Implementation Tips *for* USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community | **Inclusive Development 15** | **2020**

Definitions

Monitoring: Periodic tracking (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually) of your project's progress by systematically gathering and analyzing data and information about what you are doing, whom you are reaching, and whether your activities are being implemented as planned.

Evaluation: The comparison of actual project impact against agreed-on plans. Evaluation looks at what you set out to do, what you have accomplished, and how you accomplished it.

Adaptive Management: An intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context.
Source: USAID ADS 201

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA): CLA involves strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management. CLA approaches to development include collaborating intentionally with stakeholders to share knowledge and reduce duplication of effort; learning systematically by drawing on evidence from a variety of sources and taking time to reflect on implementation; and applying learning by adapting intentionally.
Source: USAID ADS 201

Context Monitoring: The systematic collection of information about conditions and external factors relevant to the implementation and performance of a strategy, project, and activities. This includes monitoring local conditions that may directly affect implementation and performance or

Integrating Learning into Projects

Q   What is learning and how can it be used to improve M&E and program implementation?

A   Learning is a practice undertaken by an organization to intentionally and systematically gather lessons and knowledge for the purpose of improving program implementation. Adoption of a learning approach adds value because it prompts organizations and projects to look for, detect, and adapt to changing needs—thereby allowing them to operate more effectively in complex environments. Learning is often driven by a learning agenda, composed of learning questions, learning activities, and learning products.

By adopting a learning mindset, project managers can actively identify gaps in knowledge, prioritize information needs, and set up Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems and activities to address these gaps and needs. Project managers can then use the learning generated to make decisions and programmatic adjustments to increase the effectiveness of implementation. Learning efforts provide the foundation for adaptive management. (For more information on adaptive management, see the *Implementation Tip* on Adaptive Management.)

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting

In response to the need for a more systematic and intentional approach to learning, USAID developed the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework and built it into the Program Cycle. CLA is a set of practices that help improve development effectiveness by encouraging stakeholders to reflect on and respond to evidence generated through Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) activities so strategies can be adjusted to improve outcomes.[1] The CLA framework describes the elements that comprise a holistic approach to CLA (see figure 1).

The left-hand side of the framework indicates activities that can take place throughout the program cycle to facilitate CLA. A CLA approach to learning includes:

- Using an M&E system for continuous learning (rather than solely for accountability of results agreed upon with donors).

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1   USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit - Understanding CLA

Definitions, continued

external factors that may indirectly affect implementation and performance.
Source: USAID ADS 201

Indicator: A quantifiable measure of a characteristic or condition of people, institutions, systems, or processes that may change over time.

Network Analysis: An analytical approach that tracks and identifies relationships among various stakeholders in a system.
Source: USAID Learning Lab

Outcome Harvesting: An evaluation technique that starts with programming outcomes and works backwards to determine whether and how an intervention contributed to these outcomes.
*Source: BetterEvaluation*

Pause and Reflect: A component of learning and adaptive management: the act of taking time to think critically about ongoing activities and processes and plan for the best way forward.
Source: USAID ADS 201

Rapid Assessment: A structured evidence review that often includes key informant interviews and desk research. The scale of a rapid assessment is much smaller than an evaluation, allowing the assessment to be completed within a shorter timeframe (days or weeks instead of months).
Source: BetterEvaluation

Stocktaking: A structured review and assessment of ongoing efforts and options going forward.
Source: USAID ADS 201

Scenario Planning: Identifying existing and emerging trends that may affect programming, determining plausible outcomes or scenarios, and taking steps to monitor and mitigate risks.

