# How USAID is building the evidence base for knowledge management and organizational learning

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## Abstract

The United States Agency for International Development[1] (USAID) programmatic knowledge management and organizational learning effort, Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA), seeks to improve organizational effectiveness and development outcomes. To explore the hypothesized links between CLA and improvements at the organizational and program impact levels, USAID and its partner LEARN initiated the Evidence Base for Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (EB4CLA) workstream to answer the following 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? How do we measure the contribution? This work builds on USAID's 2011 KM Impact Challenge, which explored solutions and challenges to measuring the impact of investing in knowledge management (KM). This was documented in a special issue of this Journal, and was lauded by the journal's Editorial Board. EB4CLA has addressed these questions through five activities: a regularly updated literature review, an internal learning network of implementing partners working to develop methods to measure CLA's effects, a CLA Case Competition Analysis, and additional studies, including analysis of employee survey data and 'deep dive' case studies employing contribution tracing and other methods. Findings from these efforts provide preliminary support for links between CLA and improved organizational and development outcomes, and describe how collaborating, learning, and adapting work together in development contexts.

**Keywords:**   adaptive management, CLA, collaborate, development, evidence, knowledge management, learn, organizational learning, USAID

## Why invest in organizational learning and adaptive management? Is a learning organization a better development organization?

For the past eight years, USAID has been building a holistic approach to organizational learning and adaptive management into our field programs. This broad

effort across the Agency's programs in more than 70 countries grew out of earlier sector-based investments in knowledge management and organizational learning (OL) at USAID headquarters (many of which continue in parallel to the Agency-wide effort), extending their lessons and successes to the field. USAID's CLA approach is grounded in a holistic framework and set of practices that integrate CLA into the USAID Program Cycle and support the enabling conditions – culture, processes, and resources – necessary to that integration. Initial guidance on CLA emerged in 2010 on an experimental basis, and was first included in formal Agency guidance in 2012, as an optional component of the Program Cycle (USAID's guidance that directs program planning, management, and assessment). Since September 2016, CLA has been a required component of field programs, but is still customized by field Missions[2] according to their own priorities.[3]
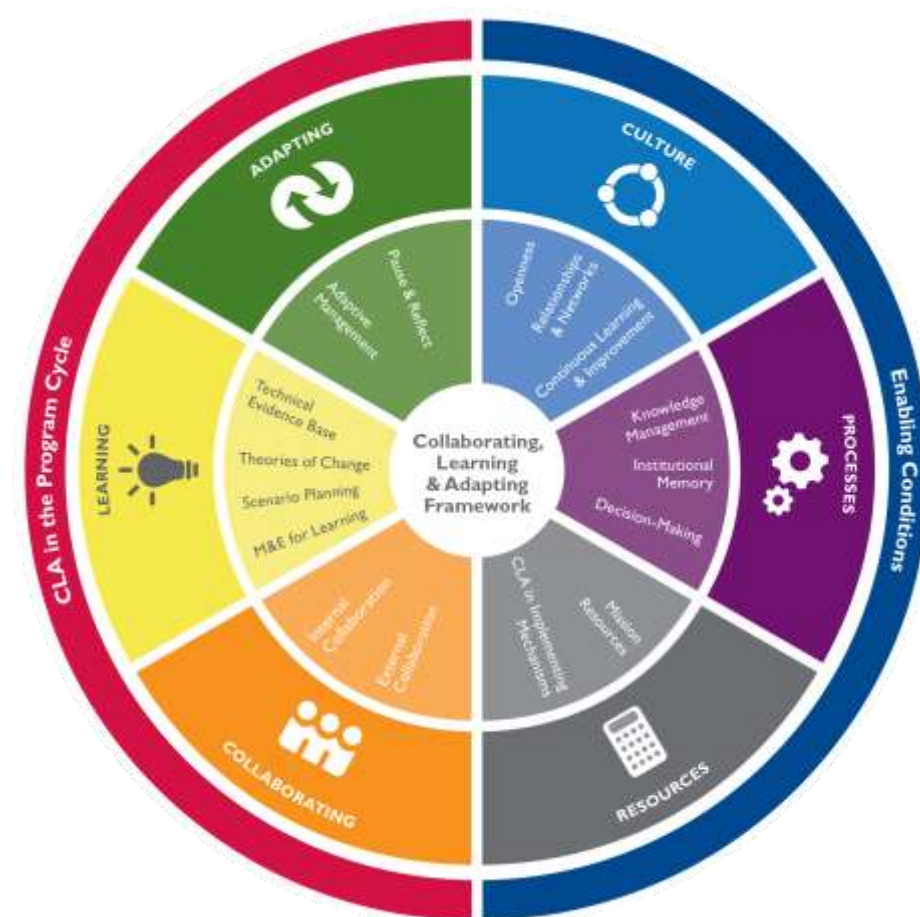


**Figure 1: CLA Framework**

CLA's grounding hypothesis is that by becoming a better learning organization, USAID will become a better development organization. Nothing earth-shattering here: rare is the organization in international development or elsewhere that doesn't try to improve through collaboration across internal divisions and external barriers, learning how to do things better, and adapting to put that learning into practice.

