2019 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

CLA in USAID/Cambodia Site Visit Reporting and Utilization

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Organization: USAID/Cambodia

Caption: An eco-tourism forest community group discussing the impact of Chinese development in the area

Credit: USAID/Cambodia

Summary:

Previously in USAID/Cambodia, site visits were documented in a disaggregated fashion that relied on each individual AOR/COR and how they maintained site visit reports in their official activity files. It was challenging and time consuming to analyze the information from site visits for more than one activity at a time, let alone across an entire sector or the Mission-wide portfolio. In addition, the Mission could not ensure consistent quality of the site visit reports. We knew that the Mission needed a centralized database to capture all the site visit data and provide a systematic view of the information in order to inform adaptive management practices in an evolving operating environment. However, we first wanted to know the kind of information that would be most useful to AORs/CORs in during a site visit and challenged ourselves to make the site visit template a tool for learning. We then developed a new site visit reporting tool using available in-house services/technology, through Google Form.

Our entire approach to update the site visit planning and reporting process has been grounded in the precepts of Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting, from the collaboration to refine the information in the template, to the active learning that transpired as we rolled out our new tool, to the adaptation of that tool to meet evolving Mission needs. By focusing on strengthening how we plan, document, and analyze site visits, we believe that our partners will bear witness to our efforts and reciprocate with a similar focus on achieving strong outputs for all of their activities. It is only in this way, working on a strong foundation of micro-level outputs, that we can ultimately achieve our macro-level development outcomes and impacts.

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can 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 is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

Cambodia is in a period of radical political transition. After credible local elections in June 2017, during which the opposition party gained 44 percent of the vote, the ruling party instituted a series of steps intended to silence dissent and eliminate any meaningful political competition in advance of the July 2018 national elections. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) began an active campaign to restrict freedom of association, silence political opposition and independent media and consistently identified the United States as trying to overthrow the Government through a “color revolution.” The RGC also dissolved the main opposition party and distributed its recently-obtained seats to ruling party loyalists. The U.S. Government (USG) has been a leading voice in condemning the actions of the RGC and imposing concrete sanctions, coordinated through the National Security Council, such as cutting some assistance to the government and imposing visa restrictions, pushing the RGC to turn to China for financial and political support.

In this volatile operating environment, Mission oversight of U.S. taxpayer-funded activities is of paramount importance, both to ensure that we are achieving our intended development outcomes and to avoid exacerbating a challenging relationship between the RGC and USG. At the most fundamental level, site visits constitute a performance monitoring responsibility that is common for all AORs/CORs for the mechanism(s) they manage. Previously in USAID/Cambodia, site visits were documented in a disaggregated fashion that relied on each individual AOR/COR and how they maintained site visit reports in their official activity files. These reports were readily accessible by technical teams, and were only distributed to other stakeholders in the Mission (e.g., OAA, Program Office) upon request. The only individuals with any visibility on site visits were the AORs/CORs themselves and in some cases the technical office directors. It was challenging and time consuming to analyze the information from site visits for more than one activity at a time, let alone across an entire sector or the Mission-wide portfolio. In addition, the Mission could not ensure consistent quality of the site visit reports.

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

With these challenges, we knew that the Mission needed a centralized database to capture all the site visit data and provide a systematic view of the information in order to inform adaptive management practices in an evolving operating environment. The database would help the Mission make sense of the site visit data, conduct quality control of the data, and utilize the data for the Mission's decision making. However, before launching into the development of an enhanced technological method of collecting information, we first wanted to know the kind of information that is most useful to AORs/CORs during a site visit and challenged ourselves to make the site visit template a tool for learning. We wanted the utility and content of the site visit template to drive what technology we would eventually adopt, rather than the other way around. Thus, we made efforts to revise the content of the site visit template with consultation from the whole Mission.

Next, we developed a new site visit reporting tool using available in-house services/technology, Google Form, that aggregates responses from multiple users into a Google Spreadsheet in a machine readable format. Once data is aggregated in this format, the process of data analysis and visualization is straightforward, and the information is accessible by all Mission staff.

