2018 CLA CASE COMPETITION

COLLABORATE • LEARN • ADAPT

Case Title:

Step by Step: Using Collaborative Approaches to Scale the UPTAKE Ladder

Project stakeholders participate in a content development write-shop in Njombe, Tanzania
Credit: Stephanie Gakuo/UPTAKE Project

Name: Gakuo Stephanie & Karanja Lucy

Organization: CABI

Summary:

The Upscaling Technologies in Agriculture through Knowledge and Extension (UPTAKE Project) works to scale up the use of productivity-enhancing agricultural innovations amongst 1,000,000 small holder farmers in Tanzania. It employs wide reaching information and communication technologies (ICTs) particularly radio and SMS to reach farmers in rural areas. UPTAKE brings together agricultural value chain stakeholders to build consensus on common campaign approaches and harmonized information. During the project's initial stages, diverse stakeholder interests and the project's omission to effectively engage stakeholders resulted in apathy in the SMS content development process affecting campaign effectiveness. This necessitated a radical change in the project's trajectory. Adopting an attitude of openness towards addressing the challenge, UPTAKE consciously turned to the Collaborate, Learn and Adapt (CLA) approach as a problem solving tool to tackle the inherent challenges in the content development process. Using the pause, reflect, decision and relationships elements, the project adapted its content development process to what is now a relatively collaborative mechanism propped up by solid relationships with external stakeholders. Today, the project has an elaborate content development and dissemination process with feedback looped in from stakeholders to address emerging information occasioned by variable weather, insect pest outbreaks and market information. The result is an improved output backed by partners who freely invest their time, financial resources and technical advice in the project for a common goal; that of improving productivity amongst small holder farmers.

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

- [ ] Internal Collaboration
- [ ] External Collaboration
- [ ] Technical Evidence Base
- [ ] Theories of Change
- [ ] Scenario Planning
- [x] M&E for Learning
- [x] Pause & Reflect
- [ ] Adaptive Management
- [ ] Openness
- [x] Relationships & Networks
- [x] Continuous Learning & Improvement
- [ ] Knowledge Management
- [ ] Institutional Memory
- [x] 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?

The Upscaling Technologies in Agriculture through Knowledge and Extension (UPTAKE Project) aims to increase agricultural productivity amongst small holder farmers in Tanzania. It attempts to scale up the use of productivity-enhancing agricultural innovations and marketing mechanisms through enhanced awareness and new knowledge amongst one million farmers and adoption of target technologies by at least 150,000. 40% of those targeted should be women. The project employs information and communication technologies (ICTs) particularly radio and SMS as the principal means to reach farmers spread out in rural areas. The project's setting is one of inadequate extension capacity both in number and quality arising from years of little investment by the public sector. UPTAKE seeks to contribute to breaking down barriers to increased agricultural productivity. The project has therefore established partnerships to promote harmonized campaigns amongst key stakeholders: district agriculture staff, local extension personnel, researchers, agro-input suppliers and non-governmental organizations. A fundamental component of the project's output is therefore to create unified content for dissemination through an agreed campaign approach and harmonized information. Initial project design however had it that content would be developed at source then validated by stakeholders. Similarly there was lack of an effective feedback mechanism from the ground to update project staff on developments. The result was therefore unengaged stakeholders and lack of ownership for the project. The official certification process to give approval to dissemination proved elusive and often delayed the campaigns. Since campaign content is aligned to the cropping cycle, delays meant the information was untimely and affected campaign effectiveness. Similarly, failure to update the campaigns with dynamic information meant farmers missed out on important information. Project failure to engage stakeholders effectively at inception and unclear stakeholder roles in the campaign process led to apathy diminishing the effectiveness of the initial campaigns. It is this context that turned UPTAKE to the collaborate, learn and adapt approach.

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

The Project consciously chose to apply the CLA approach on experiencing a number of challenges two of which are illustrated and which project staff felt could be resolved progressively through some elements of the CLA approach. These are pause, reflect, use learnings garnered from monitoring exercises and adaptive management. The latter concept was learned in one of the USAID learning events/workshops. Content development is one of the two prongs in UPTAKE's campaign process. The initial project design planned for this to be developed at source and then shared with stakeholders for refinement and validation before dissemination. The result was a process that didn't receive acceptance, was prolonged and caused delays to the information dissemination process. As information sent out to farmers is aligned to the cropping cycle therefore late delivery impacted its value. This required a hard and fast decision to remedy this.

