2018 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Continuous CLA for Adapting Complex Programs: Implementing a Violence Prevention Model Around the World

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Youth participate in peer activity as part of USAID/El Salvador Crime and Violence Prevention Program. Credit: Creative Associates International.

Summary:

This case is about absorbing the realities of families living in high-risk communities in different countries to adapt an intervention proven to reduce risks of gang-joining in the U.S. It is about adaping the Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development secondary prevention model, hereafter referred to as the "LA model," to six countries through USAID/State Department funding: Honduras (2013-2015, 2016-2019), El Salvador (2014-2018), Eastern and Southern Caribbean (2016-2020) and Tunisia (2017-2018). Creative's adapted version of the LA model is called the Prevention and Intervention Family Systems Model (PIFSM). PIFSM comprises two interrelated processes: 1) a diagnostic called the Youth Service Eligibility Tool (YSET) that measures a youth against nine risk factors predictive of gang joining; and 2) the seven-phase family systems intervention that has proven to reduce a youth's risk as identified by the YSET.

Challenge: Gang/youth group violence has grown in the last 10 years in Central America and the Caribbean and common suppressive approaches have failed to address the problem. Beginning in 2010, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras began to embrace preventive strategies as an alternative, but with few evidence-based models to draw upon. The U.S. evidence base shows that secondary interventions (those targeting youth scientifically likely to join criminal street gangs) are effective at reducing gang-joining. Yet, there was no such model in the region in 2014 when USAID/the State Department adopted a place-based strategy to combat insecurity. Exporting evidence-based models to these countries and beyond required adaptation. CLA Solution: Collaboration and learning presented a natural solution to the challenge of adapting and has become intrinsic to Creative's scaling and replication of PIFSM.

1. Which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Framework are reflected *most* in your case (select up to 5 subcomponents)?

- [ ] Internal Collaboration
- [x] External Collaboration
- [x] Technical Evidence Base
- [ ] Theories of Change
- [ ] Scenario Planning
- [ ] M&E for Learning
- [ ] Pause & Reflect
- [x] Adaptive Management
- [ ] Openness
- [ ] Relationships & Networks
- [ ] Continuous Learning & Improvement
- [ ] Knowledge Management
- [ ] Institutional Memory
- [ ] Decision-Making
- [ ] Mission Resources
- [ ] CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

2. 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?

Over the last decade, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have experienced increased gang and youth group violence that threatens citizen security and undermines development. At first, governments responded with common punitive and suppressive policies that failed to address the problem. Donors such as USAID then intervened with a primary prevention strategy including activities like after school sports, drug abuse resistance education, and youth scholarships for vocational training. However, these programs suffered from mixed results due to lack of evidence-based models and varying levels of commitment.

Meanwhile, experts working domestically in the United States made progress. The City of Los Angeles, where most of the gangs now prevalent throughout LAC originated, created an Office for Gang Reduction and Youth Development to engage researchers in developing models for intervention in American cities. In collaboration with the University of Southern California (USC), the city found evidence that secondary interventions – those which target the youth most likely to join criminal street gangs – were most effective at reducing instances of youth age 10-15 joining gangs. In 2012, USAID and the City of LA partnered to test the "LA model" internationally, adapting the secondary intervention to countries that previously had no such models or evidence.

As the implementer for the first pilots in Honduras and El Salvador, Creative Associates found a significant need for changes to the model in the new context, and that we would need to collaborate with stakeholders to learn and test what works. After seven years of continually applying this process, Creative has established an adapted model called the Prevention and Intervention Family Systems Model (PIFSM), that USAID and the State Department have funded in six countries: Honduras (2013-2015, 2016-2019), El Salvador (2014-2018), Eastern and Southern Caribbean (2016-2020) and Tunisia (2017-2018). This case demonstrates how we used a CLA approach to merge the technical evidence base with the realities of families living in high-risk communities.

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

In 2012 when Creative entered the Honduras and El Salvador pilots of the PIFSM model, we did not explicitly call our development process CLA; rather the challenge of adapting a multi-pronged, evidence-based model demanded that Creative adopt the principles of CLA. The first part of the model – the YSET diagnostic tool - is a complex survey instrument created by experts in violence prevention and youth development at USC. The second part of the model, offering family counseling services in gang-controlled neighborhoods, requires as much collaboration as possible with external and local experts. Creative understood that external collaboration was critical to unite regional expertise in crime and violence prevention, to learn from LA technical experts about the history of the model, and to ensure that we maintained the essence of what made the LA model successful.

