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COLLABORATING, LEARNING, AND ADAPTING INFORMED BY RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE (CLAIRE)

TASKING CB076

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ACRONYMS

CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting
DRG	Democracy, Rights, and Governance
KII	Key informant interview
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
OCA	Organizational capacity assessments
PEA	Political economy analyses
RCT	Randomized control trial
RT	Research team
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study seeks to understand how USAID and its partners conduct CLA and to generate lessons for how it can improve CLA going forward. In particular, it employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the role of evidence in the CLA process and to disprove or validate the following hypothesis: ***IF*** monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is planned and used to inform CLA, ***THEN*** adaptations are more likely to lead to program outcomes. It also addresses three subsidiary learning questions:

1. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third-party data ***planned*** to inform democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) CLA vis-à-vis other goals (e.g., performance monitoring, reporting)?
2. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third-party data ***used*** to inform DRG programmatic adaptations vis-à-vis other inputs (e.g., personal experiences)?[1]
3. What are the challenges and lessons learned in planning for and using monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data to inform adaptations?

Methods: The research team conducted a document review of 105 DRG CLA case competition entries, as well as key informant interviews with representatives from selected cases and CLA experts. Because this is a study primarily of CLA competition case submissions, the research is not intended to generalize to all CLA in DRG programming. Rather, this study allows for identification of best practices and positive lessons learned in the use of evidence. Moreover, among this exemplary population of cases, any identified shortcomings in the use of evidence are expected to be far more common in CLA practices more generally.

RQ1&2 Findings: While personal experiences continue to heavily inform programmatic adaptations, there are strong examples of structured evidence ***use*** to inform DRG CLA. DRG CLA case competition entries often relied on unstructured evidence and personal experience; program managers and CLA specialists reported intuiting key takeaways from collaborative processes. Indicators and monitoring data are often designed for accountability. To inform real-time learning, these data should be thoughtfully aligned with CLA as part of a suite of data sources. Primary data collection is a common strategy, and PEAs (and other types of assessments) are accessible tools for incorporating structured evidence into CLA. Several examples successfully combined unstructured evidence with structured evidence, leading to systematic and testable program adaptations. Substantive evaluation use is infrequently described in CLA case competition entries. Third party data and research are rarely incorporated into CLA. Though data on planning are limited, it is typically focused on unstructured evidence. Advanced ***planning*** can support the integration of structured evidence as part of DRG CLA; more research is needed to comprehensively understand whether and how planning for this happens throughout CLA. Most CLA planning to incorporate data is geared towards unstructured evidence, such as through informal discussions and reflections. Relying on collaborative processes and personal experience are the default tools used when unplanned adaptation is required. Advanced planning for incorporating structured evidence ensures the creation of processes to integrate this evidence into CLA.

RQ3 Findings: Planning for CLA is associated with a higher use of structured evidence. Using structured evidence in CLA requires planning to generate grassroots buy-in. Organizational learning has greater chances of success when it is planned as part of core project implementation processes. Effective use of structured evidence in CLA requires investing resources, but this investment pays dividends. There is a

[1] Due to the limited evidence for RQ1, the research team presents these findings together with RQ1.

perception that structured evidence—including MEL data—is at odds with CLA, but integrating varied evidence sources enhances CLA and programmatic adaptations. Structured evidence is an essential element of CLA integrated with or sequenced alongside unstructured evidence.

Overall Conclusion: The research team finds that the above hypothesis that systematic evidence usage in CLA leads to programmatic outcomes is plausible. Outcome achievement is influenced by myriad factors, and it was not possible to prove this hypothesis with the data available. However, the report does conclude that hybrid approaches that pair unstructured evidence with structured evidence are more transparent and may enhance organizational learning, as well as capture the valuable lessons from stakeholder engagement and execute interventions that respond to program participants' needs.

1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) is USAID's approach to learning and adapting in the program cycle. CLA is one of USAID's most essential tools for ensuring that its development activities remain effective across diverse contexts and over time. Through this mechanism, USAID Missions and implementing partners learn and iteratively adapt programming, with the aim of ensuring that an activity is responding to changing contexts, needs, dynamics, and stakeholders.

The USAID Introduction to CLA Course notes that CLA facilitates better development by:

- Improving the quality and relevance of USAID's programs by grounding them in evidence;
- Making programs adaptive to new learning and changing contexts;
- Extending USAID's influence through sharing knowledge and collaborating with other development actors; and
- Catalyzing learning among country development actors to build capacity and facilitate country-led development.