In the second instance, routine monitoring visits to implementation areas revealed that whereas significant decisions around dissemination were made around administrative boundaries, agro-ecological zones (AEZs), played a much bigger role than the former. Neighbouring farms would for instance be at different stages of the crop cycle, yet farmers had been enlisted on the basis of administrative locations and decisions made in regard to information dissemination were done on this basis. As a result farmers received information either later or earlier than they required it. This necessitated another key decision. The project saw an urgent need to have a network of stakeholders feed into the system to ensure farmers got timely and relevant information.
The project decided to adopt the pause, reflect, use learnings garnered from monitoring exercises to give a clear thought process and solution to both challenges. Principally, we realized that better collaborative mechanisms with stakeholders could help resolve both challenges.

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.

Taking stock of the challenges in the content development process and in obtaining relevant feedback from the field, the project discerned a need to tackle the challenges before the subsequent round of campaigns. Project staff paused to reflect on how to effectively engage stakeholders for the content development process and how to obtain current and relevant updates from the field to ensure we addressed the right activity and developments in the crop cycle. Key reflections in the content development process revolved around who participated in the process, the value they brought to the process, how could we better engage them for greater technical contribution to the process and how to ensure the certification process was expedited for timely delivery of the campaigns? Four principal steps were followed on tackling the issue of content development.

Step 1: Project staff paused to reflect on the issue. They brainstormed on the issues and developed proposals to tackle the challenges.
Step 2: There was openness in acknowledging gaps in the content development process. Staff consulted with a few principal stakeholders on possible solutions thereby stepping up the collaborative process in problem solving.
Step 3: Collaborative decision making was adopted with the stakeholders and agreement on a plan for adaptive management. This would involve a re-organized content development process to enhance collaboration and strengthen relationships and networks with stakeholders.
The re-engineered process begun with a rapid assessment of the situation, with stakeholders as the key informants. Subsequently the project would work with one stakeholder to develop a framework for collating content on appropriate technologies for dissemination. This would then be shared with other stakeholders for their review and would thereafter be consolidated through a write-shop process. In the write-shop process, stakeholders would flesh the framework by coalescing into small working groups based on their expertise, reviewing and refining content. This would then be validated by the broader team and submitted for official certification. As the certifying agency would have participated in the overall process, the certification process would be expedited for timely dissemination of information.
Step 4: Iterate this process for repurposing information for the different channels by letting stakeholders use the principal document developed in step 3 for this purpose.
Step 5: Monitor the content development process as it unfolded, learn from it and propose refinements for the next round therefore being in a cycle of continuous learning and improvement of project processes.

A similar approach was used for the second situation. As the campaign design lacked an inbuilt feedback mechanism, the project paused to reflect on the options available. Lack of funds and time meant the practical solution would have to be a low cost, easy to set up but still engaging enough for stakeholders to participate in.

Step 1: We paused, reflected and identified possible solutions. The most plausible was a WhatsApp group. This app would allow diverse stakeholders to provide updates in their areas as often as required. WhatsApp was ideal for its low cost, widespread availability as long as the user had access to a smart phone. Its interactive nature meant that a wide variety of media could also be shared. Further one could switch on and off at their convenience.
Step 2: We consulted with stakeholders on the problem and proposed the solution for them to reflect and decide on. Their consent and willingness to participate was vital. Success depended on their interest and will to use their private internet bundles to provide updates. Stakeholders consented to participate in a WhatsApp group, be available to share updates from their respective areas and engage constructively on maize production at no cost to the project.
Step 3: The WhatsApp group was formed comprising of project staff, district agriculture staff, researchers and extension personnel and the engagement via the medium begun.
Step 4: Monitoring was done to assess the levels and quality of engagement and small measures were occasionally instituted to revitalize the group to achieve its initial purpose.

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?

Learning from the CLA approach and being able to considerably improve processes such as the content development process has institutionalized in the project a desire to have continuous learning and adaptive management as a thread that runs through project activities. As large scale SMS campaigns are relatively new in Tanzania, there is little practical experience to learn from. Much knowledge has therefore been gained through implementation. The CLA approach has therefore been invaluable in helping project staff to approach challenges with a stop, pause, reflect attitude. This allows project staff to analyse the situation, brainstorm the options, consult internally and externally and make informed decisions.

From an initially non collaborative content development process fraught with suspicion and lack of ownership, today the project's content development process is the epitome of openness, collaborative and consultative approaches adopted with diverse stakeholders. The project recognizes their valuable insights and experience and as a result partners believe they have a tangible stake in the project prompting them to want to do more. The result is an improved output. Considerable investment has been made in building strong relationships and networks and partners have reciprocated by investing resources to facilitate project work. For instance the recurring task of reviewing SMS for dissemination as well as monitoring activities is supported by government partners at no cost to the project. Private sector partners have also contributed to campaign funding whilst agro input companies offer free technical advice to the project on pest and disease management. Joint problem solving is occasionally instituted. For instance when the Fall Army Worm outbreak happened, discussions between partners on WhatsApp resulted in consensus building on appropriate management practices. The partnership is a remarkably cooperative one in which stakeholders pro-actively contribute to one goal, that of project effectiveness.