The initial CLA approach became iterative as Creative moved from the pilot in two countries to six full projects. Each time, we collaborated with technical experts, community members, and leadership to learn what elements of the model could stay the same and what elements needed to be adapted. For example, the LA model required wrap-around service provision to youth who were receiving family counseling. These services, behavioral health to job training were scarce to non-existent in the target Honduran communities. Creative partnered with USC, experts from the City of LA, and local family counselors in Honduras to design an approach that relied more on the resources available in Honduras – families, as opposed to social services available in LA. This emphasis proved important in the Caribbean context, and in Tunisia it proved feasible to include service referrals in the model. In short, CLA was helpful to address the development challenge because without it the original intervention would have likely failed or failed to yield maximum impact.

4. 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.

Our continuous approach to CLA for Honduras, El Salvador, the Eastern and Southern Caribbean and Tunisia comprised four main features: (i) consultations with US-based gang scholars and youth and families from target communities; (ii) cross-pollination among projects for learning; (iii) pause to reflect on pilots at six and twelve-month intervals, and iv) feeding new evidence, results, and learning into each new iteration of the intervention.

1. The process began with collaborative learning, first with technical experts and then with regional experts and participants. We worked with USC to learn how to administer the YSET diagnostic they had developed through years of gang research. By conducting focus groups and key informant interviews with families, youth, teachers, and counselors, we collected feedback on ways to make the YSET diagnostic understandable to the target treatment youth in Honduras. This was repeated in the cases of the Caribbean and Tunisia. In the latter, we collaborated with the University of Tunis to modify the risk factors to account for violent extremism, as opposed to gang joining.

2. The first pilot of Creative's PIFSM model was implemented in five high-risk communities in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. A treatment group received a one-year cycle of family counseling, which generated a 52.4% average reduction across all nine risk factors identified by the YSET diagnostic. The Honduras pilot was subsequently scaled up through USAID funding of the five-year Proponte Mas program, and became the basis for cross-pollination with the Tunisian, Salvadoran, and Caribbean projects. The Proponte Mas project team trained the secondary prevention teams in the three other projects on how to identify, deploy and support counselors, and on data collection and sharing using real time experience and interim results from working with target families.

3. Results from the Honduras pilot informed our decisions about tweaking the PIFSM model in Proponte Mas. The evidence reinforced the emphasis on the family as a protective factor, given the limited social services available. We also learned that the ideal counselor was not necessarily someone with a Master's in Social Work, but someone embedded and trusted in the community who was willing to learn and follow a structured model. Further, we learned about the importance of socializing the principles of structured family counseling and the data showing risk reductions in the treatment group to garner broader support for the intervention in the target communities, among potential youth and family service providers and host government institutions. We learned that we could gain access and build trust by talking about families instead of talking about gangs.

4. Our continuous CLA model began a second iteration in 2017 with an additional collaborating academic partner, Arizona State University (ASU). Proponte Mas partnered with ASU gang scholars to boost capacity to analyze YSET results of several hundred youth, particularly in terms of the relevance of each of YSET risk factors in determining risk and to conduct an experimental impact evaluation of the intervention.

5. The Proponte Mas pause and reflect at six month and 12 months revealed two realities that would inform the intervention design in the Caribbean and in El Salvador. First, the team determined that they should eliminate the peer module of the intervention because of the risk of negative peer influence from the group activities. Secondly, we determined that the intervention could be shortened from one year to six months without reducing effectiveness.

5. 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?

Through the application of the CLA approach, we have become more intentional when creating a proposal to identify potential local and external stakeholders and include them in our planning and design to ensure successful implementation of our project. This has also made us challenge the assumptions and methodologies underlying the LA model as we have adapted to the various countries where our projects are located. Working in a more collaborative and inclusive manner across project offices and between field and headquarters offices from project in the beginning phases of the project has allowed us to socialize concepts and evidence that may not be widely understood thus generating broader support for the interventions. Our hope is that the CLA will prompt additional team members to deepen monitoring and evaluation skills around specific interventions in order that each iteration of CLA reflects a more advanced technical conversation, raising the quality of the intervention.

Our models are evidence based and offer a trove of data from each project, which is collected in different systems. It is our intent to centralize all data to get a more comprehensive picture of the impact this intervention has on our communities and contrast experiences so projects can be mutually reinforcing and each new project will have a greater body of knowledge from which to launch. This will also allow us to more readily share a range of evidence to other countries/regions who have demonstrated interest in following this methodological approach.

We have also learned through CLA that because the YSET was designed to measure gang entry, and not generalized youth delinquency, we will likely need to modify the YSET and how we determine cut-points for eligibility to address the latter. Internally, we also hope to conduct multi-project family counselor pause and reflect session(s) to enable continuous improvement and shared experiences.