USAID is no exception: Agency staff and implementing partners have always collaborated, learned, and adapted. However, they have rarely done so in a way that is systematic throughout programs, intentionally incorporated into all aspects and phases of programs and processes, and resourced with sufficient funds and staff skilled in KM, adult learning techniques, facilitation, and other relevant competencies.

At USAID, investing in CLA systematically, intentionally, and with sufficient resources is an evolving effort, with a great deal of progress made and a great deal more still to go. As part of the broader evidence agenda, this holistic approach to organizational learning supports evidence generation and use. Through the Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) work, USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) and its partner LEARN explore the evidence behind the value proposition that investments in CLA are worthwhile for the returns generated in rendering USAID and its partners more effective, and its development efforts more impactful.

Development organizations try to base their investments on evidence of, or contribution to, impact. Like most other organizations, we want to know that there's value in doing what we're doing. And like other publicly funded organizations, our funders also want to know that's the case. In addition, we want to know which aspects of what we're doing are working and under what conditions, and how we might become even more effective.

Other international development organizations working in KM and OL have the same questions. Most believe that KM and OL confer obvious benefits, but demonstrated evidence remains elusive. There are several likely reasons for this: the impacts we seek to create are only indirectly related to our investments, methods to measure the relationships are either insufficient or not applied, and resources to confirm the value proposition are scarce. Therefore, as part of this initiative, we are also investing in exploring, capturing, and sharing evidence about the contribution that a systematic, intentional, and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting makes to organizational effectiveness and to development results. We have undertaken five different kinds of analysis to answer our key questions:

1. Does a systematic, intentional, and resourced approach to collaborating, learning, and adapting contribute to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes?
2. If so, how and under what conditions?
3. How do we effectively measure the contribution (or lack thereof) of CLA to improved organizational effectiveness and development outcomes?

The EB4CLA work has produced a robust collection of evidence on KM and OL in international development. We have substantial evidence of contributions to

organizational effectiveness, and emergent evidence of contributions to development results. Funders and practitioners alike will find much here to interest them and inform their work.

### Why do we need to explore the evidence that organizational learning leads to better development?

In some quarters, it is considered axiomatic that better learning leads to better development (Evans 2018). The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) report on 'How DFID Learns' begins thus:

> Excellent learning is essential for UK aid to achieve maximum impact and value for money. We take learning to mean the extent to which DFID uses information and experience to influence its decisions (ICAI 2014: 3).

Notably, ICAI has not thought to do a study of 'Why DFID Should Learn.' The report elaborates:

> ICAI believes that DFID should excel at learning if the full impact and effectiveness of the UK's aid budget is to be achieved. When learning is poor, this can have serious effects on the value for money and impact of aid. This is why our reports always rate learning (ICAI 2014: 4).

If learning helps, doing it better should help more, so the logic goes.

But in practice, there's a gap, sometimes a chasm, between what makes sense to do and what actually happens. We refer to a 'systematic, intentional, and resourced' approach to CLA in recognition that USAID and other development actors have always collaborated, learned, and adapted, but rarely have done so in a way that is systematic, intentional, and resourced: i.e. built into advance planning, spread evenly across a program or an organization, and with sufficient resources to ensure that it achieves its potential in contributing to development success. There is, therefore, a need to convince even those who agree with investing in learning that doing so merits more attention, in the form of a more systematic, intentional, and resourced investment than has typically been the case in development programs.

How best to persuade? The answer, it turns out, depends on who you want to do what. As part of our USAID Partners in Learning/Learning Dojo[4], we undertook a series of interviews with decision makers to determine what kinds of evidence they would find most persuasive in informing decisions about CLA and other systemic approaches.

What we learned was surprising: our evidence-focused colleagues indicated that they were more likely to ask someone they knew about their experience with an approach, rather than to seek hard evidence of the sort we were compiling. Digging a bit deeper, we find that our collective (albeit anecdotal) experience and that of colleagues in other organizations seeking to establish investments and activities in KM, OL, adaptive management, etc., is that very different kinds of evidence are called for depending on whether it is meant to inform practice vs. resource allocations. When colleagues endeavor to establish a CLA process or incorporate CLA into programs or operations, they often ask a friend for experience-based guidance, or seek out case studies for direction on how (not whether) to proceed. When colleagues are asked to commit resources to CLA/KM/other systemic approaches, they ask for evidence of impact, and not infrequently cite the (perceived) lack of evidence as justification to refuse the investment. In other words, advancing a change agenda in an agency such as USAID requires qualitative examples for designers and practitioners who are trying to expand practice, but the ability to marshal resources for such expanded practice ultimately depends on being able to meet demand from skeptical quarters for clear evidence of impact.

