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Measuring the intangible: lessons from USAID partners on how to measure the impact of organizational learning and adaptive management

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This paper explores lessons learned from a USAID-funded learning network of implementing partners, known as CLAIM, which developed innovative methods to measure the seemingly intangible contributions of collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes. CLA is a USAID Framework and a set of practices that can be used to strengthen organizational learning and the conditions that enable it. CLA can be applied to USAID's programming to improve organizational effectiveness and development outcomes. Learning network members developed and tested a range of methods and tools to measure the extent to which organizations and projects integrated CLA and whether that integration contributed to organizational or development outcomes. Approaches analyzed in this paper include: developing clear theories of change to determine what researchers would "expect to see" were CLA to contribute to outcomes; CLA self-assessment processes to measure the extent of CLA integration; and the use of pivot or change logs to document both CLA integration and its contributions. Learning network members also found the learning network model to be a useful approach for sharing and pooling learning across members, despite some structural challenges identified in this paper during the life of the network. The approach and early findings may be useful for a broad audience, including knowledge management professionals who regularly facilitate peer learning, and researchers who study difficult-to-measure outcomes in various technical sectors. Specifically, it may be useful for those interested in measuring the contribution of organizational learning, knowledge management, and adaptive management to organizational change and development results. Challenges and limitations around time, samples, and resources impacted the ability of the learning network members to produce categorical evidence about the impact of CLA on organizational effectiveness and development outcomes. However, the

initiative produced interesting findings, such as how pivot logs proved most helpful for capturing development outcomes but are subject to biases.

Keywords: international development; organizational learning; organizational development; USAID; CLA; adaptive management; knowledge management: USA

Introduction

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) is working to institutionalize collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) into its program planning and implementation, as part of a broader effort to improve the effectiveness of its development assistance through organizational learning, knowledge management (KM), and adaptive management. USAID funded a Learning and Knowledge Management (LEARN) project to support organizational change at USAID and enable USAID to integrate CLA approaches into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programs. USAID/PPL and LEARN initiated the Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) work stream to determine whether strategic collaboration, organizational learning, KM, and adaptive management contribute to organizational and development outcomes and how this contribution can be measured. In her paper, *“How USAID is building the evidence base for knowledge management and organizational learning,”* Stacey Young describes the EB4CLA initiative and the five supporting activities in detail.ⁱ This paper focuses on one of those supporting activities: the CLA Initiative for Measurement (CLAIM) Learning Network.

The CLAIM Learning Network was launched in the fall of 2016 to develop and share innovative methods to measure the contribution of CLA to organizational and development outcomes. A learning network is a “facilitated, peer-to-peer learning approach that can be highly effective at documenting and sharing knowledge between donors and implementing partners to help strengthen a particular technical area.”ⁱⁱ Typically, USAID structures learning networks around 5-10 member organizations (with 2-3 representatives from each organization). USAID has supported at least 15 learning networks since 2002.

Unlike communities of practice or other learning groups, in the USAID context, learning networks are formally funded typically through grants to learning member organizations, and exist for a finite period. Learning network members are expected to:

- Contribute to the creation of a shared learning agenda for the network;

- Complete individual deliverables and contribute to shared network deliverables (such as a journal article, brief summarizing approaches or lessons from across the network, etc.); and
- Attend in-person and virtual meetings during which they share what they are learning, assist their peers, provide technical feedback, and share technical resources.

Five awards were made under CLAIM to organizations to engage in an 18-month long co-creation process to collaboratively advance understanding of measuring and demonstrating the effects and potential impact of material investments in strategic collaboration, program and organizational learning, and adaptive management. The winners of the five awards were:

- Counterpart International focused on the Participatory Responsive Governance—Principal Activity (PRG-PA) in Niger to measure the degree to which staff used CLA-generated knowledge and learning in planning activities and executing decisions in their daily work and the degree of empowerment that participants felt they had in those activities.
- The Global Knowledge Initiative pursued replicable approaches for monitoring and evaluating collaboration by testing and refining the Context-Collaboration-Program Effects (CCPE) Analysis on the Learning and Innovation Network for Knowledge and Solutions (LINKS) program in Uganda.
- Market Share Associates built and tested a set of CLA-focused tactics, such as coaching modules on adaptive management and pivot logs through the DFID-funded Arab Women’s Enterprise Fund (AWEF) in Egypt.
- Mercy Corps field tested promising techniques for promoting adaptive management through pilot projects as part of the Analysis Driven Agile Programming Techniques (ADAPT) initiative.
- Pollen Group conducted two comparative, longitudinal case studies of projects that have made significant investments in CLA in Bangladesh and Zambia.

