

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Training

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What is the general context in which the story takes place?

USAID/Uganda has embedded collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) across application of the Program Cycle, making CLA part of its organizational and development practice DNA. CLA is visible in USAID/Uganda's first CDCS, and has been applied to keep that strategy responsive, with the processes and products of CLA efforts now informing and further institutionalized in its next CDCS. Expectations for CLA have been woven into new program designs and awards, and an innovative mechanism in the form of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Program (USAID/Uganda "Learning Contract") was launched in 2013. This program is charged with assisting USAID/Uganda in refining, scaling-up and institutionalizing CLA approaches. USAID/Uganda's Implementing Partners (IPs) have been testing, documenting, and sharing their CLA experience, capturing examples of where and how CLA is making a difference in program quality and effectiveness. IPs have also shared with USAID/Uganda the realities of streamlining CLA as part of program planning and operations by pinpointing the implications of challenges such as: limited time to thoughtfully collaborate; restrictions in and/or inadequate funding to learn as often or as deeply as desired; and the reporting and performance requirements that sometimes confine truly adaptive realignments to contextual shifts, negative and positive.

Consider that as human beings we have to learn how to walk, talk, recognize the physical features of family members, think creatively, and express emotions — so too must the "how's" of CLA be learned and practiced. This case story describes The Learning Contract's experience in building CLA capacities for the Mission and its IPs.



An MEL course session on developing logic models being delivered to a cohort of USAID/Uganda implementing partners." *George Musoke, The QED Group, LLC.*

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

The Learning Contract works seamlessly with the Mission to achieve better development results through the provision of quality monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) services. These services enhance the Mission's ability to generate evidence for program planning and management. They also enable USAID/Uganda to use effective learning modalities for timely adoption of adaptive behaviors. In this partnership for advancing the application of CLA, The Learning Contract maintains a close interface with data management and performance reporting systems, guides the development of MEL plans and practices, and helps determine the value of Activities' achievements. The Learning Contract has also been intimately involved in facilitating dialogue and the formation of an enabling environment for collaborating and managing adaptively.

In its day-to-day support to the Mission and IPs, The Learning Contract noticed that particular challenges led to a less-than-desired application of CLA. A review of annual reports, "reflection moments" during semi-annual portfolio reviews, and biannual CLA perception survey data revealed that there is not yet a full understanding of how to design and stimulate MEL processes that are fully active. The surveys also uncovered related gaps in the translation of MEL outputs into platforms for collaborating, learning and adapting. Among the challenges were:

- Competing demands on staff leading to insufficient consultation time within and between technical teams, sector-specific authorities, and external stakeholders;
- A misalignment between the execution of key evaluation and/or learning activities and timelines for information use in decision-making;
- Limited staff familiarity with performance reporting and data management systems, and not enough skill, experience, or encouragement to deliberately ask "how" and "why" questions regarding M&E data;
- Different social, cultural, and organizational factors at times inhibiting more candid questioning, knowledge sharing, and collaborative decision-making;
- Poor formal documentation practices affecting knowledge management and institutional memory;
- Lack of systematic, planned and routine use of tools, templates and forums that have been shown to make positive contributions to CLA practice.

Feedback from USAID/Uganda and IPs hinted at a need to be more concrete in what it means to "apply CLA." For example: "We know why CLA is important, but how do I know when I'm doing it or whether I'm doing it well?" For The Learning Contract, this question from Mission and IP staff prompted a fresh focus on helping development practitioners move beyond *defining* CLA to *experiencing* CLA. A key milestone that set the CLA capacity building initiative in full motion was an MEL orientation workshop offered to newly incoming Mission staff. This formed and formalized a set of important orienting parameters about what it means to work in a Mission that had CLA built into its DNA, crystalizing the idea that the best way to teach and *demonstrate* CLA was to create an opportunity – and a great space for learning – to *experience* CLA.