This is a fair question: international development resources are scarce, relative to the enormous need development efforts seek to meet. It's not only entirely reasonable, it's morally incumbent upon development actors to try to ensure that we are using those scarce resources to yield the most, best, and sturdiest benefits possible for people in developing countries. And with increasing emphasis on performance monitoring and program evaluation – and a growing industry built up around these activities – the call to be 'evidence-based' comes at a time when there's both growing recognition and growing capability generally in this area. The difficulty lies not with the imperative to ground our programs in evidence, but in the poor fit between that imperative and the definitions and tools with which we seek to meet it. This fit seems especially awkward for something as intangible, distributed, and indirect to ultimate development gains as KM and OL, and the adaptability[5] they foster.

## Why is demonstrating the value of organizational learning difficult?

I have written elsewhere about the narrowness of how we define evidence in international development, and the insufficiency of those definitions for understanding the contributions to development made not only through investments in KM and OL, but also through investments in other intangible goods that rightly command growing resources (e.g. systemic approaches to market systems; programs that aim at increasing women's empowerment; etc.) (Young 2012). Many analysts have explored the distinctions between the effects of international development

interventions that are easy to measure and those that are potentially most important, and have found, as I did in 2012, that:

> We need a demonstrable evidentiary basis for understanding what works and what doesn't in international development, and to use that to guide programming decisions; the challenge is that some things are easier to measure than others, and so we tend to focus on the results and impacts that are easy to measure. Neither 'evidence' nor 'results' are limited to phenomena that are easily measurable, but we tend to lose track of this fact. We let the proxy of our limited definition of evidence stand in for what it was originally supposed to suggest, which is to say results (Young, 2012: 2).

Members of the KM4Dev community periodically entertain the question of whether and how to measure the effects of KM practices such as knowledge sharing (Clark 2011); these are not new concerns. And a growing body of innovations (such as developmental evaluation, as well as complexity-aware approaches such as outcome harvesting and contribution tracing) seeks to expand the tools we can use to come to a clearer understanding of the dynamics of development that are harder to detect, are difficult to measure, and lack an easy counterfactual. Practitioners also engage important questions around the status of counterfactuals and of attribution in how we think about 'evidence,' and whether it's useful to restrict ourselves only to evidence that is supported by clear counterfactuals.

## What are we doing to explore the value proposition?

The EB4CLA workstream consists of five activities:

### Literature review
This is a periodically updated review of literature from development, organizational learning, KM, behavioral science, and other sectors to synthesize empirical evidence about the contribution that strategic collaboration, organizational learning, and adaptive management, and their enabling conditions of culture, processes, and resources, make to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes (USAID 2017a).

### CLA Case Competition Analysis
Drawing from the 32 highest-rated cases received in the first year (2015) of USAID's Annual CLA Case Competition,[6] and a second set of cases received in the third year (2017) of the competition, this analysis synthesizes evidence in these examples of contribution to organizational effectiveness and development results (USAID LEARN 2018a).

**Additional Studies**

Additional research projects address specific evidence gaps and challenges in CLA. For example, a secondary analysis of CLA-related items on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) examined collaborating, learning, and adapting together in relation to certain indicators of organizational effectiveness (USAID 2017b). A 'deep dive' study of a case involving CLA practices in an Ebola response in Liberia (Shapiro 2018) demonstrates contributions not only to organizational effectiveness, but also to development results. Another deep dive study of a case involving a behavior change intervention to decrease open defecation in Zambia (USAID LEARN 2019) does the same.

**USAID Partners in Learning/Learning Dojo**

Several USAID operating units, including PPL, the Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Center, the Office of Local Sustainability, the Office of Forestry and Biodiversity, and the Global Development Lab, pooled evidence on the contribution of their respective efforts to better development, their approaches to measuring that contribution, and their knowledge about effecting change in the USAID context to build the overall, shared evidence base.