Members were brought together for in-person sessions at the launch and close of the network in November 2016 and March 2018, respectively. At the launch event, members created a shared learning agenda. Between the launch and closing sessions, members met virtually on a monthly basis to share progress, challenges, and approaches, and request feedback. LEARN also provided technical inputs to support members' efforts, such as write-ups on plausible contribution methods, confirmation bias, and aggregating findings across members. The closing session was an opportunity for members to synthesize their key lessons learned against their original learning agenda questions.

CLAIM was jointly managed by two USAID-funded contracts: the Feed the Future Knowledge-Driven Agricultural Development project (KDAD), which covered the grants management portion, and LEARN, which facilitated the Learning Network.

Definition of key terms

In order to understand better the ways in which collaborating, learning, and adapting positively impact organizational effectiveness and development outcomes, the learning network utilized a set of defined key terms. Defining exactly what “CLA” means, and the facets of organizational health that comprise it, helped the network operate from a shared understanding among themselves. Having clear definitions is particularly critical for this type of measurement work, specifically as it relates to proving the plausible contribution of CLA to organizational effectiveness and/or development outcomes. When “CLA” is used throughout this paper, it is not just referring to the practices of collaborating, learning, and adapting. It refers to the entire CLA Framework that includes knowledge management, adaptive management, decision-making, relationships and networks, and other aspects of organizational health.ⁱⁱⁱ

Structure of this Paper

In this paper, you will find:

- Background - This section will provide background literature on what has already been attempted in terms of measuring the contribution of CLA to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes.
- Research Questions and Design - This section will describe the key research questions explored by each member in the learning network, briefly describe the research designs employed to answer those research questions, and describe how the CLAIM learning network was designed to foster cross-partner learning about the methods used.
- Discussion and Findings of Measurement Approaches - This section will present what the CLAIM learning network learned about the methods and tools used in trying to measure the contribution of CLA to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes.
- Reflection on the Learning Network Model - This section will share reflections on the use of the learning network as an approach for generating learning on EB4CLA questions. It will focus on sharing what worked well, what did not, and what could be changed about the approach for future use.
- Implications - This section will provide possible actions and considerations for USAID, other donors, and those interested in developing the evidence base for CLA, and will suggest areas for further research.

Research questions and design

Primary research questions

The primary research question for this paper was one of the key questions of the EB4CLA initiative and each awardee: how do we effectively measure the contribution (or lack thereof) of CLA to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes?

USAID used the learning network model to create a forum in which members could learn from their research experience in answering the key EB4CLA questions:

- Does a systematic, intentional, and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes?
- If so, how and under what conditions?

This section provides background on the learning network model as a way to generate learning across member organizations and outlines members' research designs in response to these two EB4CLA questions.

Learning network members' research questions and designs

Below is a brief explanation of each learning network member's specific research questions and design.

Counterpart International

Counterpart's primary research questions were:

- Do decisions differ based on sources used? Do participants change decisions more/less over time based on sources used? Do participants' sources change over time?
- Did the outcome of an activity correlate with the decisions that led to it? Which direction? With what magnitude?

To answer these questions, Counterpart worked with its Participatory Responsive Governance-Principal Activity (PRG-PA) in Niger to measure the selection and application of knowledge sources in the cohort of facilitators and how that selection and application affected the participation quality in the program's community-government dialogues. As the activity changed, the study design also changed from a single-focus study on the application of learning by facilitators to also include a study of the staff's application of learning. For this concurrent triangulation, Counterpart used quantitative and qualitative data to cross-validate and corroborate findings. The quantitative methods analyzed the facilitators' application of knowledge and the outcomes.