As Missions continue to integrate CLA into the program cycle, there is a need to support their efforts, particularly on that first point–the use of data, evaluation, and evidence to strengthen CLA. There is a concern that monitoring data is more oriented towards reporting and performance monitoring than generating data intended to inform CLA, and that evaluations are also not well timed or planned to inform CLA. This study sought to understand how USAID and its partners conduct CLA, particularly around the inclusion of structured evidence, to generate lessons learned for how it can improve structured evidence integration CLA going forward.

Evidence can take various forms. This study differentiates two forms of evidence: structured and unstructured evidence. Structured evidence includes monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data—or any data that has been collected in a way that it can be systematically analyzed to support data-informed decision-making. Unstructured evidence can be gleaned from collaborative processes, stakeholder engagement, and personal experience; while valuable information, these types of evidence may be subject to individual bias and lack transparency when used to inform decision-making. Unstructured evidence may be collected and analyzed in such a way that it becomes structured evidence, such as through careful notetaking and systematic analysis.

Incorporating structured evidence is fundamental to adaptive management, which seeks to reduce risks and mitigate uncertainty in order to give activities the best chance to achieve the desired outcomes.[2] Furthermore, incorporating this type of evidence is essential learning (another central component of CLA) and effective monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).[3] Literature on data-informed adaptive management argues that, "the cornerstone of effective learning is the creation, gathering, accumulation, interpretation and use of data and evidence… only through evidence that those leading and managing adaptive programmes can really know whether they should be adapting, and in what ways."[4] Successful incorporation and use of structured evidence is key to ensuring that programmatic adaptations have the best chance of being successful.

[2] Byom et al., 2020
[3] Hernandez et al., 2019; Rogers & Macfarlane, 2020
[4] Hernandez et al., 2019, p. 6

Understanding how USAID incorporates both structured and unstructured evidence into effective CLA is essential to advancing the CLA within USAID, as well as the broader Agency mission of international development and humanitarian assistance.

This study explored the role of structured evidence in the CLA process in an attempt to disprove or validate the following hypothesis: ***IF*** monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is planned and used to inform CLA, ***THEN*** adaptations may lead to program outcomes.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching research question guiding this report is:

Is there evidence that supports or contradicts the hypothesis that *IF* MEL is planned and used to inform CLA *THEN* adaptations are more likely to lead to program outcomes?

The research team (RT) addresses three subsidiary learning questions that, collectively, inform the primary learning question above. These are:

1. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third-party data ***planned*** to inform democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) CLA vis-à-vis other goals (e.g., performance monitoring, reporting)?
2. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third-party data ***used*** to inform DRG programmatic adaptations vis-à-vis other inputs (e.g., personal experiences)?
3. What are the challenges and lessons learned in planning for and using monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data to inform adaptations?

This report details the RT's answers to these questions based on its analysis of relevant data and provides recommendations for how USAID and its partners can improve CLA practices through the incorporation of evidence. When answering these questions, the research team uses the ADS 201.6 definition of evidence to inform their definition of structured evidence [emphasis added]:

> *The body of facts or information that serves as the basis for programmatic and strategic decision making in the program cycle. Evidence can be derived from experiential knowledge, assessments, analyses, performance monitoring, evaluations, research, and statistical activities. It can be sourced from within USAID or externally.* ***Evidence should result from systematic and analytic methodologies or from observations that are shared and analyzed.*** *There are four interdependent components of evidence: foundational fact finding and research, policy analysis, program evaluation, and performance measurement. Evidence can be quantitative or qualitative and may come from a variety of sources. Evidence has varying degrees of credibility, and the strongest evidence generally comes from a portfolio of high quality, credible sources rather than a single study.*

As described above, the team categorized evidence into structured and unstructured evidence. Common examples of unstructured evidence include stakeholder engagement, personal experience, or other collaborative processes that are used to inform program adaptations *without* systematic analysis. Structured evidence is information that has been organized and systematically analyzed (e.g., monitoring data, primary data collection).

2. APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions articulated above, the research team employed a qualitative data collection and analysis methodology. The research took place in three phases:

- Phase 1: Desk Research & Document Coding
- Phase 2: Key Informant Interviews
- Phase 3: Analysis

More detailed information about data collection and analysis methods is available in Annex 2.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION

PHASE 1: DESK RESEARCH & DOCUMENT CODING

In Phase 1, the research team conducted a review of existing CLA guidance and data-informed adaptive management from USAID and other donors and implementers (see Annex 1 for a reference list of these documents). From there, the RT determined to review all 115 DRG CLA case competition entries (2015–2023) posted online to the USAID Learning Lab. From these, the team was able to work with 105 PDFs due to file corruption and data access issues. Through this process, the RT decided on a multiple case study approach to the research and planned to select key informant interviews (KIIs) from the 105 DRG CLA case competition entries. Furthermore, the team elected to use a stratified approach to sampling for interviews in order to invite stakeholders from both strong examples of structured data-informed CLA, as well as examples that relied on unstructured data in their CLA case competition entry. The aim was to enable a more thorough exploration of barriers to use of CLA and adaptive management, and the benefits and lessons learned.

PHASE 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The research team intended to interview representatives from a maximum of 10 cases, five from CLA cases that made strong use of structured data and five from CLA cases that did not. The research team invited stakeholders from 20 cases (10 were strong examples of structured data use, 10 did not incorporate structured data) to participate in an interview about their CLA case competition submission; this was an oversample to try to offset anticipated lack of response.[5] A total of 13 individuals responded to the invitation to participate, representing seven cases. Of these, nine respondents came from five cases of strong use of structured evidence, and four respondents came from two cases that did not incorporate structured evidence.[6] Interviews ranged in duration from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed after consent was granted. Topics discussed included reflecting on the CLA process, the decision to use data as part of decision-making about an activity or initiative (or not), and recommendations to facilitate data and/or evidence use going forward (see Annex 3 for the interview guide).

Also in Phase 2, researchers identified CLA experts to participate in KIIs using purposive sampling, with the aim of including varied perspectives (e.g., Mission, USAID/Washington, academic). A total of five respondents were invited, and three participated in two interviews. Interviews ranged in duration from

[5] Potential interviewees may have chosen not to respond to the invitation to participate in an interview due to the amount of time that has passed since they had submitted their CLA case competition entry (up to nine years), lack of availability (the RT extended the interview window well beyond the planned two weeks), or lack of connection with or perceived benefit from the research being conducted.

[6] While the RT did not achieve the planned equal representation from CLA cases without structured data use, the RT feels it has sufficient evidence to describe best practices for including structured evidence in CLA and notes relevant limitations stemming from the design of the study throughout the body of the report.

20 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Topics discussed included reflecting on the CLA process, the decision to use data as part of decision-making about an activity or initiative (or not), and recommendations to facilitate data or evidence use going forward (see Annex 3 for the interview guide).

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

Researchers used qualitative software (i.e., Dedoose, NVivo) to conduct the content analysis of CLA case competition documents and used a consensus approach to coding. Due to the small number of interviews, the research team conducted analysis manually. Following interviews, the research team would review notes and begin to sort findings by thematic category. The team would then meet on weekly calls to discuss preliminary findings, lay out thematic categories for analysis, and address alignment or divergence across data sources

2.3. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The findings capture the experience of those most likely to use structured evidence to inform CLA and are not representative of DRG programming overall due to the population studied, as well as response and social desirability bias. Interviewees and CLA case competition entries represent those most engaged (and likely having the highest buy-in) to CLA and the use of evidence in CLA; these are exemplary examples of CLA. Indeed, despite an intent to include equal representation of cases with structured evidence use and those without in KIIs, representation was unequal due to lesser response rates from cases without structured data use. The findings cannot be generalized to DRG programming more broadly; rather, the findings are useful for identifying good practices and understanding lessons learned in the use of structured evidence-informed CLA. The research team sought to avoid social desirability bias related to this among respondents by asking open-ended and neutral questions during interviews, emphasizing the interest in respondents' experience, and assuring confidentiality.

Recall issues and gaps in reporting limit the research team's ability to triangulate CLA cases across multiple sources. Although the research sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of selected CLA cases (through CLA case competition entries, other annual reporting on the DEC, and interviewees), this was challenging because of holes in reporting (i.e., lack of information on the DEC about selected activities and associated MEL/CLA processes) and recall issues due to length of time since the CLA case competition study was submitted–much less since the CLA had been conducted. Due to time constraints and response rates from prospective interviewees, the research team was also only able to speak with a few involved individuals with selected CLA cases. There may be perspectives on CLA processes for the selected cases that the research team was unable to collect. Furthermore, CLA case competition entries were largely silent on CLA planning processes; though the team had planned to explore this topic in-depth in interviews from the start, the experience from nine interviews is not representative of planning processes across DRG CLA. More research is needed to better understand how Missions and IPs are planning (or not) to incorporate structured evidence use.