We used different CLA approaches to ensure that the updates to the site visit planning and reporting process obtained the buy-in from the Mission, especially AORs/CORs. While using enforcement as a method of utilization was certainly possible, we knew that getting buy-in would be more sustainable. A tool can only be useful if the users happily use it, so we wanted to make sure the tool helps AORs/CORs monitor their mechanism on the ground. At the same time, the tool needed to ensure quality and provide aggregated data that the Mission can use to inform management decisions at higher levels.

3. 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.

To revise the content of the site visit template, we convened a 'listening session' with a wide array of technical and support offices to make the template a more effective tool. This 'Pause & Reflect' exercise allowed the Mission to step back and review the previous report template that had been in use for a few years. At the outset, we set the rules for the listening session where the Program Office would listen to staff who had gone out on site visits and learn about what worked and what did not in the template. We deployed active listening techniques throughout the session and refrained from providing any immediate response. Our intention was to purely listen to their experiences and the technical staff found this approach very helpful. By actively seeking technical staff input in an open-ended way, this method of 'Internal Collaboration' gave everyone a stake in the process, thus leading staff to willingly use the new tool we designed for learning and helping our program adapt through site visit findings.

The Mission also integrated CLA into the site visit report template itself. A lot of our partners are engaged in CLA but are not using those terms to describe it. USAID also uses CLA in its management of awards without always explicitly using the term. The site visit report can be a place where AORs/CORs document CLA both in terms of USAID's approach to management and how the partners themselves are using CLA. To give an example, during the listening session, one staff mentioned how he had gone on a site visit to an implementing partner that had numerous sub-awardees working across the country. This AOR had suggested convening exchange visits among the various sub-awardees as a way of learning through collaboration. In the new site visit reporting tool, this suggestion would be recorded as CLA and would thus help the Mission better demonstrates the different ways CLA is already happening.

During the 'listening session', it became apparent that there were a lot of misunderstandings and inconsistent practices across the Mission related to site visits. We conducted a refresher training to address those misunderstandings and to introduce the Mission to the new site visit reporting tool in Google Form. This process of 'Openness' allowed us to capture different perspectives/practices that led to all of these misunderstandings. We also introduced minimum requirements which set standardized practices for the Mission as well as allowed offices to have space for their office management as long as minimum requirements were fulfilled.

The Mission piloted the new site visit reporting tool and then conducted another 'listening session' four months later. The second listening session was to capture AORs/CORs feedback on the revised site visit content and the use of the Google Form. Overall, their feedback was positive and there were only minor revisions to make the form more clear.

After collecting the site visit data for over six months, we conducted thorough data analysis on site visits from March to September 2018 in time for the annual strategic-level portfolio review. This approach allowed the Mission to use 'M&E for Learning' not only at a mechanism level, but across the entire Mission. The creation of such a database ensures 'Institutional Memory' for the Mission because it can serve as a resource for staff transitions and for overall data transparency and accessibility.

The whole process—from the listening sessions, to the development of a new data collection tool, to integrating a CLA section in the template—shows the Mission's high commitment to a culture of continuous learning & improvement.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: 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?

For the content of the new site visit reporting tool, the revisions to the old template made the work done during site visits much more practical. During the listening sessions, AORs/CORs commented that some of the questions made more sense to answer using desk reviews (progress reports, work plan, etc.). They also added that open-ended questions are important in leading to enhanced project adaptation. To give one example, the previously used template contained numerous specific questions on the environmental impacts of an observed activity. While some of these questions are required, there was no space for AORs/CORs to note their general observations. By including open-ended questions on environmental impacts of an activity's interventions, the new site visit reporting tool prompts AORs/CORs to pay attention and capture information not otherwise gleaned from the required environmental impact questions. This approach helps staff provide more suggestions on adaptation based on site visit findings.

As a result of our analysis of site visit data, the Mission has identified areas for cross-office collaboration. For instance, Mission staff identified an opportunity for a Democracy and Governance activity to assist in filling a programmatic gap in a health activity related to addressing gender-based violence. In addition, Mission staff identified innovative ways to conduct joint forest patrolling in sensitive conservation areas.

The new site visit reporting process also enhanced accountability. Previously with the old template, there was no quality control in place. It was doubtful if the Financial Management section was ever filled in and if the Gender section was reported sufficiently. Although the Program Office could ask technical teams to share their reports, we would spend a significant amount of time doing data compilation before analysis could even happen. The Google Form generates responses in a machine readable format allowing us to conduct data analysis more easily. In our design of the Google Form, we were able to build in a requirement for more thoughtful responses, rather than just a 'ticking the box' exercise. It is more flexible and adaptable for AORs/CORs based on the purpose of the site visit.