Global Knowledge Initiative (GKI)

GKI's primary research questions were:

- Does awareness of changes in the context (the agricultural sector in Uganda, in this case) lead to proactive action to improve development outcomes?
- Does responding and adapting to signals of change in the system, and/or proactively leveraging collaboration opportunities, result in improved ability to meet the growth goals of BioCrops (GKI's partner in Uganda)?

To answer these questions, GKI collaborated with a Uganda-based organization, BioCrops Uganda Limited, to assist them in adapting to changes emerging from the constantly evolving and complex agricultural innovation system to more effectively achieve their growth goals. The GKI team pursued the research questions from an optimization approach.

MarketShare Associates (MSA)

MarketShare Associates sought to build, test, and measure the impacts of a set of CLA-focused tactics with the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF), a five-year, DFID-funded project that takes a Market Systems Development^{iv} approach to women's economic empowerment in Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan. The study set out to test two hypotheses with the Egypt program:

- CLA is facilitated when tools, processes, and support (e.g., coaching) are tailored to individuals' and teams' unique collaboration challenges, and context/room for adaptation.
- More effective CLA translates to improved development outcomes.

To test these hypotheses, MSA utilized baseline, midline, and end line surveys to measure changes in CLA during the lifetime of the project.

Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps' primary research questions were:

- Do adaptive factors (i.e., collaborating, learning, and adapting practices) enable project teams to take adaptive actions (i.e., utilize information to make informed decisions that are then acted upon)? If so, how?
- To what extent do adaptive actions contribute to achieving development outcomes? What is the adaptive margin (i.e., the difference between what happened as a result of the adaptive action, and what would have happened if the action had never been taken)?

Mercy Corps investigated these questions working with two Mercy Corps project offices in Nepal and Timor-Leste. Researchers first refined and used Mercy Corps’ and the International Rescue Committee’s AdaptScan co-assessment process with teams, which determines the extent of their adaptive factors/CLA practices. This was followed-up with semi-structured key informant interviews to determine whether adaptive factors contributed to adaptive actions and subsequent adaptive margins, as described above. As a result, researchers were able to document eight adaptive “action chains,” each constructed around a specific action that the program took to adapt its approach.

Pollen Group and Canopy Lab

Pollen Group/Canopy Lab’s primary research questions were:

- How does learning happen and get applied?
- How does this learning impact performance (internal) and outcomes (external)?
- What enables and inhibits CLA?

To answer these questions, Pollen Group and Canopy Lab developed comparative, longitudinal case studies of two organizations in relation to their approach to CLA: the USAID-funded Bangladesh Agricultural Value Chains (AVC) project and Musika, a Zambian non-profit. The overarching methodology, essentially following the organizations for more than a year, was designed to understand which investments in CLA were the most beneficial for the organizations and why, and to synthesize learning that could assist other projects working in different contexts to identify the investments that might be appropriate for them. This research was qualitative in nature and involved a mix of observation of project staff during learning meetings, and of key partners including market actors, donors, and other development actors.

CLAIM Tools Call Out Box

The following describe several tools used (and in some cases developed) by CLAIM awardees during their research:

Action Chains: Mercy Corps mapped out chains using action chains. The chains are horizontal tables that describe the “factors” that enabled the action, the “actions” (including information that sparked the action), and the “margin” (the state prior to the action, the result of the action and an estimate of what would have occurred without the action).

ADAPT5 Framework: MSA applied this self-assessment tool to help projects “take stock” of where they were in terms of CLA, identify areas of strength and improvement, and contextual factors they had to work around. The framework identified five major categories of CLA

(enabling conditions, culture and leadership, collaboration, adaptation, and monitoring and learning).

Adaptive factors framework: Mercy Corps used this framework to form the basis of team discussions on which factors enabled or inhibited specific adaptive actions.

CLA landscape framework: Pollen Group used this framework to analyze three levels at which CLA happens on a project - i) internal processes; ii) external processes; and iii) high-level strategic decision-making – and analyze how (if at all) these led to a change in strategy, tactic or intervention design.

Pathway/Decision Mapping: To analyze the success of individual knowledge products (via positive deviance and conditional probabilities), the GKI team mapped the pathways from request through adoption for each knowledge product.