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?

In the words of a young extension officer in Ikumbi village in Mbeya District, "In January this year, farmers came to me carrying a worm which they said was destroying their maize. I had no idea what it was or how to manage it. The initial advice I proposed wasn't effective and the farmers kept coming back. We were frustrated. I turned to online research to find a solution but found the internet unhelpful because I lacked leads to narrow down the search. Then I received the CABI/Esoko SMS alerting of a fall army worm (FAW) outbreak, the means of detection and management. I disseminated the same to the farmers and thereafter the numbers coming back declined considerably. They had a solution."

Information on locations of outbreak and the measures farmers took to manage the insect pest was covered on the WhatsApp group . Once the outbreak was verified by the public research agency and approval to disseminate pest management information given, it was promptly done. Feedback and discussion on the spread and effectiveness of the indicated management measures by stakeholders helped to modify information appropriately. Delays by the government extension system to release insect pest alerts and management information often leaves the extension system ignorant and ineffective in supporting affected farmers leading to significant losses. Having a vibrant and responsive extension network means such alerts once verified can promptly be responded to minimize losses. Focus group discussions in March 2018 in Mbeya indicated pest and disease management as the biggest hindrance to improved farm productivity. In 2017, feedback from extension personnel on improper maize harvest and drying practices led to relevant information on post-harvest management practices being sent out to farmers contributing to food safety and enhancing the ability to fetch higher prices on the market. In the project's 2017 outcome survey, about 16% of SMS recipients said they had started to use PICS bags for storage arising from information disseminated.

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

A number of things worked for UPTAKE towards implementing the CLA approach. Top was management flexibility. We had the benefit of having a flexible project management structure and therefore elected to stop to reflect on success, challenges and corrective measures. Employing continuous learning as a philosophy in the life of a project requires flexible approaches in management.

Openness –things can and do go wrong in project design and implementation. An attitude of openness that recognizes that errors happen and the willingness to accept and put in corrective measures to get back to the intended trajectory is an important enabling factor.

In our case for instance, in the effort to fit within the label of scaling up, UPTAKE's SMS dissemination initially took on an enormous geographical scope. Only later through the continuous learning process did we realize this misstep and moved to rectify it. Had the project not been open in analysis of successes and challenges, this may not have changed. Key to establishing concrete relationships too is the willingness to consult, collaborate and accommodate other perspectives. External perspectives bring in different insights and experiences which can enrich the project's management and contribute immensely to ownership, often a difficult thing to achieve with development projects. UPTAKE is quite happy to be in the role of facilitator and not necessarily leader.

An obvious obstacle to adopting the CLA approach however is time. In our situation we struggled to go through the pre-campaign process in time for the cropping cycle. Consequently, the benefit of pausing to reflect and modify challenges wasn't always available. Notably too, we adopted CLA midstream. As an approach which strengthens the structure for project improvement based on lessons learned, it therefore relies on monitoring of processes being instituted at inception. Our project design didn't initially provide for monitoring the SMS component which made it complex to institute changes based on the results of a good monitoring process.

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

The CLA approach is a deliberate and conscious effort by a project to continually improve its performance through undertaking a structured process to either make small incremental changes in processes or fundamental shifts where feasible. It should be seen in a continuum rather than a one-off process tackling a particular incident. It may be regarded as a continuous problem solving tool premised on the mantra "If something is wrong, correct it!" CLA is best anticipated at project inception. Monitoring is at the heart of the CLA approach as the lessons it generates, provide the opportunity and platform for undertaking continuous improvement whether in building relationships, decision making or other facets of project implementation and management. Being a cycle, there should be another round of monitoring to assess whether the changes instituted deliver the desired results and continuing the process. The approach is best applied within contexts where problem solving and decision making is done in a collaborative manner with partners. Internal and external collaboration means empowering stakeholders to be active participants. This is a resource the project can benefit from but only if willing to recognize their contribution. Taking on CLA is demonstrating willingness to internalize the elements and apply them for improvement. It works well where the project management is open to corrective action. Projects ought to be conscious that CLA may portend a change to the project's management. Being participatory the project must question whether internal and external collaborators have space to openly discuss the challenges and find solutions. Change is often difficult to institute and there is the risk that it may be resisted. Notably, what CLA is not, is a panacea for all project challenges. Management should be able to breakdown these and deal with them in stages.