5. Development Results: 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?

We assume that improved performance management and oversight will have a positive correlation with activity implementation and development outcomes. So in that sense, we have already seen productive changes in the way that we focus our site visits (e.g., having a clear purpose and objective for each visit) and how we distribute our site visits geographically.

Site visits enable us to monitor at a micro level. Without this type of monitoring, USAID would lose focus on the most direct outputs of our interventions, as well as the context within which this work occurs. Monitoring results of each intervention allows us to assess the performance of a whole mechanism, which furthermore builds up to the Project level. All of this monitoring, when aggregated, analyzed, and reflected upon, provides a comprehensive macro-level view of our development activities. In addition, our use of site visit data has strengthened our oversight of the investments we have made in Cambodia.

During our mission-wide portfolio review, our discussion on site visit findings led to an expansion of the site visit reporting tool to include other engagement efforts. By including questions that are relevant for routine meetings or other engagements with stakeholders that do not fit the definition of a "site visit", the Mission is positioned to systematically collect, aggregate, analyze and act on a robust base of collective knowledge about our portfolio. This includes systematically collecting feedback from a broad array of stakeholders on the implementation of our activities, which will underpin the formulation of our next CDCS. This information will influence and guide how as much as $350 million in taxpayer funds are invested in pursuit of development outcomes in Cambodia over the next five years.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

The whole process of updating our site visit reporting process has not been easy, yet it has been motivational. The Mission has been accustomed to using the previous tool so changing to a new tool was uncertain for some staff. The use of the Google Form platform was new to some staff, and not everyone liked to use it at first. It also seems that some AORs/CORs were reluctant to share their site visit reports with the entire Mission out of fear of having their site visit data misinterpreted.

These obstacles were expected. In response, we worked hard to demonstrate willingness to listen, adapt, and improve the tool. We acknowledged the limitations of the new tool from the beginning, but also tried to highlight its benefits to staff. We built in flexibility in both the tool and the requirements for site visits (e.g., only three sections are mandatory for each visit, while others can be completed as applicable) to make the tool more user friendly. Ultimately, we successfully convinced Mission staff that the benefits outweighed the limitations.

The biggest enabler for this process was when the Program Office presented site visit findings during the Mission-wide portfolio review. One was that the Mission was able to see what and how site visit data they have collected could be utilized in a meaningful way. While we highlighted key findings related to cross-office collaboration, gender, and environmental compliance, and acknowledged and appreciated the Mission's efforts in collecting and sharing data, we also pointed out what the Mission could do better to improve quality of the site visits and site visit reports. Importantly, we did this presentation for the entire Mission, and without directing focus to any individual AOR/COR or office. We opted to discuss individual cases during our pre-portfolio review meetings between each technical office and the Program Office. In this way, AORs/CORs would not feel defensive or offended and would trust that the Program Office wanted to focus on the overall quality of the process and related learning.

7. Did your CLA approach contribute to self-reliance? If so, how?

In his Executive Message on December 21, 2018, Administrator Green stated "As we continue to promote the Journey to Self-Reliance in 2019, and transform the way we engage with the world, I remind you that the active management of the performance of our implementers is our core business." USAID/Cambodia has maintained a vision for performance management that is consistent with that of the Administrator and we have taken comprehensive steps to strengthen our most fundamental oversight activities. Our entire approach has been grounded in the precepts of CLA, from the collaboration to refine the information in our site visit report templates, to the active learning that transpired as we rolled out our new tool, to the adaptation of that tool to meet evolving Mission needs. By focusing on strengthening how we plan, document, and analyze site visits, we believe that our partners will bear witness to our efforts and reciprocate with a similar focus on achieving strong outputs for all of their activities. It is only in this way, working on a strong foundation of micro-level outputs, that we can ultimately achieve our macro-level development outcomes and impacts.

As the USAID Policy Framework states, USAID's operations and work force will be re-oriented to realize the goals of the Journey to Self-Reliance. This case is an operations-oriented example of CLA, so there is an indirect link to programming for self-reliance.

The case authors explain their view of the connection between self-reliance and the work described in this example.