Participatory Quality Assessment (PQA): Counterpart used this tool to measure participant feelings of empowerment and engagement with the government through the use of visuals. Visuals were created to represent different levels of citizen participation and were tailored to fit the local context. Participants would select the visual that best represented their level of engagement, and their selections were then used as evaluation data throughout the project.

Pivot log: A tool that captures details about a specific change, or “pivot,” made by an organization. In order to understand how CLA did or did not connect to outcomes, MSA and Pollen Group both used pivot logs to share specific stories of how learning led to decision-points for the project team.

Discussion and findings on measurement approaches

The multitude of measurement approaches used by the learning network members yielded a rich array of findings, of which several key ones are presented here.^v CLAIM facilitated the identification of these lessons via an in-person and virtual reflection and brainstorming sessions.

General lessons

A theory of change was needed to articulate different levels of measurement

Given the complexity of the causal pathway, the learning partner members found that developing a detailed theory of change (TOC) was instrumental to articulating the series of expected changes across all stages. The TOC made it clear, ex ante, what causal pathway was anticipated to link CLA with development outcomes. Perhaps more

critically, given that the participating learning network members all believed in the efficacy of CLA, they also found that the TOC helped to reduce confirmation bias. For instance, MSA created a results chain that outlined the specific steps in the change process and included “Expect-to-See” evidence (i.e., data we would expect to find if the contribution claim holds true. If one doesn’t see this evidence, the claim is likely false. If one does see it, the claim is a plausible cause of the observed change, but it may not be the only cause. It is necessary but not sufficient to support a contribution claim.) This was paired with means of verification, so that it was clear ex ante where evidence would be drawn from. These steps were consistent with the learning network’s research on plausible contribution and contribution bias (Shapiro, 2017), conducted in recognition of this potential bias by the researchers.

While the specifics varied somewhat, an analysis of the causal pathways of the learning network partners revealed several common elements that would need to be measured in order to prove or disprove the research question. These would, therefore, form common components in a theory of change, including:

- Activities by the learning network members to support application of CLA practices: testing the theory of change required assessing whether the learning partners had completed planned activities to improve the CLA practices of the partner organization
- Improved application of CLA by focus organizations and their staff: once the CLA support activities were completed, the organizations would need to assess whether CLA had been incorporated or improved (in the case that such practices were already being practiced) by the partner organization. In practice, this was typically evidenced by partner staff having taken a decision. A decision was typically used as a tangible, measurable opportunity to examine the direction that the partner organization was taking and to examine whether and the extent to which CLA had influenced the decision (e.g., by using learning to inform the decision).
- Development outcomes: a third critical component in testing the theory of change was to assess what development outcomes had occurred. Given that every partner organization would have been aiming to achieve development outcomes even had they not received CLA support, the theory of change needed to specifically examine what net differences there were (if any) between the outcomes that were achieved having applied CLA practices and the outcomes that would have been achieved absent the application of those practices. The section on Lessons on Measuring Changes in Development Outcomes below explores the approaches used by the learning network to measure this.

The research design needed to be flexible given the challenge of measuring the research question(s)

The learning network identified that maintaining flexibility in the research design was critical given the type of changes it was seeking to measure. This included partnering with multiple organizations to reduce the risk of failure and using multiple research tools to increase flexibility if one or more did not work as intended.

Lessons on measuring changes in the application of CLA

CLA must be defined up front to facilitate measurement

CLA encompasses a broad array of practices. This can complicate measurement of whether CLA has been applied. In some cases, learning network members encouraged a pre-selected CLA practice and then looked for evidence of its adoption. In other projects, however, learning network members were uncertain of how the application of CLA practices would manifest. Several of those partners found it was important to define ex ante what those practices included using the CLA Framework and Maturity Tool as a starting point.^{vi} For example, MSA used an ADAPT5 framework that included five categories of CLA-type practices. ADAPT5 was applied to define CLA with the team but was also helpful to enable prioritization with the team of what they would focus on. Mercy Corps' adaptive factors framework included a series of aspects that would influence the ability of an organization to apply CLA. Pollen Group and Canopy Lab's CLA landscape framework identified three levels at which CLA could be observed as having been applied within an organization: internal processes, external processes, and high-level strategic decision making. These frameworks proved helpful in focusing the development of research tools ex ante—and in some cases the focus of any related support for the organization to improve its CLA practices—as well as identifying ex post where CLA practices had improved, and where changes that could be attributed to the application of a CLA practice were.