3.0 FINDINGS

Given the balance of data on ***use*** of structured data versus ***planning***, the RT has elected to combine findings from RQ2 and RQ1 into a single finding on ***planning and use***. In addition, given that there was more data on use than planning, RQ2 findings are presented first within this combined finding. After RQ3 findings, the RT responds to the central hypothesis of the study.

SUMMARY

RQ2: To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third party data ***used*** to inform DRG programmatic adaptations visàvis other inputs (e.g., personal experiences)?

RQ1. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations (e.g., formative, process, a/b testing, nimble, impact evaluations), and third party data ***planned*** to inform DRG CLA vis à vis other goals (e.g., performance monitoring, reporting)?

- While personal experiences continue to heavily inform programmatic adaptations, there are strong examples of structured evidence ***use*** to inform DRG CLA.
    - DRG CLA case competition entries often relied on unstructured evidence and personal experience; program managers and CLA specialists reported intuiting key takeaways from collaborative processes.
    - Indicators and monitoring data are often designed for accountability. To inform real time learning, these data should be thoughtfully aligned with CLA as part of a suite of data sources.
    - Primary data collection is a common strategy and PEAs (and other types of assessments) are accessible tools for incorporating structured evidence into CLA. Several examples successfully combined unstructured evidence with structured evidence, leading to systematic and testable program adaptations.
    - Substantive evaluation use is infrequently described in CLA case competition entries. Third party data and research are rarely incorporated into CLA.
- Though data on planning are limited, it is typically focused on unstructured evidence. Advanced planning can support the integration of structured evidence as part of DRG CLA; more research is needed to comprehensively understand whether and how planning for this happens throughout CLA.
    - Most CLA planning to incorporate data is geared towards unstructured evidence, such as through informal discussions and reflections. Relying on collaborative processes and personal experience are the default tools used when unplanned adaptation is required.
    - Advanced planning for incorporating structured evidence ensures the creation of processes to integrate this evidence into CLA.

FINDINGS ON DATA USE AND PLANNING IN DRG CLA

The research team found strong evidence of structured data ***use*** (e.g., monitoring data, qualitative and quantitative primary data collection, and evaluations)—albeit in a minority of cases—and moderate

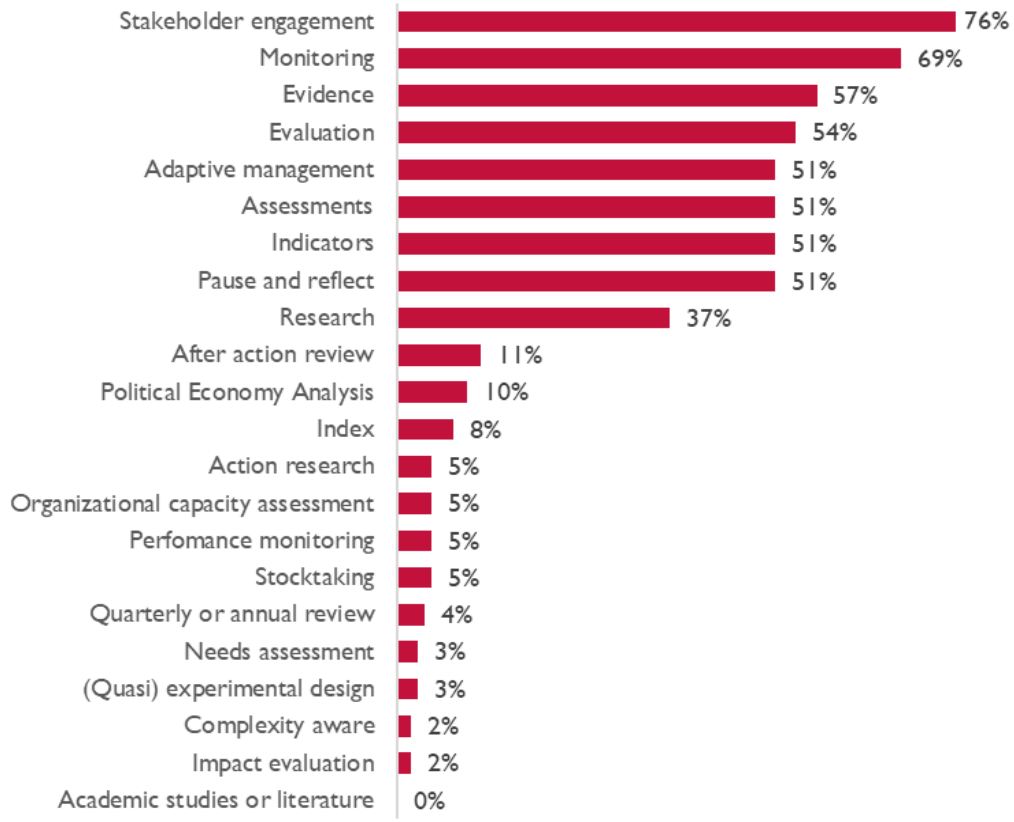
evidence of ***planning*** to use structured data as part of CLA in case competition submissions. The research team found unstructured evidence use is common in CLA because it has much lower barriers to usage (low cost, low research literacy requirement, and low requirement for research infrastructure), as well as simpler planning requirements and ease of use for unplanned adaptations. This reliance on personal experience and unstructured collaborative processes is problematic, as decision-makers may not be making fully informed decisions or may be lacking crucial specifics to explain successes or failures (or alternative causes to change). Furthermore, best practice in adaptive management is to use "evidence from monitoring, evaluation and research to inform decisions and action" to inform systematic learning.[7]