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Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

The Learning Contract, in close collaboration with the Mission, developed a concept for building CLA capacity through the design and delivery of a course (i.e., a learning experience) that would itself embody the practice of CLA. The course was titled “Improving Development Results through Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning”. This course was designed and offered because USAID/Uganda and The Learning Contract believe that the pathway to evidence-based and better development results comes through a deeper investment in stronger M&E that is supported by thoughtful analysis that goes beyond reporting, and that is enhanced by testing assumptions and generating development knowledge with systematic and intentional learning followed by adaptations in program management and improved implementation. What is innovative about this course is the deliberate and explicit attention to learning alongside M&E, *and* the drawing of concrete linkages between MEL and CLA. The course was envisioned to be a blended, interactive, practical, and memorable encounter that would not only deliver content but which would position the Ugandan development context squarely inside ‘classroom’ conversations.

The design of the MEL course was indeed collaborative. As noted, the framing of the need and shaping of the concept was a joint effort between The Learning Contract and the Mission’s Policy and Program Development Office (PPD), and MEL Specialists embedded within the various technical teams. Data on training needs from the CLA perception surveys were analyzed in order to respond to user interests. Additionally, the Learning Contract convened a small number of IPs who had been demonstrating promising practices in applying CLA to prioritize course content, test delivery ideas, and identify examples of CLA-in-action that could be used during ‘show and tell’ sessions as part of the course. Examples of successful training approaches in other context and/or industries were also brought to the table and adapted per the Mission and IPs’ needs in Uganda. The iterative and collaborative design effort continued with weekly planning sessions between the Uganda-based and Washington-based members of the planning team. Technical MEL specialists teamed with training experts who then worked with graphic design artists to produce PowerPoint presentations, develop participant workbooks and other training resources, and to design the layout and decorate the training room. With the aid of a tracker (i.e., task management matrix), debriefing and course-correcting sessions between the planning team and the Mission were held on pre-determined check-in dates or upon the completion of a significant development milestone. Dry-run deliveries were also done with Mission staff, and PPD team members selected particular sessions they would take lead on delivering as part of the training and facilitation team.

The MEL course was designed for delivery in two parts; part 1 was offered over a 3-day period and part 2 was delivered in a 1-day session. The course objectives were as follows:

MEL Course Part I Objectives

- Describe the interplay and interdependent relationship between monitoring, evaluation and learning;
- Identify and collaborate with key stakeholders in MEL partners;
- Use causal logic tools to guide program learning, decision-making and implementation;
- Define and address learning questions through the selection and use of quantitative and qualitative M&E methods;
- Design effective learning strategies and approaches.



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MEL Course Part 2 Objectives

- Share and meaningfully discuss the implications of M&E data with key stakeholders;
- Translate data into clear and relevant information for decision-making;
- Use effective learning strategies and approaches to inform timely, evidence-based adjustments;
- Strengthen your organization's behavioral and operational practices - and management culture that reinforce learning and promote positive change towards better development results.

This course was the first of its kind offered in Uganda, and to our knowledge, the first of its kind worldwide. Another distinct feature was the cohort approach used. Part 1 split participating IPs into two cohorts (8 and 10 IPs respectively) with course offerings separated by two weeks. Both cohorts were brought together for a single offering of Part 2, offered six weeks after Part 1. Daily debriefs, end-of-course evaluations, and an after action review between and after cohorts 1 and 2, and again following Part 2 ratified the collaborative learning and adapting approach that truly enveloped the course.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

The MEL course was envisioned as more than a training event. In addition to developing participants' knowledge, attitudes and subsequent behaviors related to MEL, the course espoused special considerations for (1) space for Mission staff and IPs to together discover what they were already doing in the spirit of CLA, and (2) strengthening professional ties that extend beyond the course dates and the training room.