The learning partners had several lessons in how to define CLA. For instance, MSA found that it was important to differentiate between reactive changes (i.e., changes driven primarily by external factors that likely would have happened anyway, such as changes in response to a new government policy), and proactive changes (i.e., changes that an organization takes due to internal drivers, such as in response to an organization's own learning systems).

Self-assessments are effective tools for generating partner buy-in and can substantially affect the quality of research findings

While the learning network members made significant use of key informant interviews, in which they directly collected information from their partner organizations on the

application of CLA, several organizations also utilized self-assessment tools. For instance, Mercy Corps used a self-assessment tool in which the partner organizations themselves were the ones that assessed what changes had occurred and whether CLA was a contributor to those changes. Similarly, MSA facilitated the use of its ADAPT5 framework by its partner organization to identify “CLA pain points” that measurement would then focus on and assess the existing level of application within the organization. Both organizations found that self-assessments were helpful in building buy-in from their partners. This was important given that the quality of research findings depended substantially on the buy-in of the partner organizations; those partner organizations with low buy-in participated in the research process either only a little or not at all. However, self-assessment tools did suffer from the risk of bias noted with pivot logs.

The context plays a significant role in shaping the most appropriate methods for measuring CLA

Several learning network members found that the contexts in which partners were working affected whether CLA practices could be applied, and hence the utility of different research methods. These included: the regulatory context (e.g., the ability of the partner organization to adapt its plans); the resources of the partner organization (inadequate resources reduced responsiveness); the partner’s organizational incentives (where low or missing, partners struggled to engage); and the mindset of the partner organization’s counterparts vis-à-vis CLA. Understanding or at least adapting the research methods to these factors proved important for many of the learning partners.

The slow pace of CLA implementation requires a less-intensive, longer-duration research approach

The slow pace at which CLA manifested within partner organizations drove the research design. As noted by the Pollen Group and Canopy Lab, “it is important to emphasize low-intensity, long-duration relationships with projects. Building a culture of learning takes time and this, in turn, translates slowly into new ways of working with partners. This makes it important to have a longer time horizon in mind when undertaking this type of research...” (Bourque et al., 2018). Changes were rarely observed quickly, and so the research design needed to reflect this. This long-term duration implied that the burden placed on partner organizations of the research needed to be kept manageable.

Pivot logs help capture key decision points, but are less useful for measuring other manifestations of CLA

To measure changes in CLA, all learning network members first defined what constituted evidence that CLA had been applied. This varied between learning network members, given the types of projects they were working on. A method used by several partners was a pivot log, also referred to as a change log.

The learning network members found that pivot logs helped “to capture the decision points that ultimately shifted some major aspect of either organizations’ strategy or how they operated internally” (Pollen Group, 2018). Moreover, by being oriented around specific decisions or pivots that were made, it allowed a very granular understanding of the causes and results of those decisions. For example, Mercy Corps used the Adaptive Factors Framework to help the teams identify the adaptive factors that enabled the change, as well as the specific results that emerged as a result.

However, the pivot logs also did suffer from some weaknesses. For instance, the focus of the pivot log on a key change means that it was inherently unable to capture points when the appropriate application of CLA was actually to make no change at all. This was posited as a particular challenge for more mature organizations, which may understand their context better and therefore make fewer pivots while still applying CLA. In cases where few pivots are being made, the pivot log will not be a very helpful tool. Further, the focus on specific changes means that it can be difficult to assess what the sum of the various pivots is for an organization (Mercy Corps, 2018). Another challenge with the pivot log was that because of its case study orientation, the tool is prone to subjectivity. This is particularly true when applied to document decisions that were taken a long time previously, as recall issues become particularly serious. Several learning network members were hesitant to ask about negative outcomes or even raise this as a possibility when facilitating the exercise with their teams. This was often driven by a desire to maintain interest and momentum in the research study itself. Learning network members attempted to mitigate this by seeking confirmation from multiple parties and promising anonymity to respondents.