Stakeholder engagement and collaboration are core components of CLA but should not be used exclusively to drive decision-making. The richest CLA processes plan for and incorporate multiple forms of evidence, including both in structured and unstructured forms, to guide adaptations. The RT sees movement toward this with the substantial number of DRG CLA case competition entries that have incorporated primary data collection. There appears to be an increase in PEA usage over time, suggesting its value in decision-making and CLA. However, the use of research, whether academic literature or primary research (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental design), continues to be rare. Barriers to use of research include time, cost, accessibility, ease of understanding (due to academic jargon), and finding relevant literature with applicable information.

Figure 1, below, provides an overview of the frequency of selected CLA key terms in the sample of case competition entries analyzed. Notably, this figure provides a lens on the frequency of the use of terms, however the mention of the term does not necessarily mean that the practice played a prominent role in CLA. In addition, the reader should keep in mind that the DRG CLA case competition entries represent exemplary examples of CLA; in other words, the sample is not representative of all CLA.

[7] Rogers & Macfarlane, 2020, p. 3

Figure 1. Percentage of DRG CLA Case Competition Entries with Selected CLA Key Terms (N = 105)



3.1. WHILE PERSONAL AND COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES CONTINUE TO PRIMARILY INFORM PROGRAMMATIC ADAPTATIONS, THERE ARE STRONG EXAMPLES OF INCORPORATING STRUCTURED EVIDENCE INTO DRG CLA.

Finding 3.1.1: DRG CLA case competition entries often relied on unstructured evidence and personal experience generated through stakeholder engagement, pause and reflect sessions, after action reviews, and stocktaking exercises to inform CLA.

The research team coded the reports for "stakeholder engagement," which was defined as "including voices outside of the Mission; engaging with stakeholders and communities; this would include non-formal qualitative data collection and personal experience. Three-quarters (76%, N = 80; see Figure 1) of CLA cases were coded at least once to stakeholder engagement, suggesting that CLA processes frequently include both external voices and unstructured evidence. In some instances, stakeholder engagement was coupled with formal data collection. However, in 19% of cases, there was no mention of structured data collection beyond stakeholder engagement; a further 11% of reports included only high-level mentions of data. This suggests that roughly one-third of cases relied only on personal experience and collaborative processes to inform CLA processes.

These collaborative processes were often accomplished through pause and reflect sessions or after action reviews, which were popular among case competition entries. Roughly half of these entries (51%, N = 54; see Figure 1) of documents mentioned pause and reflect sessions. After-action reviews were less often

described in reports (11%, N = 12; see figure 1), and discussion of stocktaking exercises was rare (five percent, N = 5).

Finding 3.1.2: In the absence of structured evidence, program managers and CLA specialists who participated in interviews tended to intuit key takeaways from collaborative processes.

