



INCORPORATING CLA IN ACTIVITY MANAGEMENT

Introduction

The degree to which strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management characterize the implementation and management of an activity [can have a significant impact on its effectiveness](#). As you manage your activity, you have a chance to model these practices and to encourage and incentivize them in your implementing partner (IP). By laying the foundation for an open, trusting, and learning-oriented relationship with your IP, and facilitating collaboration, learning, and adapting throughout the life of the activity, you can help the activity achieve the best possible outcomes.

Many of the tips and resources below can also be helpful for incorporating more CLA midstream into an activity or project that is already underway.

Start By Asking

- What key messages need to be emphasized with the IP to set the right tone? How can interactions with the IP establish and reinforce expectations for a collaborative relationship?
- How can the Mission, the Contracting Officer's Representative or Agreement Officer's Representative (COR/AOR), and the Project Manager model – and explicitly recognize and encourage – the behaviors and CLA approaches expected from the IP?
- What does adaptive management look like in this case? Given the type of contract or agreement in place, what scope is available for adaptive management? What incentives or disincentives exist that would affect the IP's ability to respond to certain requests?
- How does this particular experience of managing adaptively need to sync up with the rest of the portfolio, Mission, and other stakeholders to be most effective?
- What additional stakeholders will need to be brought into adaptive management decisions?
- What expectations have been set on the part of the beneficiaries, external collaborators, or host government counterparts?

Your answers to these questions will help you to plan your interactions with your implementing partner, and your management of the activity, to be optimally effective.

Four Strategies for Successful Activity Management

I. SET THE TONE FOR A COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP

Once an award has been made, the IP's first encounter with the Mission typically happens at the post-award briefing. This is an excellent opportunity for the Office of Acquisition and Assistance, technical office, and others involved to set the tone for the relationship, clarify expectations, and reiterate the importance of utilizing a CLA approach, as defined in the award. Here are some potential topics to cover at the onset of the activity:

- Explain the activity's connection with and contribution to higher-level Project Purpose (if applicable), or if a standalone activity, to the Mission CDCS and any learning agendas.
- Articulate expectations for collaboration with relevant stakeholders (e.g., other activities within the same project or with similar geographic scope, local development organizations, beneficiaries, other key local actors, and the partner country government).
- Outline engagement and communication modalities between the USAID COR/AOR and other Activity Managers and the IP leadership and staff (e.g., weekly check-in calls, monthly meetings).
- Discuss collaborative work planning, regular partner meetings that facilitate knowledge and/or data sharing, and working groups organized along geographic or technical lines.
- Make a mutual commitment to openness regarding timely, transparent feedback about what's working, what's not, and possible solutions to resolve challenges.
- Clarify decision-making processes for adaptive management and the type of evidence and information needed to inform adaptation.
- Make sure the IP knows of and has access to available resources (including the CLA Toolkit) that will help them infuse CLA throughout the activity implementation and in accordance with USAID Program Cycle protocols.

It is important at the onset of a new activity for CORs/AORs, and the Mission in general, to begin to build trust with the IP, in addition to oversight. While CORs/AORs have an important compliance role to play in managing awards, a CLA approach also calls for us to move from being solely compliance officers to being partners with our IPs. This means acknowledging explicitly with our partners that implementation may bring surprises, which are expected. The aim is to work together with IPs to understand what's happening, analyze options together, and conduct joint problem-solving and course corrections, working as knowledge peers who are, on both sides, committed to making the activity as successful as possible. Our chance of success in realizing development outcomes and impact is higher when working collaboratively, as the [evidence base](#) shows.

In the case that the award was not designed with CLA in mind, you may need to take more time to carefully review the agreement, decide the existing scope for adaptive management, and make a plan to either revise the award or work around its constraints.

2. COLLECTIVELY VALIDATE AND REVISE THE THEORY OF CHANGE AT START-UP

Once the key personnel are in place, hold a start-up workshop with the IP(s) to discuss, validate, and revise, if necessary, the activity's problem analysis, purpose, and theory of change. If relevant, you might also include personnel from other activities that are most closely aligned with this one – that have a shared Project Purpose or otherwise inter-related theories of change, for example. At this workshop, you can:

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- Review the situation that the activity is designed to address, including the scope, focal interests, threats, and drivers. Identify any changes in context or priorities that need to be addressed in activity work planning.
- Make any necessary modifications to strategic interventions and their accompanying indicators.
- Revise your logic model to make sure it coherently communicates the activity theory of change in a manner that all stakeholders can understand and support.
- Have partners identify opportunities to test and explore the activity's theory of change, and spot gaps in the knowledge base.
- Assisted by the logic model, identify and prioritize (or validate) learning activities, including plans for capturing knowledge at close-out, that can be included in the Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Plan and articulated in a learning agenda as applicable.
- Align the formats of the work plan and MEL Plan with the structure of the theory of change.
- Use a stakeholder identification and collaboration planning tool to identify key stakeholders and plan how to engage them to maximize locally-led development whenever and however appropriate.
- Set the expectation that revisions to the theory of change will be a recurring activity that precedes work planning.
- Identify what changes in the activity's theory of change might affect the project's theory of change, if applicable.