**CLA Impact Measurement (CLAIM) Learning Network**

Grants to five implementing organizations supported developing and sharing innovative methods for measuring CLA's contribution to organizational and development outcomes. These methods have yielded evidence of impact at the organizational level and some nascent evidence of contributions to development results in specific cases. Resulting methodologies have advanced the state of KM and OL measurement, and may also be more widely applicable for difficult-to-measure outcomes in several technical sectors. The findings from the CLAIM Network are reported in an article in this volume.
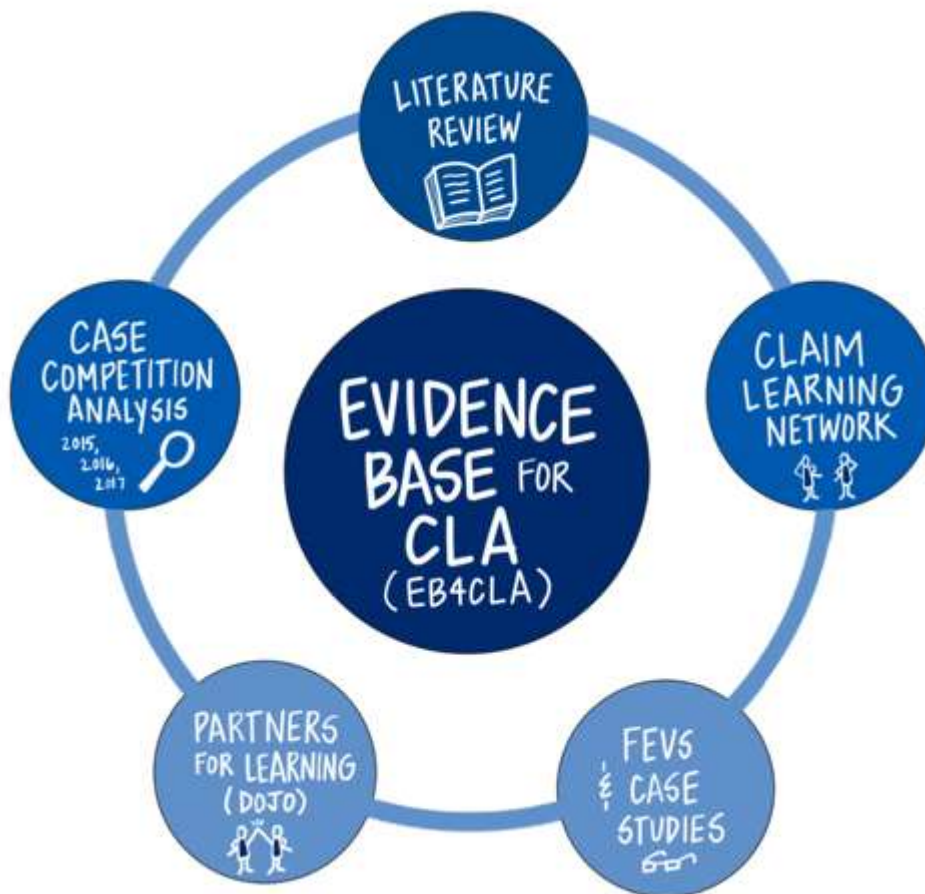
**Figure 2: Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) activities**

## How are we synthesizing the evidence from the EB4CLA activities?

The CLA policy requirements are modest. The CLA framework, capacity building tools and approaches, and case library are much more holistic, offering a continuously widening range of possibilities for ways to operationalize CLA according to a unit's development program and priorities. In USAID programs, CLA is operationalized as a collection of practices that align with the framework, but which vary by unit in holism, combination, intensity, sequencing, and emphasis.

We have not found it useful to delineate clear categories along a spectrum of piecemeal to holistic CLA. Although our CLA self-assessment and action planning tool is constructed based on a maturity model (USAID LEARN 2016a), with practice described as not yet present, emergent, developing, advanced, and institutionalized, we do not evaluate our field Missions' CLA programs against these categories. Instead, Missions assess their own practices, some specific, some more general, and the maturity categories serve to spark conversation about what's being done and what

else could add value. Missions and other operating units find that, depending on which sub-component they assess, their constituent CLA practices fall into different maturity categories. These are often contested among participants in the exercise, depending on which practice is under discussion. The value of the tool lies in surfacing good practices and gaps, and in the forward-looking action planning that the subsequent discussion enables.

When it comes to assessing the contributions of CLA, the shape that the evidence takes is very like the shape of CLA itself, as a framework and set of practices: distinct pieces that are interwoven and mutually reinforced in a way that strengthens as it densifies. As noted in the literature review:

> The literature indicates that CLA's contribution to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes is difficult to measure. Further, we could find no existing research that examines collaborating, learning, and adapting holistically, or looks directly at the combined effects of these approaches. As mentioned above, however, the literature presents evidence confirming that various aspects or components of collaborating, learning, and adapting matter to development outcomes and organizational performance. Therefore, to understand CLA's effects and effectiveness, it is necessary to combine and compare evidence across the different components or aspects of CLA to gain a more comprehensive understanding (USAID LEARN 2017c: 7).

Nobody is making a career out of doing evaluations of USAID's CLA approach. Nor have we encountered other equally holistic approaches to organizational learning in international development, much less bodies of evidence about their contributions, from which we can extrapolate to make claims about CLA's contribution. Rather:

- We are piecing together evidence of the contribution that CLA makes to organizational effectiveness and development outcomes through a literature review and analysis of submissions to our annual CLA case competition (USAID LEARN 2017d) that consider evidence at the level of the six components and 16 subcomponents of CLA. The question addressed in the CLA Case Competition Analysis was: 'How did CLA practices and approaches contribute to organizational change or development outcomes?'

- We are also leveraging evidence from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results from USAID around collaboration, employee engagement and empowerment, KM, and decision making. In other words, we are looking at evidence about several aspects of CLA that appear to move together and reinforce each other, which gets at a more holistic form of CLA. The FEVS study considers a composite index of several related indicators and survey questions, taking them

68

together to get a picture of the relationships among staff engagement, empowerment, collaboration, and learning at USAID. This USAID-specific data confirms that aspects of the CLA framework move together, correlating and reinforcing each other. Adding other survey questions that would help test the limits of correlation among the various factors addressed in the survey would help to get at the 'under what conditions' question in ways that go beyond confirming the current approach.

