Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Fosters Local Ownership and, Ultimately, Better Results: A Review of the Evidence

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INTRODUCTION

As USAID reorients its mandate to support countries in planning, financing, and implementing solutions to their own development challenges, local ownership will feature even more prominently in the Agency's partnerships. Findings from USAID's Building the Evidence Base for Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (EB4CLA) effort highlight that collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) encourages engagement with local stakeholders, which generates increased buy-in and ownership and, ultimately, improved development outcomes. While there is consensus that fostering country self-reliance requires ownership by local stakeholders, actually fostering local ownership in practice remains challenging. How can donors and practitioners intentionally and systematically engage with local partners and stakeholders in ways that support and enhance local ownership and, eventually, greater self-reliance? This briefer synthesizes this evidence, offers examples of the linkages between CLA, local ownership, and better results, and highlights additional resources.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY ABOUT LINKAGES BETWEEN CLA, LOCAL OWNERSHIP, AND BETTER RESULTS?

Local engagement—i.e., when local actors are involved in defining development challenges and solutions via program activities—**leads to local ownership and, ultimately, improved development outcomes**. Evidence from a deep dive on the Ebola crisis in Liberia, a deep dive on Community-led Total Sanitation in Zambia, and several CLA case stories demonstrates that when local stakeholders experience ownership over development efforts, the results are more relevant and effective, which in turn increases local stakeholders' commitment to and engagement in identifying sustainable solutions to community challenges. This is consistent with the literature, which increasingly emphasizes that local ownership—with solutions that are locally negotiated and delivered—leads to more effective development (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Faustino & Booth, 2014; Booth, 2016; Booth, 2015; Drew, 2002; Barnard, 2003).

Bottom-up approaches to adaptive management enable more effective facilitation of local ownership and contribute to better development results. A recent study analyzing about 10,000 development projects found that aid agencies achieve better results when using bottom-up approaches that empower frontline workers and organizations to make decisions based on their local knowledge and relationships. The study finds that we are more likely to miss the mark on our development goals when we lead with a headquarters-driven, top-down management approach. In other words, in most scenarios, top-down fails more often. Why? Because overly prescriptive rules and controls meant to curtail employees from being passive, disengaged, and rigid can also curtail employees from being proactive, curious, and flexible, which makes it difficult for staff to apply locally relevant knowledge and adapt programs to emergent realities and opportunities (Honig, 2018). This study also echoes evidence from the broader public management literature, which says that managing adaptively is more likely to improve outcomes when decision-making autonomy is placed as close to frontline staff and local partners as possible (Galletta, Portoghese, & Battistelli, 2011; Spector, 1986; Denizer, Kaufmann, & Kraay, 2013; Honig & Gulrajani, 2017; Butel & Watkins, 2000; Honig, 2016). Findings from aid agencies and developing country governments support this conclusion, suggesting that greater autonomy enhances program adaptability and flexibility (Honig & Gulrajani, 2017). Flexibility for frontline staff to manage adaptively is a key enabling condition for USAID and other donors to apply more locally led approaches in their work.

EVIDENCE IN ACTION: HOW CLA ENCOURAGES INCREASED LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND CONTRIBUTES TO BETTER OUTCOMES

Working with traditional leaders contributes to improvements in latrine access and health indicators in Zambia

When Akros, in partnership with UNICEF, first started working on a DFID-funded program of Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) in Zambia, it initially operated through government workers; however, it soon noticed that communities were not making sufficient progress toward becoming open defecation free (ODF). Community members lacked motivation to build the hand-washing stations and latrines that could have had a significant, positive impact on their health. Akros investigated the barriers to achieving ODF status and discovered that community members trusted local leadership more than government workers. Akros then shifted its focus and began to engage local leaders directly. Through orientations and workshops, field staff had the opportunity to explain the dangers of open defecation. Then, traditional leaders, such as headmen/women and chiefs/chieftainesses, began to play a central role in motivating villagers to build and use latrines and hand-washing stations. They were able to track the progress of communities in their chiefdoms using real-time monitoring made possible by a mobile-to-web app developed by Akros to facilitate quick feedback loops and continuous learning. A quote about one local leader, Chieftainess Nkomeshya, illustrates the depth of local involvement on the ground:

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Chieftainess Nkomeshya has made it her personal goal to make her chiefdom ODF… She initially met all zonal leaders, who represented multiple community headmen, to receive an update on the sanitation status of each zone, and each zonal leader developed a plan to achieve ODF. Thereafter, she followed up with each community headman and conducted house-to-house monitoring visits across her chiefdom, even after nightfall… Public places including restaurants and bars are included in Chieftainess Nkomeshya's follow-ups; if after multiple warnings a toilet is not constructed in a public facility, the facility is locked until a toilet is constructed. She has also placed a community headman in jail for failing to support ODF, showing that sanctions were an option she was willing to use if people neglected their responsibilities on ODF… UNICEF 2017:61.

This 2015 case competition entry demonstrates how a CLTS approach generated an increase in local engagement and ownership and eventually a decrease in open defecation in Zambia. An additional assessment of existing evaluation reports and key informant interviews confirmed the claims Akros made in its original case entry: the **CLA approaches employed by Akros encouraged local ownership and ultimately contributed to increased latrine access and decreased stunting and wasting in children under five**.

