

Collaborating Learning and Adapting

Development efforts yield more positive change more quickly if they are coordinated and collaborative, test promising new approaches in a continuous search for improvement, and build on what works and eliminate what doesn't.

Creating the conditions for development success will be the focus of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) function. This function, and the team that drives it, will ensure that the CDCS works as a living strategy, providing guidance and reference points not only for implementation but also for learning and course correction as needed.

Increasing coordination of efforts within USAID, among its implementing partners, and with other donors and Government of Uganda (GOU) counterparts will help to reduce duplication of efforts, eliminate working at cross-purposes, and provide a focal point to coordinate efforts to achieve the development objectives articulated in the CDCS. Coordination and synchrony can be aided by basic information management, including the mission's geographic information system (GIS) data mapping project, as well as through facilitation of more collaborative relationships among actors engaged in high-priority activities.

The CLA function will:

- ensure coordination among USG agencies, partners, and stakeholders by managing the PMP and conducting one of the two portfolio reviews held annually with the participation of all of these stakeholders (the second semi-annual portfolio review will focus internally within the USG at the project level)
- strengthen the evidence basis on which decisions about development assistance are made, and ensure that experience and observations inform program decisions
- facilitate adaptation of activities to changing conditions and new learning about what works and what does not.

Coordinating and Collaborating – the CLA team will lead activities to:

- map the activities of USG and of stakeholders in USG development assistance (other USG agencies, implementing partners, GOU, other donors, civil society representatives) and establish a central repository of relevant information about their activities; use GIS technology to overlay key data sets on agriculture, health, etc.
- identify opportunities for further collaboration based on mutual interest among donors, joint efforts among implementing partners, and strategic learning opportunities among thought leaders
- pilot test approaches to enhance collaboration among partners whose philosophical and practical differences threaten to undermine the synergies that could be gained by coordinating their efforts
- increase tacit knowledge exchange and strategic and program continuity through a robust capture-and-convey process, led by FSNs, to include recording exit interviews with departing

USG staff and implementing partners, and conducting intensive in-briefings with arriving staff and partners to ensure that country, agency and program history and context are captured and shared

Learning – CLA activities will:

- facilitate constructive dialogue (e.g., USAID development hypotheses, —game changer issues and program foci) to improve the quality and substance of discourse and to validate the direction of USAID development assistance, or elicit suggestions for changes to that direction. Institutionalize periodic/iterative consultations and collective analyses with various stakeholders. Use these —big picture public discussions of key issues to compare expected outcomes against observations to determine progress along the pathways to change, where refinements to planned interventions are needed, where opportunities for cross-sectoral coordination and synergies are emerging, etc.
- for each of the game changers, facilitate preparation of an Assessment, Surveillance and Response (ASR) Plan to track early indicators of shifts that signal the need to adjust strategy or program direction; share findings in the —big picture reflections and through donor working groups to inform coordinated development assistance efforts
- test selected development hypotheses (e.g., the hypothesis that concentrating the activities of all three development objectives in targeted geographic areas will yield improved development results)
- identify critical knowledge gaps and fill them with existing resources, or commission new research/syntheses where necessary (topics could include the climate change impacts on key crops and implications for agriculture-led economic growth projects; and unanticipated negative consequences for children’s nutrition status and women’s authority in household decision making of our proposed value chain programs that concentrate on male-controlled cash crops)
- improve the M&E process (from data collection and analysis to the use of M&E findings to improve implementation); conduct program-level evaluations and strategically targeted impact assessments
- identify opportunities to pilot test innovative approaches (such as facilitation to improve collaboration among disparate implementing partners in target areas)
- work with partners and other stakeholders to capture and share tacit knowledge based on experience and observation (e.g., experiential knowledge of how best to work with local government)

Adapting –To facilitate adaptation of assistance efforts to new learning and changing conditions, CLA will:

- engage partners and other stakeholders in periodic, candid big picture reflection on the USG program to validate strategy and implementation; jointly define a pathway to change and each actor’s/activity’s role in it; analyze unanticipated developments and articulate necessary course corrections; refine their vision for the future of Uganda; and better understand their role in the

broader landscape of USG development assistance, so as to be better able to identify opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer assistance

- create and institutionalize a culture among USAID program and project managers, implementers and stakeholders that is conducive to learning, in which incentives are aligned with learning objectives and people are rewarded for approaching challenges by working together to analyze them candidly and seeking to solve problems rather than lay blame

The central function of the CLA is to ensure that progress toward development objectives is guided by analysis of a wide variety of information sources and knowledge: M&E data, innovations and new learning that bring to light new best practices or call into question received wisdom, collected observations from those who have particularly deep or unique insight in a given area, and so on. The intent is to ensure that the causal pathway to desired outcomes is continuously assessed and adjusted to yield the most effective course of action. In rare cases, the objectives themselves may need revision, as when broader country conditions shift significantly, or USAID priorities do, or critical evidence becomes available that suggests that a major strategic shift is necessary. Typically, however, development objectives will remain constant, and changes will take place at the level of implementation. The CLA process is meant to inform decisions at all levels, but is not meant to supplant the Mission Director's discretion in strategic decisions.

The CLA effort will engage most staff and partners in some capacity, as learning and planning are widely shared responsibilities. The function will be led by a CLA Advisor, M&E Program Specialist and GIS Specialist all housed in the Program Office, a gender & youth liaison, and subject matter liaisons (SMLs) representing technical areas in each of the USG agencies and for each of the game changer issues. The CLA team will manage the PMP, and will engage a wide range of stakeholders in development assistance to ensure:

- that interventions are coordinated and complementary
- that stakeholders collaborate effectively to achieve programmatic synergies, by sharing information and knowledge, and working together to validate development hypotheses so as to make the necessary, timely course corrections in both strategy and implementation
- that stakeholders make best use of available knowledge resources, and contribute to those resources through accurate M&E and through sharing their observations and experiential know-how
- and that they work in concert to analyze program implications and apply relevant learning to the pressing problems facing Uganda and its people.

Work To Date:

- Formed a cross-Mission Community of Practice (COP) to coordinate CLA efforts, improve rigor, and build staff interest.
- COP led a CLA field exercise to learn from previous mission work building agricultural bulking centers and determine best practices for future work.

- Two large scale (over 100 participants) CLA exercises conducted with implementing partners—one to examine how major trends in Uganda (called “gamechangers” in our strategy) affect program implementation and another “big picture reflection” on successful practices in local governance.
- Conducted an evaluation and re-design of an ongoing agricultural project to adapt the project to a new Feed the Future strategy (evaluation named to be a “top 5” evaluation for whole Agency in November 2011).
- Revised mission order on activity design to have teams create more rigorous development hypotheses, evaluation plans, and include CLA questions.
- Based on a DG Assessment conducted after the February 2011 elections, amended the strategy for the DG-focused Development Objective, adapting it to new information and trends in Uganda’s DG environment.
- Greatly strengthened new DO-level Performance Management Plans to measure achievement of the CDCS; focused on “quality, not quantity”.
- Piloting “District Operational Plans” to bring together all USAID implementing partners and district government officials in a given district to improve coordination, troubleshoot operational issues, align interventions to district development plans, and discuss progress. Will use both district’s own indicators as well as USAID/Uganda “common indicators” (to be used in all DOP districts to permit comparisons). These committees serve as “CLA platforms” to discuss what’s working and what’s not and make operational adjustments.
- Two impact evaluations in procurement to be conducted in parallel with major instruments; the impact evaluations are designed to inform and facilitate adaptation of these major instruments at specified opportunities.
- New instrument in design to replace traditional M&E contractor with a “CLA contractor” to assist the mission with the horsepower needed to implement CLA projects and analyses.