- We're investing in developing methodologies to better measure CLA's contribution through the CLAIM. See the article by Fowler, Haugh, Mehta, and Salib in this volume that speaks directly to the findings from CLAIM on the question of how to effectively measure contributions of CLA to organizational and development outcomes. Learning network members identified several useful approaches, including determining 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. These approaches resulted in nascent evidence in three cases that CLA contributed to organizational or development outcomes, but with limited time and small samples, categorical evidence was not possible.

- Through the internal Learning Dojo, we cross-referenced evidence generated around several USAID efforts at systemic change: CLA; STIP (the Global Development Lab's Science, Technology, Innovation and Partnerships effort); democracy and rights (the Democracy, Rights and Governance Center's work); Local Works[7] (an initiative in USAID's Office of Local Sustainability that features long-term funding for locally led efforts), and the Office of Forestry and Biodiversity's adaptive management work. The Dojo's learning yielded practical insights into how different aspects of CLA and other systemic approaches reinforce each other, and how change efforts in the USAID context are best approached. The Dojo learning effort has evolved into an internal coordination effort to inform USAID's Self-Reliance Learning Agenda, which itself is an effort to inform USAID's new priority on fostering developing countries on their journey to self-reliance.[8]

- In the deep dive case studies, we are trying to get at a deeper level of evidence specifically around contributions to development results. The first deep dive focuses on how Global Communities, an international development non-profit, leveraged collaborating, learning, and adapting to reduce the spread of Ebola in Liberia at the height of the crisis (Shapiro and Lindell 2018). This deep dive documents how specific CLA approaches contributed to an increase in safe burials of Ebola victims and ultimately a reduction in the spread of the virus. Another

deep dive highlights how a collaborative approach with local stakeholders in Zambia led to a significant decrease in open defecation in comparison with other communities that did not use the same collaborative approach.


**What are we learning from the EB4CLA activities about CLA's contribution?**

The selected findings below are synthesized and boiled down to their essence, and briefly elaborated with references to an illustrative sample of the underlying sources, with a view to providing readers with some sense of the breadth and depth of the evidence base. The findings are not surprising and that's part of what's interesting: the review of nearly 400 articles (in the literature review) and the other evidence (from the case competition analyses, FEVS study, deep dive and Learning Dojo) confirm the CLA approach. Those who see CLA as being 'common sense' are affirmed in their assessment; those who question its value are assured of it.

The EB4CLA workstream has yielded much more – and much more sophisticated – evidence than that included in the selections below, and interested readers are strongly encouraged to delve further into the literature review, the CLA Case Competition Analysis, and other products (including forthcoming products from the CLA Impact Measurement learning network, and the article about that effort included in this volume). There is a great deal of evidence and analysis behind these boiled-down selections, and much that addresses the subcomponents within these CLA framework components. Each aspect of the selections below is therefore supported by multiple sources embodying great nuance and detail, captured (in the case of the CLA Case Competition Analysis) in explicit results chains.  The point here is that these essential findings are unequivocally evidence-based: while much more can be learned about how best to combine and innovate on them, their validity can be considered unequivocal. All of the evidence gathered through the EB4CLA efforts can be found through the EB4CLA dashboard on the USAID Learning Lab website.[9]

**Collaborating**
Findings from both the literature review and the CLA Case Competition Analysis show that collaboration improves both organizational effectiveness and higher order results. 'The evidence in support of collaboration spans sectors and settings as diverse as schools, hospitals, factories, offices, and battlefields, given the increased ability of groups to sense-make' (USAID LEARN 2017c: 14, 12-15). Collaboration improves performance by leveraging resources for collective benefit (USAID LEARN 2017c: 4-5)[10] and by helping staff form shared frames of reference (USAID LEARN 2017c: 5).[11] But the collaboration needs to be strategic and targeted, not blanket, in order to avoid wasting time, leading to increased conflict, and loss of motivation.[12]

Both the literature review and the CLA Case Competition Analysis surfaced evidence that development efforts are more effective when trusting collaboration with local stakeholders leads to initiatives that are contextually relevant and locally owned. Those locally owned efforts achieve better results for developing communities.[13] The deep dive analysis of an Ebola response in Liberia implemented by Global Communities illustrates this evidence. It provides a fuller picture of how collaboration with local communities reshaped a failing intervention into a much more successful one that contributed to the decline in new cases of Ebola (Shapiro 2018). This example also provides evidence of improved development results enabled by an adaptive approach to implementation.

**Learning**

Findings from the literature review show that how we approach learning can make it much more likely that the evidence we gather informs program decisions. Participation by decision makers is key; engaging them in defining their evidence needs, matching monitoring, evaluation, and other evidence gathering to support decisions related to those needs, and engaging the decision makers in interpreting the evidence all make it more likely that they'll use that evidence to manage their programs adaptively, with better development outcomes. Building these practices into standard program management processes, along with investing in intentional KM, yields organizational conditions that extend this kind of evidence utilization beyond specific incidences into a more systematic practice.[14]

The literature (USAID LEARN 2017c: 16-21)[15] also finds that:

- Learning from good quality monitoring and evaluation is positively and significantly associated with project outcomes.
- Learning that focuses on theories of change and underlying causes and systems is often linked to the ability of individuals, teams, and organizations to adapt programming in the most effective and sustainable way.
- Learning is strengthened and evidence adoption is supported through analyses that contribute to the technical evidence base, such as evaluations, organizational assessments, and reviews.
- Learning is more likely to take place through communities that organize organically and reflect as a group, and in flatter, less hierarchical organizations.