Improving service delivery through increased dialogue between communities and leaders

In Uganda, the Governance, Accountability, Participation, and Performance (GAPP) activity aims to improve social services through increased dialogue between local communities and their local leaders via the UBridge platform. This platform enables communities to monitor government services and report cases of compromised service delivery; leaders, in turn, are able to respond to each issue that was reported. Notable improvements in service delivery have been made, such as boreholes constructed in response to community outcry about lack of water; roads improved to increase access to markets for agricultural productivity; bridges mended to ease general transport; and schools de-congested by new classroom blocks or learning spaces.

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Other examples from the CLA case analyses demonstrate how:

- Involving community members in reviewing and learning from monitoring data motivated them to adopt more healthy behaviors in Bangladesh.
- Engaging local leaders as change agents to curtail the Ebola epidemic in Liberia led to an increase in safe and dignified burials and the eventual end of the crisis.
- Co-creating solutions with the local community contributed to the adoption of improved savings behaviors in Uganda.

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO CLA AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP

Donor flexibility, leadership support, and openness consistently enabled the success of CLA and the increase in local ownership:

Donor flexibility:

- The deep dive on the Ebola crisis in Liberia indicated that USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) employed a flexible and collaborative approach to funding that was critical to this intervention's success. The grant underwent five modifications and one no-cost extension that altered its completion date, funding, program description, and terms and conditions.
- In the deep dive on CLTS in Zambia discussed above, the implementing partner credits the donor with openness and flexibility, which allowed Akros to pilot a data collection app and deepen its engagement with traditional leaders.
- An analysis of seven case studies of development initiatives conducted by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) also found that features of the donor agency environment, such as flexibility and transparency, were significant in facilitating the success of politically smart, locally-led development initiatives.

Leadership support:

- Active participation of diverse leadership during the Ebola outbreak in Liberia became a key factor in convincing other leaders that they should participate in influencing behavior change across communities.
- The CLTS intervention in Zambia benefited from a broad range of leadership support and participation, including the donor agency, the Zambian government, and local chiefs/chieftainesses.

Openness:

- None of the examples mentioned in this synthesis would have been successful without donors and implementers actively listening, considering, and implementing suggestions from local stakeholders.

A review of the evidence reveals no barriers to CLA that were common across all cases; however, some barriers identified in individual cases include:

- **Limited time** for staff to pause and reflect on how to make improvements in breastfeeding;
- **Coordination challenges** during the Ebola crisis as the scope, scale, and speed of the Ebola epidemic created a chaotic environment that made coordinating response efforts challenging;
- **Distrust and resistance** to government and outsiders due to Liberia's recent history of civil war, which left many communities distrustful of government authorities and suspicious of messages about Ebola transmission and prevention measures; and
- **Sustainability challenges** as the government of Zambia has been unable or unwilling to continue devoting resources to CLTS after donor funding ended.

Relatedly, Time to Listen, a study based on listening to the insights of international aid recipients, documents how side-stepping governments to work with local communities is a risk to sustainability. Ultimately, if local governments do not buy in to development efforts, local ownership of those efforts at the community level might not be enough to sustain the impacts of the development interventions.

HOW CAN I USE CLA APPROACHES TO SUPPORT LOCAL OWNERSHIP?

Development practitioners who have experience with CLA principles and approaches can foster local ownership and increased self-reliance by:

- Identifying and engaging local actors from communities, local organizations, host country national and local government entities, and the private sector, who are critical to achieving our shared objectives before programming begins.
- Convening and facilitating conversations among identified and potential stakeholders to identify shared interests, co-create programming, and develop stronger relationships and wider, more relevant networks.[1]
- Generating and using evidence from and in collaboration with stakeholders that would be most useful to our shared decision making while also working with partners to strengthen their capacity in generating, sharing, and using evidence.

Bringing a CLA lens to our work enables us to think critically and strategically about the systems in which we work and to collaborate and partner effectively with the actors most critical for successful development efforts. From there, we can work with partners to find effective ways to bring those actors together, facilitate and strengthen relationships among them, and support them in sharing and using existing knowledge and generating new evidence to spur joint action for greater local ownership, sustainability, and self-reliance.

So, **what can you do** to help narrow the gap between the current consensus on the importance of local ownership and actually achieving greater local ownership in practice?

- Share this briefer with your colleagues.
- Implement some of the tips discussed above on fostering local ownership.
- Locate more tools and approaches for encouraging local ownership through this resource in the CLA Toolkit.
- Contribute additional evidence about CLA, local ownership, and better development results by visiting the Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Evidence Dashboard.

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1   A caveat: it is important not to pre-determine who the critical stakeholders are (which USAID is often not equipped to do) and "implement through" them (in the mode of service delivery), but rather to engage local stakeholders as actors in their own right, and convene, listen to, and program in response to—and in partnership with—them, while also working with them to identify other stakeholders. The gap in donors' (including USAID's) information and relationships is what makes donor-to-community CLA so valuable.

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