Figure 1: CLA Framework
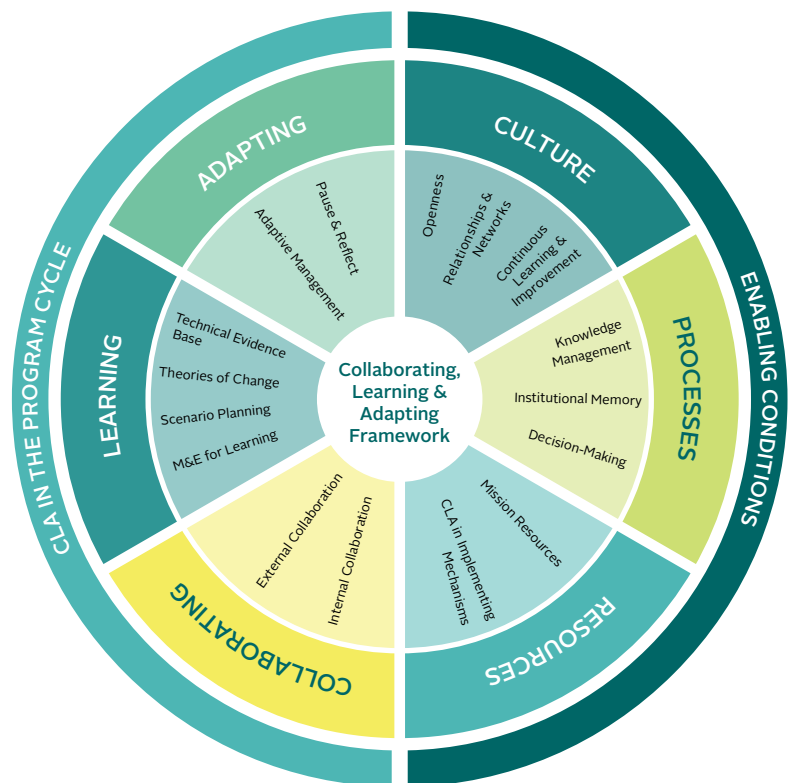
- Considering existing and emerging trends that may affect programming; determining plausible outcomes or scenarios; and taking steps to monitor and mitigate risks and/or detect and expand on opportunities (scenario planning).
- Using theories of change to articulate and test causal linkages and assumptions
- Leveraging diverse knowledge sources to build an evidence base for decision making.

The right-hand side of the framework describes the organizational conditions that can support CLA—the culture, processes, and resources that enable effective collaboration among stakeholders; the gathering and use of learning; and programmatic adaptation in light of emerging evidence. Learning approaches should take into account the enabling conditions present in your organization and how you can make use of existing processes and tools to embed learning in your organizational culture.
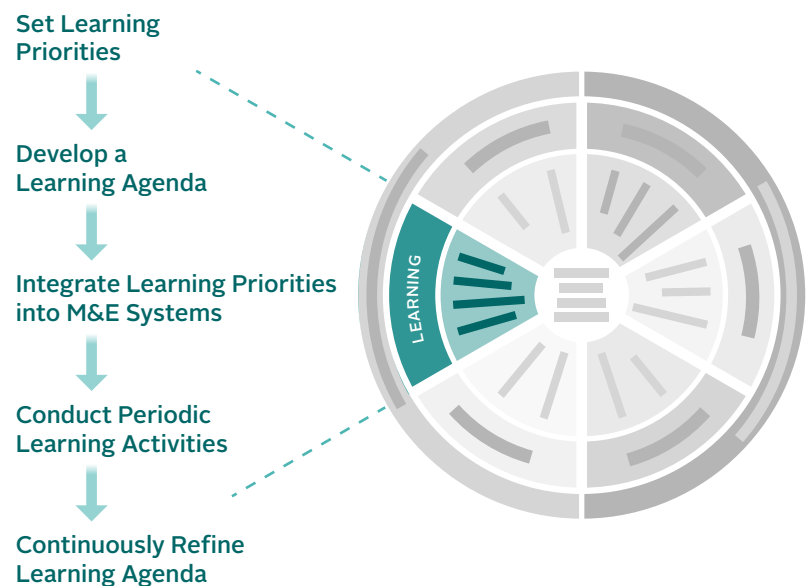
The CLA framework can also be used as a conversation starter—to help think about and discuss ways in which your organization can more fully embrace learning. The CLA framework is accompanied by a maturity tool, which describes what CLA looks like at different

stages of organizational maturity for each of the 16 elements of the CLA framework.[2] Your organization can use the tool to self-assess its current CLA practice as a basis for discussing what changes it would like to invest in to support deeper CLA integration.

The role of learning in improving implementation

Learning sits at the center of CLA. It is a response to the needs of stakeholders and informs programmatic shifts through adaptation. As such, learning is a set of activities that convene stakeholders around evidence so that they are better equipped for decision making. Figure 2 below shows how learning can be systematically approached in your organization.

Figure 2: Steps to Embedding Learning

Set Learning Priorities
↓
Develop a Learning Agenda
↓
Integrate Learning Priorities into M&E Systems
↓
Conduct Periodic Learning Activities
↓
Continuously Refine Learning Agenda

LEARNING

Setting learning priorities

Learning priorities are the topics or questions of most interest to key stakeholders, articulated to promote intentional reflection on programming to improve implementation strategies and effectiveness. Identifying learning priorities gives project managers and implementers greater returns on their M&E efforts. By addressing learning priorities, M&E systems can generate data that directly inform decision making for management purposes, course correction, and future planning. The ideal time to set learning priorities is during the planning or start-up phase of a project, although priorities can be established or adjusted at any time during implementation.

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2   USAID Learning Lab, Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) Maturity Spectrum

When establishing learning priorities, consider the following questions:[3]

1. What are we trying to achieve? What are the intended results? How will we know if we have achieved those?

2. What theories of change and assumptions do we need to test to ensure we achieve our intended results?

3. What do we not yet know that may affect the level of our achievement?

4. What do we want to learn? What additional learning activities are needed to better understand our context or development challenges?