Quantitative analysis can be helpful in analyzing cases with large numbers of observations

Learning network members used mostly qualitative tools. However, they found that quantitative tools were most appropriate when applied to cases with large numbers of observations. Quantitative methods were critical for Counterpart to analyze the extent to which field facilitators were using CLA as a knowledge source in their group facilitations. The method proved quite effective in defining a counterfactual, as the facilitators who did not draw on CLA activity as a knowledge source could be compared against those who did.

However, some learning network members did not find as much utility from using staff surveys to capture changes in CLA practices in their partner organizations. Because the small number of staff at partner organizations meant that the findings were not statistically significant and because of high turnover within those partner organizations,

only some of the respondents were able to reflect on changes that had happened and the extent to which CLA application had evolved. Accordingly, one learning network member decided to stop deploying surveys and focus exclusively on key informant interviews (KIIs) to assess change at midline and end line.

Key informant interviews of staff need to be applied at the right time with a full set of actors

Every learning network member used KIIs with project partners to complement their other tools and interpret their findings. One lesson was the importance of including within the interviews the full set of actors that influence the application of CLA. In MSA's case, this included team members at headquarters given the important role they played in setting organizational culture, as well as the field-based team. The timing of the KIIs was also important to improve the ability of learning network members to interpret results. For instance, learning network members found that a KII used to establish a baseline of CLA practices should be done once an organization or project has had an opportunity to mature. Otherwise, it is difficult to distinguish between changes in staff attitudes or practices as a result of efforts under CLA versus those resulting from staff simply feeling more confident to make decisions, collaborate with each other, and share mistakes.

Lessons on measuring changes in development outcomes

How development outcomes are defined will significantly impact the timeframe required to measure outcomes; changes in partner organizations can be observed more quickly but changes in the populations that they serve take longer

Across the learning network members, there were differences in how development outcomes were defined. Some defined development outcomes as achieving changes in their partner organizations (e.g., improved financial stability), while others sought to capture changes at the level of the population served by those partner organizations (e.g., increased incomes for poor farmers). The definition of the desired development outcomes had significant impacts on the ease of capturing them and the timeframe in which they would be captured. Whereas changes at the partner organization level could be observed more quickly, changes in development outcomes for their target beneficiaries often exceeded 18 months (which was the lifetime of the learning network). Consequently, only two of the five learning network members were able to measure CLA's contribution towards development outcomes over the period of the grant.

Pivot logs proved most helpful for capturing development outcomes but are subject to biases

The only tool successfully used by the learning network to capture development outcomes was various iterations on the pivot log. Mercy Corps' Action Chain, for instance, expanded on the basic pivot log by not only identifying examples of changes, but also the adaptive conditions that supported them and the development outcomes that resulted. The Action Chain tool yielded eight cases in which specific actions had led to development results. The measurement of the development results was typically done using other tools (e.g., surveys) via the project's monitoring system.

There were several challenges with using this method. First, the method remains highly dependent upon the quality of analysis in selecting interpretations for why these development outcomes occurred and the role of the project in creating them. As project staff were involved in this interpretive process—and were indeed essential for identifying and interpreting each case—there was high potential for bias. This is likely reflected in the fact that none of the stories involved negative impacts on development outcomes, and indeed one of the learning network members felt quite hesitant in raising the possibility of negative results with their project-based colleagues. The primary method for avoiding confirmation bias was to bring together multiple perspectives within each program team, and then use program monitoring data to validate program outcomes that were identified by the project.

A second challenge was assigning the counterfactual (i.e., the “adaptive margin”) on what the development outcomes would have been if the decision had not been made. Given the case study approach of examining a specific decision point and finding the related development outcomes, many common options for assessing the counterfactual (e.g., in reference to a comparison group) were not feasible. Mercy Corps decided to assign the counterfactual as being no change. For example, in an intervention on female leadership in community organizations, one learning partner was already seeing some slow improvements prior to taking action; the learning network member compared the actual results achieved against the counterfactual of where those gradual improvements might have reached had they continued at the same pace. The learning network identified other ways to assign a counterfactual, albeit with their own challenges. For instance, one option was to estimate the net benefit that would have been created through providing a cash transfer to beneficiaries with the same amount of project funds, though this would require strong tracking of the intervention's costs and an estimation of those associated with a cash transfer program. Another option was to estimate the outcomes of a “second best” intervention relative to the one that was chosen, under the assumption that the project may have done something else had it not taken the decision that it did. However, given the myriad of programming options available in most contexts, assigning this decision would not have been easy either. Finally, those applying the pivot logs found it

challenging to determine what the overall effect was of the various changes and development outcomes captured through each log.