6. 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?

The development outcomes we sought and continue to seek is the reduction of youth involvement in gang-related crime and violence in target communities, and violent extremism in the case of Tunisian communities.
Our CLA model has helped advance this outcome through the risk reductions and through critical learning that will inform policy and practice in each context. For example, the absence of available pro-social youth development type activities in the communities in Central America has required that more emphasis be placed on the family systems interventions, and eliminating the emphasis on monthly peer group activities. The absence of tertiary level programs has by necessity required that the approach be implemented with families at a secondary and tertiary level of risk. In addition, Proponte Mas has conducted data analysis on the rate of reduction of risk factors and associated behaviors during the first six months of treatment in comparison to the second six months. The data points to the need to continue developing and strengthening six-month interventions as they are more viable, cost effective, and able to be duplicated in resource-scarce environments. Due to Proponte Mas' experience and data collection and analysis, we have been able to raise awareness of the concept and importance of risk differentiation to critical actors such as governments, policy makers, law enforcement and the judiciary. Socialization of this idea to these Honduran institutions has been successful as risk differentiation is part of their daily lexicon and they are open to the idea of creating policy based on this concept, which would have a profound impact on juvenile justice and recidivism.

Through this process, we have been able to increase the use of our model not just by identifying risk factors, but also protective factors. For example, Proponte Mas YSET data revealed that schools serve as a strong protective factor for youth; now, our project in El Salvador will strengthen its partnership with schools. From Proponte Mas, El Salvador will benefit from another cost-efficiency by shortening the family-centered intervention from 12 months to six months.

7. What factors affected the success or shortcomings of your collaborating, learning and adapting approach? What were the main enablers or obstacles?

Among the key enablers to our CLA approach was the MOU signed in 2012 between USAID and the City of Los Angeles, which established broad institutional support for USAID implementers to learn about and apply lessons from LA's experience with gangs. Second in importance was the political will and interest among both USAID Missions and Honduran, El Salvadoran and Caribbean government bodies in the target countries to pilot an intervention that had worked elsewhere, but which represented a departure from the status quo. The diversity of partners, from international gang scholars to local Universities in Honduras and Tunisia to local service providers working with at-risk youth to the families themselves, gave us rich theoretical, contextual and practical guidance. The improved commitment to monitoring, evaluation, and learning among development funders and practitioners is an enabler insofar as it translates into additional time and resources for CLA. Conversely, the lack of resources presents an obstacle; we have learned that meaningfully advancing CLA requires 10-20% of the program budget.

The main obstacle we encountered was the introduction of an external impact evaluation because experimental design with treatment and control groups does not allow for adaptation in the short term; we must wait until the trial is over to introduce changes. Adhering to strict methodologies to meet standards of an experimental design can introduce substantial programmatic delays and can strain open conversation between implementer and evaluator. In one instance, we were compelled to modify the intervention to accommodate the evaluation. Yet, the external impact evaluation also prompted us to pause and reflect more deeply on the YSET and counseling model as a byproduct of the inquiries of the principal investigators of the evaluation.

8. Based on your experience and lessons learned, what advice would you share with colleagues about using a collaborating, learning and adapting approach?

Before commencing CLA, be very intentional about who you target for collaboration and socialize the main concepts relevant to your intervention (e.g. public health model, family systems theory, risk differentiation) early and often. We learned that misconceptions can distort the purpose of the intervention and generate unrealistic expectations. Perhaps due to the desire for quick fixes to the problem of gang-joining, the YSET was perceived as the intervention as opposed to the diagnostic. The distortion can lead to a lack of appreciation and resources for the core of the intervention – the family counseling.

From the beginning, use your M&E teams for gathering and for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data. They can design appropriate measurement instruments, build and populate databases, and support any impact evaluation. CLA may not be compatible with experimental evaluation IF you expect/need to be highly adaptive.

It is advisable to summarize the findings from collective CLA approach experiences and discuss across projects which partners and stakeholders you worked with, why, and how you shared information with them. In this way, collaboration can grow more organically, which would allow for successes and challenges to be shared in real time. This will be furthered by building a central, flexible database where you can compare results from multiple projects.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure institutional memory and retain success stories and lessons. Creating a community of practice and cross-training both in the field and headquarters will help increase capacity, knowledge and continued improvement of the intervention in question. And remember to convene the protagonists in your intervention! In our case, it is the family counselors. We aspire to do a combined pause and reflect with counselors from multiple projects/countries.