Careful attention was given to inviting the active involvement of A/CORs such that 'aha' moments could be shared with staff of the award(s) they managed. Chiefs of Party were encouraged to attend all sessions so that their leadership around MEL could be felt. Particular considerations were given to the use of adult learning techniques that included individual reflection, same-team and cross-team exercises, learning activities that required multiple forms of expression (e.g. words, pictures, role play), and teaching through playful challenges that included games, puzzles, team tasks, and dancing. Deliberate effort to create a learning environment included reference and use of Costa and Kallick's *Habits of Mind: A Developmental Series* (2000), as the course sought to help participants actively practice "being open-minded and exploring alternative views; generating multiple options and being inclined to probe; having a zest for inquiry and the tendency to question the given and demand justification; and having an alertness to the need for evidence and the ability to weigh and assess reasons." Edward D. Hess's (2014) behaviors foundational to learning, and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) were referenced as elements of these frameworks for experience-building surfaced during significant 'learning moments'.

The planners showed appreciation for the use of different facilitation styles and trainer expertise. Different sessions were led by different facilitators in a way that showed diversity, versatility and a variety of ways to connect with participants. IPs who were part of the initial course design process were invited to serve as in-session "coaches" and co-presenters, ensuring that credibility and contextual-awareness were evident. Participant engagement, therefore, was driven much less by presentations and instead shaped by the quality of the discussions. Course planners gave thought to how course cohorts were assembled — determining factors included date of award (or elapsed



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implementation period), representation across the Mission’s program portfolio, consideration of natural synergy points for sector integration, and IP experience with CLA.

Part 1 of the MEL course focused on strengthening processes, planning requirements, and analytical approaches that generate evidence and knowledge, while Part 2 centered on use of data for decision-making and adaptive management. IPs developed action plans at the end of Part 1 through which they would implement prioritized MEL improvements, while also documenting their experience with change management. Thus, the spacing between Part 1 and Part 2 course offerings is critical as sufficient time was needed for action plan commitments to be implemented, but that the break would not be too lengthy where momentum, motivation and scheduling conflicts would limit the utility of the learning-by-doing experience.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

With the design and participatory delivery of this CLA experience, the most significant outcomes and lasting impact are determined less by the statistics of immediate end-of-training feedback and more by course follow-through and utilization by participating IPs. Early evidence of the perceived value of the MEL course was noted in the fact that all but one organization (due to previously planned field work) continued their engagement through to Part 2 of the course. In other words, trainees were eager to continue the CLA conversation and dedicated the time for a full-day session on adaptive management. Another positive note was the continuity between Part 1 and Part 2 in terms of the specific IP staff who attended. Here is what participants had to say about the course:

From Part 1 of the MEL course, I realized that:

“An integrated approach to MEL is important for reviewing Activity achievements, and understanding how these achievements are being reached.”

“Getting better at MEL requires adopting new attitudes and behaviors about questioning assumptions and being open to making adjustments when and where needed.”

“It is crucial to continually think about how to involve and work with stakeholders around MEL in a way that goes beyond program implementation.”

“Close collaboration with, and buy-in from, the A/COR is essential in moving towards improved MEL systems for better reporting and more systematic learning.”

From Part 2 of the MEL course, I realized that:

“Adaptive management is more than a technical fix. Managing adaptively requires an enabling culture where there is open communication about what is working and what is not, and leadership that actively supports learning, even from failure.”

“Adaptive management means making a change towards improvement – more efficiency, better results – that is backed by evidence.”



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“We are assessing and adjusting continually. The key is to make sure we document and share how the changes we make are indeed leading to better development results.”

“Adaptive management means remaining flexible to what the answers might be when we ask the right questions about our proposed solutions.”