**Adapting**

Pausing and reflecting on evidence gathered, and on experience in implementing our programs leads to synthesizing evidence at a deeper level of learning, which in turn leads to adapting as relevant, including improved organizational effectiveness and better development outcomes.[16] Adapting is also enabled by feedback loops (as demonstrated by 24 of the cases that were analyzed in the CLA Case Competition

71

Analysis[17]) (USAID LEARN 2018a: 30-34), which increase the likelihood that evidence will inform decision making, and in turn will improve organizational performance. Individual characteristics also contribute to adaptability, which has implications for staffing decisions: individuals who are curious, have growth mindsets, and are able to empathize with their colleagues are more adaptable. This makes for better development outcomes: adaptability and adaptive management contribute to sustainable development, especially when there's leadership support and resources.

There's a virtuous cycle effect as well. Doing CLA begets more and deeper CLA practice, and sometimes leads to scaling up CLA across a unit. This has obvious resource implications as well, in the sense that return on resource investments can increase as CLA practices reinforce each other with cumulative effects in an organization (USAID LEARN 2018a: 39-42).[18]

**Culture**

Leaders are essential to creating a learning culture, not least by mitigating the effects of hierarchy that can quell the free flow of ideas. That learning culture is the foundation of learning organizations, because it builds (in the USAID context) a sense of empowerment and engagement, and generally contributes to trust among staff. These in turn translate into openness to new information, commitment to collaboration, and likelihood of staying with the organization, thus deepening collective experience and knowledge, as well as institutional memory. All of these lead to improved performance, higher quality learning and adaptive management, and improved outcomes.

In the 2017 EB4CLA Literature Review (USAID LEARN 2017c: 30):

- Nine cited sources affirm the essential role an organization's culture plays in institutional change.
- 12 cited sources discuss the importance of psychological safety and trust – key elements of a learning culture – and their link to increased learning behaviors, such as seeking feedback, sharing information, asking for help, talking about errors, and experimenting.
- 19 sources affirm the increased likelihood of learning taking place in organizations that empower workers and encourage and reward their critical thinking, analysis, and creativity.

**Processes**

Quality KM systems have a significant impact on project performance, especially when combined with the right organizational culture and processes. The autonomy that staff achieve in an organization with a strong learning culture translates into

better evidence-based adaptive management with better development outcomes, when decision making processes are sufficiently devolved to the staff closest to the actions that those decisions affect.

To elaborate from the 2017 EB4CLA Literature Review, the literature on KM includes three studies that found that high levels of individuals' emotional intelligence and collective trust among colleagues support increased knowledge sharing and job satisfaction (USAID LEARN 2017c). Two studies indicate that the most important learning processes in an organization are those that include latitude to draw upon informal (as well as formal) sources of information and to draw inferences (i.e. in addition to acting on full sets of explicit data), and that these conditions correlate with innovation. Seven studies found that KM supports organizational efficiencies, such as faster ramp-up, reduced costs, faster completion, better team performance, and innovation; one 2004 study cited failure to share knowledge as responsible for Fortune 500 companies losing $31.5 billion each year (USAID LEARN 2017c). At least six studies cite the importance of organizational culture and interpersonal relationships in facilitating knowledge sharing, which in turn was correlated with open-mindedness, innovation, a shared vision, reciprocity, facilitative leadership, and decentralized organizational structure (USAID LEARN 2017c). Although five studies are grounded in developed country contexts, there is some evidence from at least one study to indicate that evidence from developing countries is similar (USAID LEARN 2017c). Evidence from the CLA Case Competition Analysis further elaborates on these conclusions with findings that KM supports effective programming (in resilience, safe health procedures, health worker management, and reduced mother-to-child HIV transmission) (USAID LEARN 2018b) by generating good practices and supporting their broader application.

When it comes to decision making that supports evidence utilization and adaptability, much of the evidence addressed in the literature review focuses on how the conditions that surround decision making facilitate or impede evidence utilization. Numerous studies cite the importance of the interplay of individuals' explicit and tacit knowledge in influencing decision making (including the degree to which it is evidence-based). At the organizational level, eight studies address the importance of organizational culture and norms, leadership, and the credibility of the producers of evidence, including three studies that note the need for decision tools, knowledge translation, and change management to support evidence-based decisions. Three studies note or support the importance of devolving decisions, of collaboration, and of openness between donor and implementer in order to achieve quality, relevant decisions and greater adaptability in contexts of uncertainty. Another six studies demonstrate a relationship between greater autonomy in decision making and greater innovation and evidence utilization (USAID LEARN 2017c).

