

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.

STOP, in the Name of Learning: Reflecting and Adapting Ethiopia's Approach to Attaining Feed the Future and Economic Growth Objectives

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Discussion with community members around how to build resilience in the face of the recent drought. Adriana Harvey, USAID.

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

Underlying USAID's Feed the Future portfolio in Ethiopia and approach to achieving its Development Objective I—Increased Economic Growth with Resiliency in Rural Ethiopia—is what is referred to as the push/pull hypothesis. The push-pull hypothesis seeks to build the capacity of vulnerable and chronically food insecure households to participate in economic activities (the “push”), while mobilizing market-led agricultural growth to generate relevant economic opportunity and demand for smallholder production, labor, and services (the “pull”). Since 2011, USAID's economic growth activities were designed in alignment with this hypothesis.

In accordance with USAID policy, USAID's mission in Ethiopia conducted several evaluations of individual activities in 2015 as well as an impact evaluation and performance evaluation to assess the impact of the five largest Feed the Future activities. Through these evaluations, USAID found that while some output level indicators were on track to be met, it was unlikely that the high-level outcome indicators linked to the Feed the Future strategy and Development Objective I would be

met within the five-year time period. The evaluations suggested several factors that may have contributed to this disconnect and questioned some of the assumptions underlying the implementation of the push/pull hypothesis. Evidence from the evaluations fed into discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the hypothesis and activity implementation during the technical office's retreat, the Feed the Future portfolio review, quarterly partners' meetings and the mission's project-level stocktaking efforts.

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

While USAID did specifically design the evaluations to test the validity of the underlying the Feed the Future activities, the evaluations highlighted the need to re-assess the key assumptions underlying the hypothesis and to consider ways to adapt to reach our higher-level strategic objective of reducing extreme poverty. For example, one assumption underlying the hypothesis is that people would move from one area to another to gain access to new on- and off-farm employment opportunities developed in neighboring regions. As a result, activities were designed so that the majority of "push" activities occurred in regions categorized as "Hungry/Emerging Ethiopia," while the majority of the "pull" activities were located in "Productive Ethiopia." But the evaluations argued that it was difficult to for farmers to move to between regions to seek greater employment opportunities and the demand for wage labor even outside the Feed the Future Zones of Influence remained small, at just about 10 percent on average, with livelihoods from on-farm crop production accounting for about three quarters of the total. The evaluations also highlighted that the extremely small size of land holdings served as a barrier preventing the poorest portion of the population from increasing agricultural productivity sufficiently to supply the quantities required for larger markets.

The timing of the information from the evaluation was advantageous as it was able to feed into the design of the Agricultural Value Chain and Private Sector Competitiveness Project, the design of several follow-on Feed the Future activities, and the mission-wide stocktaking efforts to inform the development of the second generation Country Development Cooperation Strategy.

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

Given the new evidence, the USAID Ethiopia economic growth team collaborated with other teams, particularly the alternative livelihoods and nutrition teams, to re-assess their approach and adapt new projects and activities. The office undertook a "looking back, looking forward" listening exercise during a regular quarterly partners' meeting to assess what lessons had been learned from the evaluations and activity implementation and to consider what improvements could be made.

Based on the evidence and learning, the team agreed that USAID should make the following adaptations:



1. Layer multiple activities in a more focused geographic area to strengthen the linkages between the “push” activities that target asset building for the most vulnerable households, and “pull” activities focused on enhanced productivity and generating access to markets.
2. Consolidate nutrition activities across the Feed the Future portfolio to ensure that the higher-level objective of decreasing malnutrition is achieved.
3. Develop better custom performance monitoring indicators to measure outcomes and impacts of intermediate level project activities.
4. Focus more on outcomes, such as sales and income at the farmer level after one or more years of program sponsored training, and develop our own methods for measuring impact.
5. Focus on linking smallholders to the markets that our private sector work creates.
6. With regard to the critique that several activities were not reaching the poorest households, activities that support private investors and other non-poor actors need to demonstrate the leveraged resources that they produce while also focusing on the direct spillover benefits to smallholders.

These recommendations for a new approach were incorporated into cross-office discussions around the design of the Agricultural Value Chain and Private Sector Competitiveness Project, approved in July 2015. In addition, the evaluation findings contributed to decisions to expand activities found to be the most cost effective (such as the Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development activity). Layering of activities will also be incorporated into the design of the new value chain activities that are currently in the procurement process. Many of the new approaches have not been implemented, but the learning behind the new approaches will be captured in the new Country Development Cooperation Strategy and will be evaluated over the next five years.

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

One of the obstacles identified to adapting programs was lack of flexibility in contracts and reporting requirements. To increase flexibility, the number of activity level indicators should be reduced and activities should focus on just a few high level targets.

USAID’s close coordination with Government of Ethiopia’s strategies and activities creates additional obstacles to shifting the geographic focus of activities. By supporting larger Government of Ethiopia-led, donor-supported programs which have defined targeted districts, Feed the Future has been able to leverage significant resources. On the other hand, there are political considerations to take into account to limiting the geographic scope of activities to layer multiple activities in the same districts.

Finally, there are coordination costs to layering activities into a smaller geographic zone. One approach to this dilemma is to create more multi-faceted activities, for example, including support for smallholder farmers, nutrition sensitive productivity and communications, and engagement with private sector under one contract to diminish the costs of coordinating among several activities and contractors.

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

USAID's economic growth team in Ethiopia is working with the USAID Geocenter to assess how geo-spatial data can be leveraged to feed into a future evaluation of the impact of layering and integrating poverty reduction, economic growth, and nutrition activities. The goal is to be able to rigorously validate the layered "push/pull" approach over the next five years. The design of the exact method for this evaluation is currently underway with a plan to have it finalized by September 2016.

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?

In addition to the required Feed the Future slate of indicators, offerors for the new Feed the Future value chain activity will be expected to focus on achieving three to five high-level outcome based indicators of activity impact. These can be standard Feed the Future indicators or custom indicators that more accurately capture activity impact. These indicators will be the ultimate measure of overall activity success and offerors were encouraged to be creative in their proposals for these critical indicators.

Also, in addition to the required slate of Feed the Future indicators, offerors were instructed to maintain comprehensive and itemized costs related to all value chain level activities. We stressed that USAID is no longer interested in simply reporting on indicators that are un-denominated by cost. Each intervention under this activity will be measured by its cost-effectiveness and the offeror was expected to propose a clear plan for documenting and comparing their interventions on this basis.

What were the most important lessons learned?

One of the main lessons learned is the importance of ensuring that activity-level indicators are linked to the development hypothesis and higher-level outcomes which projects and activities are designed to achieve. For instance, most of our Feed the Future Implementing partners state that there are too many indicators to report, and many indicators distract from higher level Feed the Future objectives. Even the design of the Feed the Future impact evaluation—household surveys—did not appropriately take into account the need to measure potential spill-over effects and impacts beyond the household level. Additionally, numerous examples of successful demonstrations and scalable interventions were not well reflected by the Feed the Future indicator framework. This includes the success of the Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development and Empowering the New Generation to Improve Nutrition and Economic Opportunities activities in demonstrating the effectiveness of the comprehensive support package that has helped inform the Government of Ethiopia design of the fourth phase of its Productive Safety Net Program.



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As a result, the team is now considering evaluation approaches that will be able to provide insights to the efficacy of the new integrated “push/pull” hypothesis and is developing relevant custom indicators to improve monitoring of higher-level outcomes. USAID is also dramatically reducing the number of intermediate level indicators to give implementing partners and the mission more flexibility in meeting its highest level objectives.

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