Reflection on use of a learning network

Benefits of the learning network model

Overall, members indicated that they found the learning network to be an effective model for generating and pooling shared knowledge about CLA measurement approaches. The key benefits of membership included:

- **Engaging with influential, intelligent, and like-minded colleagues struggling with the same measurement challenges.** As one participant noted, the “network brought together a number of thoughtful organizations approaching the same challenge from multiple angles. Those differing perspectives on the problem provided a great opportunity to refine our individual and collective thinking on it, as each of us focused on different aspects of the problem.”
- **Learning about new measurement methods and reflecting on existing approaches.** Members specifically highlighted methods that they can use in future programming, including change/pivot logs, the case study approach, and the frameworks developed to measure CLA or adaptive management. Members also called out discussions and write-ups produced by the learning network facilitator on confirmation bias and plausible contribution as particularly helpful and applicable to future research efforts.
- **Identifying ways to better integrate CLA into members’ organizations:** While not an explicit focus of the learning network, a by-product of the network appears to be that network members gained insights about how to better integrate CLA into their organizations. For example, one participant noted, “personally, I will use pause and reflect much more intentionally and use change logs on all my projects to determine when, how, and how often I am adapting and projects are adapting.”

Almost all network members responded affirmatively when asked if they would join a similar learning network in the future, under conditions including: strong facilitation, well-chosen participants based on clear criteria, constant engagement among members, a similarly well-defined learning question, and more in-person meetings.

From a learning network facilitation perspective, the learning network provided a safe space for members to experiment. Expectations were set at the outset: not all members would be able to demonstrate the contribution of CLA to organizational or development outcomes. However, each member was responsible for trying out and learning from its

approach, and thus contributing to advancing the effort to measure the contribution of CLA to organizational and development outcomes.

Challenges faced by the network

Structurally, the learning network suffered from some limitations. The timeline for the network (18 months) was driven by the timing of USAID’s mechanism (KDAD), under which it could provide grants to learning network members. Typically, USAID learning networks would be much longer in duration, from 24 to 36 months. Almost all learning network members and the facilitators consistently struggled with the limited timeframe, with two members indicating they could have potentially changed their research approach when a local partner was unresponsive, or when results were found to be lacking in significance.

In addition, limited financial resources meant that there were only two in-person sessions limited to two days each. In previous USAID learning networks, there was an additional mid-point, in-person meeting, and these in-person meetings lasted up to five days each. This provided more opportunity for members to build relationships and engage in substantive discussion. Learning network members noted that in-person opportunities were the most useful and they would have appreciated more.

Lastly, from a design perspective, the learning network facilitators (USAID and LEARN) were just initiating the broader EB4CLA work stream described above when CLAIM launched. As a result, the lessons learned from USAID’s evidence building efforts were not brought into the design of the learning network. For example, the solicitation lacked sufficient discussion of plausible contribution and confirmation bias that could have more directly influenced proposals and ultimately the research designs used by those selected. In addition, the solicitation may have focused more intentionally on getting members with the skills needed to develop, test, and refine measurement methods as opposed to those more familiar with CLA approaches. As one participant noted in their evaluation form, “A group focused on innovating measurement strategies on CLA should have both experts in CLA and in measurement. Research teams with only one—or neither—are unlikely to be effective.” Building on this point, during the launch of the learning network, LEARN technical advisors and facilitators were only beginning to understand what successful studies would require based on prior experience. As a result, they were not able to guide members as effectively to more rigorous designs. The same participant noted, “More pressure should be made in the earliest stages to push teams to rigorous designs. Having technical staff [from the] measurement side of USAID may have helped in this regard.”^{vii}

Implications

The findings of the CLAIM learning network point to lessons for both academic researchers and donors interested in determining the impact of strategic collaboration, organizational learning, knowledge management, and adaptive management on organizational and development outcomes.