3. FACILITATE CLA IN IMPLEMENTATION

Throughout the implementation of the activity, you have many opportunities to cultivate collaborating, learning, and adapting with your implementing partners. Not only can you use your convening power, create communication channels, and support capacity building among your IPs, you can also model openness and a learning focus in the way you conduct site visits and other interactions with your IPs. Some concrete examples include:

- Create channels for IPs to share what they learn from implementation and ideas they have for adaptation.
- Provide IP staff with capacity building in theory-of-change-based programming in the context of the USAID Program Cycle, strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management, as well as the enabling conditions that support these practices.
- Support IPs in collaborating with local development actors, other donor activities, and community members for consultation, joint learning, problem-solving, and adaptation.
- Conduct joint site visits with other CORs/AORs under the project to help ensure that work towards the Project Purpose is moving as planned and build a common understanding of how different activities contribute to that purpose.
- Participate in site visits with an eye for both accountability and learning, to help build a culture supportive of sharing what is working and what is not. Reward honest dialogue about implementation challenges with a listening ear and demonstrated responsiveness.
- Involve IPs in the Mission's learning activities, such as portfolio reviews or stocktaking efforts, as appropriate, to provide important reflection moments throughout the life of an activity and project, and aid in understanding an activity's role within a broader context and possibly changing environment.

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These practices can also be helpful in promoting CLA in existing activities that do not have CLA written into their award. In these situations, you can use techniques like the above to model, encourage, and reward collaborating, learning, and adapting. Even absent formal incentive structures in the award for engaging in CLA, you can motivate IPs to do so by highlighting their contributions in your reports, for example, and amplifying their success stories through your channels.

Resources on Facilitating CLA in Implementation

- CLA Case Competition Entry on [improving feedback loops from the Mission to implementing partners](#) outlines the content and utility of a “State of the Mission Address” to provide feedback on partners’ reports.
- [How-to Guide on Field-Based Portfolio Reviews](#) presents this approach, drawing from USAID/Uganda’s experience.

4. ENABLE ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

With respect to adaptive management in particular, you can help to lay the groundwork for thoughtful, well-informed, and agile adaptation throughout the activity. From the outset, you can set the expectation that things will change and that responding appropriately is encouraged. In addition, you can:

- Scope out your options for adaptation. Ideally, you have written your solicitation to ensure that there is workplan flexibility. This can translate into a more seamless way to manage adaptively: it allows for fewer contract modifications, and allows for changes to be made at the workplan level. If not, there are some tips in this [Discussion Note from the Office of Acquisition and Assistance \(OAA\) on Shock-Responsive Programming and Adaptive Mechanisms](#) on how to build more adaptability into existing mechanisms.
- Use the theory of change and related logic model to guide the identification of adaptive management needs and to prioritize actions to be taken.
- Encourage and, where possible, incentivize your IP to proactively seek out and communicate learning from implementation and monitoring data, as well as from new technical evidence, and to commit to review this learning before strategic adaptation points, such as before the creation of the next workplan.
- Consider the planning and reporting cycle that other awards are on, and what benefits may be gained by putting activities that will achieve more through collaboration on the same quarterly or semi-annual cycle.
- Ensure that [context monitoring](#) is in place, that there is a clear two-way line of communication between the IP and the Mission related to any contextual changes that may affect the activity, and that that information is provided in real time. This can help ensure more nimble responses.
- Build strategic [pause and reflect](#) moments into the work plan to assess whether particular interventions are moving in the right direction, and whether new learning or contextual changes necessitate some course correction.
- Document what adaptations are happening along the way. Capturing knowledge for successors will help them understand how and why certain directions and decisions were made – key for knowledge transfer, and ultimately for learning. Some organizations use pivot logs to do this; a basic template is available [here](#).
- Celebrate and communicate successful adaptations and track their impact in improving outcomes.

Reflect: What other steps can you take to enable adaptive management in your activity?

Resources on Enabling Adaptive Management

- The [Adaptive Management Discussion Note](#) discusses adaptive management at all levels of the Program Cycle, and the enabling conditions for it, as well as the traits of an adaptive manager.
- The [ProgramNet Blog](#) on improving adaptive management in missions, with a link to a “gut check” tracker tool.
- The [CLA Case Competition Entry](#) from an IP on adaptive management during implementation.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- [CLA in Activity Design & Implementation](#)
- [Incorporating CLA into the Procurement Process](#)
- [Incorporating CLA into Solicitations](#)
- For more information, please email us at learning@usaid.gov