These literature review findings are reinforced by the CLA Case Competition Analysis, which finds four cases that demonstrate that local ownership (supported through local engagement) leads to improved development outcomes (USAID LEARN 2018b). These findings are further supported in the USAID context by the analysis of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (USAID LEARN 2017b), which analyzes a composite CLA indicator comprised of seven questions. This study found that higher rates of CLA-related practices correlated with greater staff cooperation and knowledge sharing and greater innovation and adaptation (USAID LEARN 2017b).

**Resources**
Literature on resourcing aspects of CLA identified corporate gains – in profit, employee productivity, savings in operations, efficiency, and innovation – that resulted from investing in collaboration (USAID LEARN 2017c). Two of the cases in the CLA Case Competition Analysis also reported resourced CLA leading to increased efficiency (USAID LEARN 2018a). Implicitly, all of the literature and cases demonstrating value conferred by activities that include aspects of collaborating, learning, and adapting and its enabling conditions support the resources required to invest in those activities.

Relative to the other CLA components, though, there are few sources that directly address resourcing CLA (although several sources discussed and provided evidence for the need to invest in staff). This seems likely to be the result of a widely held assumption that if there is demonstrable value in a practice, process, or condition, there is value in funding and staffing it. In other words, it is logical to infer that resources are as essential as the functions that they are used to staff and fund. If someone is writing about the value of collaborating, incorporating pause and reflect into workflow, or working toward greater trust, or if they're writing a case study about a program that created value through CLA activities, they likely assume that it would be stating the obvious to make the point explicitly that these value-adding efforts aren't free. The team working on EB4CLA did at one point contemplate a return on investment study, but consultations with an economist regarding methodology were discouraging and the idea was dropped.

**Holistic CLA**

The study of USAID results for a composite indicator comprised of several questions from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey yields evidence of several aspects of CLA taken together, and the evidence supports a specifically holistic approach:

> This analysis provided support for the hypothesized links between collaborating, learning, and adapting, demonstrating strong relationships

among these variables and showing that they 'move' or work together within the context of USAID Missions. For example, the analysis indicated that according to Mission staff, where managers support collaboration and communication more, there are also higher rates of staff cooperation and knowledge sharing, staff have more knowledge and skills necessary to perform their jobs well, and there is stronger support for innovation and adaptation. The analysis also provides evidence for a holistic approach to CLA. It establishes a robust measure of the multidimensional CLA construct, which allowed us to examine CLA in relation to indicators of organizational effectiveness in the FEVS (USAID LEARN 2017b: 2).

Also:

Strong relationships between CLA and indicators of organizational effectiveness: the relationships between CLA and employee empowerment, engagement, satisfaction, and perceived organizational effectiveness proved to be strong, positive, and significant. Missions where employees reported high levels of CLA also reported high levels of these indicators. A growing body of evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies recognizes engagement, empowerment, and satisfaction as critical to successful organizational performance (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2015). CLA's strong association with these indicators provides an important foundation for further investigation into the direct and indirect effects of CLA on organizational effectiveness (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2015).[19]



**Figure 3: CLA Contributes to Organizational and Development Impact**

**Measuring CLA's contribution**
In addition to the inherent difficulties of measuring CLA's contributions to organizational effectiveness and development results described above, the CLAIM network operated under limitations having to do with grant size ($100,000 per

grantee), duration (18 months), and number of participating interventions (five). One implication of these limitations is that they may be factors in the modest amount of evidence of CLA's contribution gained through the network members' application of their measurement methodologies. Alternatively, that modest amount of evidence may be an indication of little actual contribution; or it may be due to some other variable(s) beyond the limitations described above.

It should be noted that the network recognized the potential for confirmation bias and took some measures to mitigate it. In any case:

- Four of the five learning network partners found evidence of contribution to organizational effectiveness.[20]
- One organization (MarketShare Associates) found evidence that suggests that CLA may contribute to development outcomes but was unable to prove it. However, they believe the short duration of the effort may have been a limiting factor and that, with more time, they may have more evidence of CLA's contribution to development results.
- Two of the five participating organizations (Mercy Corps and Pollen) found specific instances where they were confident of contribution by CLA to development results, but had insufficient evidence to make a categorical claim about CLA's contribution at that level.

As explored in greater detail by Ben Fowler, Katherine Haugh, Manmeet Mehta, and Monalisa Salib in this volume, additional lessons around measuring CLA generated by the CLAIM network include:

- The environment played a significant role in shaping the most appropriate methods.
- Pivot logs helped capture key decision points, but were less useful for measuring other manifestations of CLA.
- Self-assessments were used as effective tools for generating partner buy-in, which substantially affected the quality of research findings.
- Quantitative analysis was helpful in analyzing cases with large numbers of observations.
- Key informant interviews of staff were helpful when applied at the right time and with the full set of actors.
- Development outcomes can be interpreted differently, so must be defined.
- Pivot logs proved most helpful for capturing development outcomes, but are subject to biases.

