better development outcomes, and how do they differ according to context and need? And how do we recognize quality and measure success?

So many practical recommendations and practices were raised that they will merit their own follow up. Please check back to these pages for further summaries and to access the compilations of the various tools and approaches, articles and other resources you all raised in the course of discussion.

And sincerest thanks to all who engaged around this issue and demonstrated the depth of interest, knowledge and momentum around CLA that resides in our community.

A final question is a direct one. What would help you to integrate CLA more fully into your own work, the work of your project, your organization or your Mission? Help us draw the roadmap.