A powerful illustration of the most significant outcomes is recognized in that about 1/3 of participating IPs have asked for Learning Contract support in replicating our MEL course in-house for their own staff. The reason for this is not only to provide those who did not attend with the content, but to facilitate the same experience with CLA. In addition, several IPs have launched specific trainings for staff in MEL approaches introduced during the course, as they have recognized the value-add of novel tools and techniques. All of these follow-on initiatives have occurred within 8 weeks of the end of the MEL course, which is a significant indicator of early adoption and readiness to do development differently.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

The MEL course provided participating IPs with fresh thinking and practical approaches to improving their MEL systems, and gave them important language to use and indicators of success related to their CLA efforts. The Learning Contract continues to track the application of CLA in key business processes and institutional arrangements. For example, modifications to Activity MEL plans have already begun to be considered post-training. Additionally, a number of IPs have shared that they are preparing to apply a CLA approach as part of the process of developing their annual work plan, and not merely write about how they will implement CLA as they meet program targets and complete contractual deliverables.

The Learning Contract has developed a set of indicators as part of its own activity MEL plan, which are designed to assess progress in CLA by the Mission and its IPs. For example, we will track the proportion of IP staff who report increased ability to perform MEL functions as a result of technical assistance and capacity building efforts; improvements in the quality of Activity monitoring, evaluation and learning plans submitted to and approved by the Mission; the percent of IP annual progress reports that document the use of CLA approaches; the proportion of Mission staff who can identify institutional changes as a result of CLA; the proportion of Mission staff who report greater confidence in data use for program design and adaptive management decisions.

The Learning Contract will make use of quantitative approaches such as perception surveys and organizational network analyses to assess comparative changes via rating scales and through mapping of patterns of collaboration, respectively. Most significant change and outcome harvesting tools will be used to tease out CLA-related achievements and the contributions of these achievements to better development results.



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What were the most important lessons learned?

There are important lessons learned from the MEL course/CLA experience that are worth mentioning. Positive takeaways and good practices include:

- Inviting more mature IPs to serve as co-facilitators allowed us to provide practical examples of how CLA is working in reality and helped boost the confidence of the less experienced.
- The use of local experts as trainers ensures continued access to technical support and assistance with organizational improvement efforts.
- Collaboration with Mission staff in design and delivery is necessary for coherence and consistency in messaging.
- Communicate expectations around levels of staff experience, presence, and participation early. This helps to ensure that course content is targeting the right staff, at the right technical depth, and for the full duration of the training experience.
- Invite participants to help design what a great (and safe) space for learning will feel like. This helps validate that they are equal partners in shaping the look, feel and pace of the CLA experience.

Things to watch out for or aspects of the training that could have been done differently are:

- Asking IPs to bring actual program data into the room to help tackle real MEL challenges with the support of peers and coaches.
- Ensuring more consistent USAID presence in the room. Time constraints are a challenge, but early scheduling and prioritizing can help boost fuller Mission participation.
- Delivering content related to adaptive management over two days rather than a one-day session. Issues that are less on the technical side and more related to institutional systems and culture require more time for diagnosing, demonstrating and discussing, and charting the way forward.
- Considering alternative and creative seating plans such as open spaces that promote more fluid participant interactions.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Two important factors that helped to make the MEL course particularly successful were:

1. Creating a live peer-supported space for CLA.

Participants were excited about the use of the peer-assist approach used during Part 2 of the course. Following Part 1, participating organizations committed themselves to implementing an MEL action plan. Upon return to Part 2 of the course, a peer-assist session was leveraged to facilitate experience sharing, sense-making, and the giving of feedback among IPs. This session in and of itself was quite significant, as participants reported that the opportunity to talk through and listen to feedback on their organizational decision-making and change-making process was enlightening, and illustrative of what it means to collaborate, learn from each other, and adapt in view of challenges and emerging opportunities. The peer-assist session was cited by most participants as one of the most valuable aspects of the course.

2. Innovatively capturing the experience in the room. These criteria helped to make the training impressionable, memorable, and attractive.

Another important element of the course proceedings was the innovative capture of the content and character of the sessions. Live, visual note-taking talent was put on display throughout the course. The products from this experience capture approach not only demonstrated a novel method of documentation, but also encouraged participants to see and structure the connections that exist between collaborating, learning and adapting for better monitoring, evaluation and learning. Such visuals helped to make it easy for participants to retell their encounter with CLA:



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