Respondents discussed this notion of a "felt consensus" repeatedly in interviews when asked how they distilled a set of perspectives into discrete "lessons learned."[8] When asked that question, a USAID Activity Manager in East Africa recalled that they knew in part because "there simply wasn't as much disagreement. We have a pretty spirited Mission so it was pretty clear when things weren't aligning."[9] Another way they identified lessons was when they "kept hearing the same thing over and over from different people" and when "people would come up and ask questions or engage on something."[10] Program manager respondents on the youth resilience program in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region recalled that "it was obvious" which youth grievances were most important following dialogues with the government because the program team "knew the problems" from the past and because "youth leaders made it clear in those meetings" what their demands were.[11]

A learning specialist who worked for an international human rights non-profit on a multi-country human rights support mechanism also recalled the predominance of using personal experience to inform programmatic adaptations. This person had to incorporate perspectives across a consortium that spanned multiple projects and countries and felt they were only able to synthesize their own experiences into the consortium's CLA processes. Instead, they distilled the broader learning agenda to a simple question—along the lines of "what do you think is most important for our project to achieve"—and created a virtual portal where anyone from the project could provide free-form answers to this kind of question.[12] Here again, these insights served as the primary data source for CLA across the consortium. The purpose of this process, according to the respondent, "was not to develop a theory of change for how to expand civic spaces or whatever else" but rather "to have a really good reflection of what the heck we ended up doing as a project and what we did well and what we didn't do well."[13]

Finding 3.1.3: Indicators and monitoring data are often designed for accountability, rather than as an approach to real-time learning; when useful, these data were thoughtfully aligned with CLA and included as part of a suite of data sources.

Across data sources, the research team found that indicators and monitoring data were often too rigid and oriented towards accountability to produce learning in a timeframe that allows for real-time adaptation.

Indicators are mentioned in half (51%, N = 54)[14] of the DRG CLA cases analyzed. Monitoring was also often described in CLA case competition entries. The term "monitoring" appeared in 69% of DRG CLA case competition entries analyzed (N = 72), and "performance" appeared in 48% of studies (N = 50). The phrase "monitoring and evaluation" or "monitoring, evaluation and learning" appeared in 45% of DRG CLA case studies (N = 47). However, the term "performance monitoring" was infrequently used, and appeared in five percent of case studies (N = 5). Monitoring or performance monitoring was also often

[8] Interview 4, Interview 9, Interview 3

[9] Interview 10

[10] Interview 10

[11] Interview 9

[12] Interview 6

[13] Interview 6

[14] See Annex A for additional analyses.

described in combination with primary data collection, with one-third (33%, N = 34) including these other forms of data.

Indicators also frequently focus on output-level goals (often by necessity), which do not lend themselves to iterated learning, for implementers see them as targets to achieve rather than learning tools. Even outcome-level indicators are often collected too infrequently or with too narrow a set of data to serve as a meaningful input to CLA. One case noted that reliance on indicators resulted in "an over-focus on accountability" versus cultivating a learning environment.[15] Another case highlighted how "team members were often distracted from the program's strategic goals, focusing mainly on indicators and day-to-day operations—process, not results" prior to integrating CLA more broadly into their work.[16] Finally, a third case highlights challenges with indicator identification, especially when working in a consortium.[17]

Nonetheless, one interviewee encapsulated how indicators can play a useful role in CLA and vice versa through ensuring that these data sources speak to each other. They explained:

> *CLA should be thoughtfully and fully interconnected with monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plans and processes. When properly aligned, the elements of CLA and MEL can augment how a project compiles information through collaboration and monitoring of stakeholder' 'views and project indicators. This interactive process also facilitates learning at all stages of activity implementation, and guides continuous adaptation of approaches and allocation of project resources to improve progress toward objectives and targets. The MEL program should be dynamic and regularly adjusted based on inputs from CLA.[18]*

Without such thoughtful alignment, however, indicators can be disconnected from CLA. None of the interview respondents recalled that indicators served as a meaningful component of their CLA approach. One MEL specialist at USAID/Somalia found that, when they included indicators in CLA processes, "folks would just stand at the front of the room with a table of indicators and just kind of go down the list saying 'we hit this target, we hit that target, we didn't hit that target' instead of actually engaging in the learning process."[19] Thereafter, the Mission consciously attempted to separate CLA from more traditional monitoring processes.

