



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

USAID: COLLABORATING, LEARNING AND ADAPTING

Key messages

Learning and adapting have always been central to the work of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). However, staff saw opportunities to improve processes and enhance how the agency works on complex challenges and in fast-changing environments. The Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) framework is a set of practices to improve development effectiveness, involving strategic collaboration, continuous learning and adaptive management. USAID has dedicated resources to CLA and made considerable progress in developing, testing, and institutionalising this complementary way of working.

Keywords

Innovation | Learning and knowledge management | Institutional arrangement

Key partner

United States

Challenge

Development organisations often assume linear progress from agendas towards pre-defined goals. Within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a systematic disconnect had been noted. Good practices in strategic collaboration, continuous learning and adaptive management existed across the organisation and its programmes, but were not standardised or codified in policy. The systematic application of [Collaborating, Learning and Adapting](#) (CLA) approaches enables USAID and its partners to be an effective learning organisation and thereby a more effective development organisation. USAID faced the challenge of integrating CLA both externally, with partners in projects; and internally within the organisation, to enable everyone to leverage existing guidance on CLA.

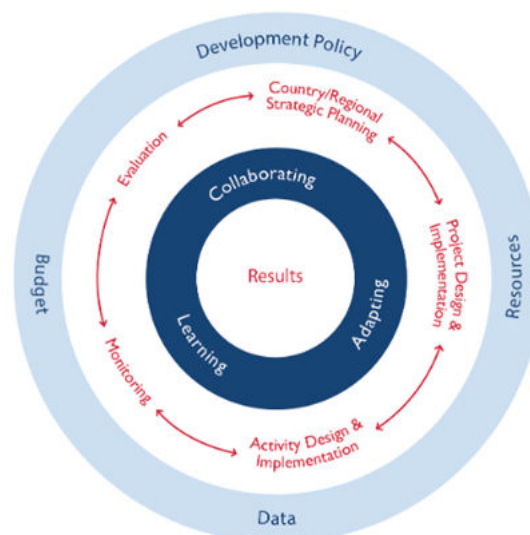
Approach

USAID's approach to embedding CLA involved:

- **A clear mandate:** Evidence, compelling case studies and growing demand from USAID staff to work adaptively enabled them to secure continuous support from senior leadership for advancing CLA.

Internal funding was set aside for activities and dedicated staff positions, including CLA/Learning Advisors, and to establish a team to integrate CLA across USAID's [programme cycle](#) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Collaborating, Learning and Adapting in the programme cycle



Source: USAID

- **A culture of learning and collaboration:** The [USAID learning lab](#); the constant expansion of the CLA toolkit; annual [case competitions](#); a [visual framework](#); and external communication, such as a dedicated [CLA webpage](#), grew a learning culture and complemented progress measurement indicators with concrete lessons from the field.
- **Context:** USAID adjusted its policy and guidance to support institutionalisation of CLA. This supported country-level innovations, including bringing a dedicated Learning Advisor on board to support CLA implementation in country missions and to keep learning and adapting high on the agenda.
- **Collaboration:** Setting up an internal Community of Practice on CLA encouraged peer support in country missions and collaborative feedback from local partners to strengthen local systems.
- **Capacity:** Training for USAID staff via the USAID University, both online and in person, boosts capacity in adaptive management and CLA. Measures are also being taken to [preserve institutional memory](#).

Results

- **Wide adoption of CLA across all stages of the USAID programme cycle:** it has also been codified into guidance on [activity design and implementation](#), [procurement processes](#), [drafting solicitations](#), [portfolio reviews](#) and [Country Development Cooperation Strategy \(CDCS\) mid-course stocktaking](#), and [monitoring and evaluation](#).
- **A wealth of case studies showing the relevance and effectiveness of CLA:** as evidenced by USAID country missions and implementing partners in the annual [case competitions](#).
- **Increased organisational learning:** the adoption of CLA into core processes has significantly enhanced USAID's organisational culture. A [growing body of quantitative and qualitative evidence](#) demonstrates that adaptive leadership and the open embrace of learning from failure improve an organisation's ability to learn and adapt, with greater employee engagement, empowerment and satisfaction.

- **Resources for learning and capacity building:** In addition to the organisation-wide Community of Practice on CLA, the Learning Lab has launched and curated the [CLA Toolkit](#), and developed several [learning podcast series](#) and [self-paced training and courses](#).

Lessons learnt

- **Framing CLA as complementary to USAID's business processes, rather than as a disruptive innovation,** made adoption easier. Guidance materials and the CLA framework align with USAID's core business processes, and the CLA team invested in understanding and navigating USAID's procedures, rules and regulations.
- **Adoption efforts require dedicated functions and resources.** To test adaptive management approaches and design a customisable and ever-evolving framework tailored to the organisation and country mission context, it is essential to have dedicated resources. These resources fund staff positions and activities, which in turn support continuous management of feedback loops and iterations of the innovation by external partners and local actors.
- **Combining top-down and bottom-up dynamics enabled CLA adoption.** Senior management support was essential for almost every stage of the adoption process, and was secured and maintained by the CLA team using evidence for results and comparative advantage. Meanwhile, a network of entrepreneurial staff eager to work in more politically informed, adaptive ways was encouraged, mainly via the internal community of practice.

Further information

Green, D. (2022), "(Re)making the case for adaptive management", *From Poverty to Power Blog*, <https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/remaking-the-case-for-adaptive-management-part-2-what-to-read-what-is-evidence-where-are-the-gaps>.

Mwadime, R. and Wood, D. (2022), *Collaborative Learning and Adaptation* [Ebook] (1st ed.), <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/ucc-technical-notes-1.pdf>.

USAID Learning Lab, *Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA)*, <https://usaidlearninglab.org/faq/collaborating%2C-learning%2C-and-adapting-cla>.

OECD resources

OECD, "Adaptive management", *Development Co-operation Fundamentals* (forthcoming).

OECD, "Innovation", *Development Co-operation Fundamentals*, <https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=10991099393-arb0p1y205&title=Innovation>.

To learn more about the United States' development co-operation, see:

OECD, "United States", in *Development Co-operation Profiles*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/45472e20-en>.

OECD (2022), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: United States 2022*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6da3a74e-en>.

See more *In Practice* examples from the United States here: <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning?submodel=in+practice&tag-key+partner=united+states#search>.

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