For donors funding this type of research in the future:

- **Design a longer funding timeline.** Most learning network members found the timeline (18 months) too short to trace results chains from the practice of CLA to impact on outcomes. As a result, some sought to trace impact on intermediate organizational level outputs and outcomes (for example, improved production efficiency, staff retention, firm expansion, revenue). Moving forward, others may consider outlining ex ante the different levels of development outcomes being measured to spark deeper insight and learning.
- **Assess the opportunity cost of the practice and impact of CLA.** The learning network faced the challenge of assigning a “counterfactual” or the adaptive margin indicating the opportunity cost in terms of development outcomes. Identifying a “second best option” or cash transfers to other alternatives might offer avenues for further research. This insight may also be useful for identifying the optimal point in the practice of CLA when it might be more appropriate to cease CLA activities and divert funding to second best options.
- **Facilitate co-creation of research design.** Creating a mechanism that allows learning network members to co-design their research approaches, such that they are more intentionally complementary or comparable, will allow for more nuanced insights and easier aggregation of findings at the conclusion of the research process.
- **Invest in creating an enabling environment to accelerate adoption and mainstreaming of CLA practices.** Moving forward, others might consider evaluating the enabling environment and CLA maturity of partner organizations before selecting a research approach to ensure that measurement activities can be effectively carried out. Differences in mindset, incentives, resources, and decision-making processes of partner organizations influenced the effectiveness of the research approaches. Additionally, the external enabling environment influenced the application of CLA and assessment of its impact. For example, regulatory structures (such as laws governing civil society organizations in Egypt) or complex social norms

(such as the role of women in economic activities) were barriers confronting project operations, and presented challenges to subsequent measurement activities.

For future researchers assessing the impact of CLA activities on organizational and development outcomes:

- **Identify the right partners for the research and investigate thresholds of “stopping” as an adaptive practice.** Applying a CLA approach to the research process itself has revealed interesting insights. Selecting the right partner influences the successful conclusion of the research. The Global Knowledge Initiative, in particular, noted the issue of determining thresholds for stopping “adaptive management” when the results from efforts are sub optimal, and stopping the research, and in other cases, even projects.
- **Build common definitions of “evidence” of CLA practice and its impact on development outcomes.** Thresholds of what constitutes “evidence” of both the practice of CLA and its impact on outcomes should be defined clearly from the outset of the learning network. Doing so may result in multiple partners testing similar CLA approaches that could be compared later. Further, network members may use a wide range of indicators as credible evidence of impact, operating from the assumption that they sought plausible contributions and not categorical evidence.
- **Investigate the alternative hypothesis and mitigate confirmation bias.** A strategy to counter the biases highlighted in the research tools used by learning network members was needed. Future researchers may explore cases or circumstances in which CLA does not meaningfully contribute, or even hinders, development outcomes. Including experts in the research who have little to no knowledge of the fields of knowledge management or CLA has the potential to further mitigate bias.
- **Investigate patterns in the CLA practice to optimize relevant research methods for assessing impact on outcomes.** The findings of the learning network suggest that there may be a range of CLA practice archetypes illustrating emergent patterns in collaboration and learning practices, and adaptations to feedback. Aggregating these patterns along with those surfacing in LEARN’s CLA Case Competition analysis^{viii} can yield archetypes of practices, as well as the effective (and adaptable) tools that can trace evidence of CLA activity impact on development outcomes. This “portfolio approach” of measuring the impact of CLA across a range of archetypes has the potential to reveal nuanced and wide-ranging insights into its impact on development outcomes.

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ⁱ <https://www.km4djournal.org/index.php/km4dj/article/view/466>

ⁱⁱ <https://usaidlearninglab.org/learning-networks/about>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/cla_maturity_matrix_overview_final.pdf

^{iv} Campbell, R., Undated, ‘A Framework for Inclusive Market Systems Development’, USAID Leveraging Economic Opportunities Brief.

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^v <https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/what-expect-when-youre-expecting-cla-lessons-claim-learning-network>

^{vi} <https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/cla-framework-and-maturity-tool-overview>

^{vii} This comment came from the CLAIM evaluation survey.

^{viii} https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/072717_case_competition_analysis.pdf