## Conclusions

There is much here that responds to demands for evidence to support and better understand the contributions made to the work of international development organizations by investing in organizational learning. Based on USAID's investments over the years in this learning agenda, and our benchmarking of the general state of evidence in this area, we believe that the EB4CLA activities have made a unique and significant contribution to building evidence around a set of important questions that are relevant for most, if not all, development organizations. We have mapped this evidence and have launched a CLA Evidence Dashboard[21] that will help those who would like to navigate the evidence and contribute to it. We look forward to learning how other organizations use and build on this evidence.

There is obviously room for further study, and we invite other international development organizations to carry this work forward. In our view, the chief priority attaches to the question of measuring and demonstrating contribution to development results. Demand for this evidence remains high, particularly in all-important resource and scoping decisions, and solutions are nascent but growing. We also advocate for other international development organizations using this extensive body of evidence to advocate for stronger commitment to and investment in organizational learning in their own institutions. Decision makers rightly require evidence when determining how to allocate scarce development resources. There is much here to support international development organizations' investments in collaborating, learning, and adapting, and the culture, processes, and resources that enable improved organizational effectiveness and better development outcomes.

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## About the Author

Stacey Young, PhD became USAID's first Senior Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning Officer in November 2019, leading Agency-wide knowledge and learning approaches, architecture, and associated roles and responsibilities. Dr. Young also serves as the Senior Technical Advisor for USAID's first Agency-wide learning agenda, on the Journey to Self-Reliance; and she co-chairs the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership of nine major donor organizations working to advance organizational learning and knowledge management in international development. From 2011-2019, as Senior Learning Advisor, she led USAID's holistic approach to Collaborating, Learning and Adapting(CLA) that is being integrated into the Agency's policies and programs. She also co-chairs the Multi-Donor Learning Partnership. Dr. Young joined USAID in 2003 as the Senior Knowledge Management Advisor for USAID's Microenterprise Development office. Previously, she worked as a consultant in Kenya, Uganda and the US for ten years; before that, she taught at Skidmore College and at Cornell University, where she earned a PhD in Government. She is the author of several books and previously co-editor with Marie-Ange Binagwaho of the 2012 Special Issue of the Knowledge Management for Development Journal on the Knowledge Management Impact Challenge that she led at USAID in 2010-2011. She is also author of

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[1] https://www.usaid.gov/

[2] At USAID, Mission refers to a field office.

[3] USAID Automated Directives System (ADS) Chapter 201, Program Cycle Operational Policy https://www.usaid.gov/ads/policy/200/201

[4] We adopted this term, often defined as a training hall for martial arts, to connote a dedicated learning space where we could pool our evidence and experience to inform our respective efforts to effect positive change in how USAID plans and manages its programs and how it does or can strengthen the conditions that enable that change.

[5] See Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM), a joint USAID-DFID effort to improve MEL for adaptive management: https://www.odi.org/projects/2918-global-learning-adaptive-management-initiative-glam.

[6] The annual Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Case Competition captures real-life case studies of USAID staff and implementing partners using a CLA approach for organizational learning and better development outcomes. This is not a call for traditional success stories, but rather an effort to source examples of what's working well, what USAID Missions and partners are struggling with, and what they've learned along the way. The competition is open to all types of individuals and organizations working with USAID. The searchable case library can be found on the USAID Learning Lab website at https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-cases.

[7] https://www.usaid.gov/partnership-opportunities/ngo/localworks.

[8] https://www.usaid.gov/selfreliance

[9] https://usaidlearninglab.org/eb4cla-evidence-dashboard.

[10] Also see De Meuse, Tang, and Dai 2009, Hackman 2002; Katzenbach and Smith 1993; Rubin, Plovnick, and Fry 1977; LaFasto and Larson 2011; and Lencioni 2002.

[11] Also see Austin 2003.

[12] See, for example, McKinsey and Company 2009; Cross, Rbele, and Grant 2016; and Andersson 2003.

[13] For discussion and analysis, see USAID LEARN 2017c:14; USAID LEARN 2018a; and Shapiro and Lindell 2018. Also see Faustino and Booth 2014; ODI Research Reports and Studies 2016; Booth 2015; Drew 2002.

[14] For discussion and resources, see USAID LEARN 2017c; USAID LEARN 2018a: 25-26; and Mohammed 2018.

[15] Also see Raimondo 2016; Pritchett, et. al. 2013; Solomon and Chowdhury 2002; Willemijn 2010; Wallace and Chapman 2003; and Center for Global Development 2006.

[16] See, for example, Di Stefano et al. 2015; Raelin, 2011; and USAID LEARN 2018a: 35-38.

[17] For a case example, see https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/continuous-evaluation-real-time-feedback-fosters-adaptive-program-management.

[18] See, for example, Case Competition Analysis, 39-42, which synthesizes 11 cases into a results chain that elaborates on this finding.

[19] See also https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/collaborating%2C-learning%2C-and-adapting-strongly-related-staff-empowerment%2C-engagement%2C-and, including comments relating the evidence presented to similar evidence from neuroscience.

[20] One partner suspended its intervention. See the article in this volume by Fowler, Haugh, Mehta, and Salib.

[21] USAID Learning Lab, CLA Evidence Dashboard, https://usaidlearninglab.org/eb4cla-evidence-dashboard.