Learning agendas

A learning agenda describes how a project's learning priorities will be pursued throughout project implementation. Designing and acting on a learning agenda enables implementers to take a structured and evidence-based approach to learning that informs decision making and adaptation. Learning agendas have three key components:[4]

1. *Learning questions:* These are the questions that will help you make better, more informed decisions and work more effectively. Learning questions should be tied to your learning priorities and serve to test assumptions, fill knowledge gaps, and explore opportunities and unintended outcomes.

2. *Learning activities:* These are the means for generating, analyzing, and synthesizing learning to answer the learning questions. Think through whether any M&E activities (e.g., evaluations, assessments) are scheduled and identify additional activities (both continuous and one-time) that can complement these processes and fill in gaps as necessary. Learning activities are often linked to an M&E plan but may also include additional activities such as literature reviews, rapid assessments, and workshops.

3. *Learning products:* These are the "outputs" of learning—the infographics, reports, blogs, meetings, etc., that result from learning activities. When determining which learning products to generate, consider the desired audience (i.e., the individuals who will be using the information presented) and how they can receive it in a way that best prompts them to take action for adaptive management.

Integrating learning and M&E

Your M&E system plays an instrumental role in embedding learning in your organization and projects. Your learning agenda helps you identify how you can use the information from M&E to answer learning questions and whether you need to collect any additional information.

3   USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit - M&E for Learning
4   USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit - Learning Agenda

There are several entry points for integrating learning in your M&E system:

ENTRY POINT	STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING LEARNING
Project Design	Identify your learning priorities and questions. Determine whether your learning questions should be answered with monitoring data, through an evaluation, or through a targeted study.
M&E System Development	Develop indicators that provide data relevant to your learning questions and ensure that they are collected frequently enough to inform decision making. Develop evaluation questions that are aligned with learning questions and ensure data collection efforts will encompass these (e.g., baseline studies, indicator data) to provide the evidence needed. Ensure the M&E system is also designed to test the causal linkages and assumptions in the theory of change.
Learning Agenda Development	Identify the products for learning, as well as the ideal timeline for implementing them.
Periodic Reflection	It is essential to hold formal reflection points throughout the life of a project to ensure that learning occurs in an intentional way. Formal reflection points can be integrated with annual reviews or can be standalone activities such as pause and reflect. Ahead of these reflection points, take stock of the evidence available to answer learning questions and identify any knowledge gaps that can be filled through special studies such as rapid assessments, network analyses, and desk reviews.

If you are integrating learning into your M&E system after it has already been designed, you will want to assess how the current system is being used for learning and identify ways it can be further aligned to your learning priorities. Key questions to consider include:[5]

- Does the project have the right set of indicators? Who is using them? For what purpose?

- Are indicator data helping to understand if higher-level results are being achieved?

- Are monitoring data being used to reflect performance and inform adjustments?

- Are evaluations being utilized to inform current and future programming?

- When was the last time a key decision was made based on M&E data? How often does this happen?

- Do the data provide enough evidence to validate the theory of change or any of its key programmatic assumptions?

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5   USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit - M&E for Learning

SCS Global thanks Consortium Partner Social Impact for drafting the content for this *Implementation Tip*.

Learning activities

Your organization's particular learning needs and priorities will drive the ways in which learning is pursued and facilitated. Below are some suggested learning activities that can be adapted to your organization's culture and learning needs.[6] (See also the Resources section.)

- Conduct a targeted literature review or rapid assessment on an area/sector of interest to increase your technical evidence base ahead of a programmatic decision.
- In developing your theory of change, include stakeholder consultations to increase understanding of context and include diverse perspectives.
- Use activities such as stakeholder consultations and outcome harvesting to test assumptions articulated in the theory of change and modify theories as needed.
- Share learning (through meetings, knowledge-sharing events, or learning products) with other implementing partners and donors to assist with their own planning and design activities.
- Develop scenario-planning narratives that describe existing and emerging trends that may affect programming; monitor the project for early warning signals that the current scenario "fit" is shifting.
- Use context monitoring to detect shifts in the operating environment that indicate adaptation is necessary.
- Host learning workshops following evaluation fieldwork to reflect on preliminary findings and conclusions and develop recommendations jointly with the evaluator.
- Conduct after-action reviews after major project activities (e.g., evaluation, pilot test of implementation approach, baseline study) to identify what was supposed to happen, what did happen, and what can be learned for future activities.
- Hold pause and reflect sessions to take stock of existing learning, identify gaps, and make programmatic adaptations based on incoming evidence.

6 USAID Learning Lab, Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) Maturity Spectrum