Selected CLA case competition entries described thoughtful inclusion of performance monitoring data as part of a suite of data and activities used in CLA processes. One case noted that the performance monitoring data were provided alongside qualitative data from stakeholders to ground workshops in evidence, which were then used to develop recommendations for the activity that "reflect[ed] the contextual operating environment."[20] Another entry, in its conclusion, highlighted the various ways that structured evidence supports the Activity's CLA: "learning opportunities are supported through quarterly and annual learning events, regular performance monitoring and special assessments like annual baselines and community perception surveys."[21]

Selected CLA case competition entries focused on other monitoring processes, such as changes in context or the validity of their theories of change. For example, one entry described a "monitoring-mapping-

[15] "Ask questions, generate learning, use learning," 2023

[16] "Collaborating in Armenia to Improve Government Communications," 2022

[17] "A Constellation of Stars With Purpose, or How to Navigate the MEL Maze," 2021

[18] "Collaborative Learning - The Way Forward to Protected Areas in Bangladesh," 2018

[19] Interview 5

[20] "USAID/Liberia's Rapid, Cost-Friendly, and Collaborative Evaluations," 2019

[21] "Greater Evidence and Participation: Using CLA to Learn from Stabilization in Yemen," 2021

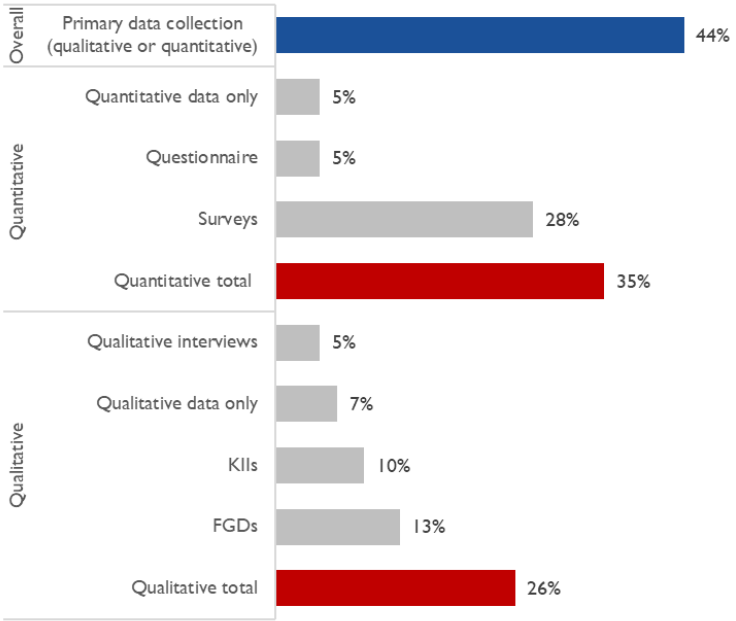
mitigation" feedback loop model to address political violence around a recent election.[22] This entry reported that maps used as part of this process helped to inform where IPs would send election observers, as well as avoid duplication of efforts among IPs. Another entry described designing their CLA processes around monitoring and "structured experiential learning" to test and validate their theory of change. They undertook this by "administering a robust system of context indicators to monitor the operating environment and critical assumptions identified in the logical framework."[23] This led to an adaptation for how they chose to engage CSOs in their work, shifting from "forced" groupings to "natural" coalitions.

Finding 3.1.4: Among case competition entries, there are several exemplary cases of incorporating structured evidence into CLA through planned primary data collection.

DRG CLA Case Competition Findings

In DRG CLA case competition entries reviewed, 44% (N = 46; see figure 2, below) mentioned using any kind of primary data collection, whether qualitative or quantitative. A quarter of reports (26%, N = 27; see figure 2) mentioned some kind of qualitative data collection (i.e., key informant interviews, focus group discussions, or broad reference to qualitative data) while roughly a third of cases (35%, N = 37; see figure 2) mentioned quantitative data collection (i.e., surveys, questionnaires, or broad reference to quantitative data).

Figure 2. Percentage of DRG CLA Case Competition Entries with Primary Data Collection (N = 105)



A total of 17% of case studies (N = 18) described multiple forms of primary data collection (i.e., qualitative and quantitative data) as part of CLA processes. Several of these cases described robust evidence integration into CLA. For example, one activity used multiple forms of evidence to inform adaptive management of the program.[24] This CLA case notes that at the midterm of the program, it "embraced an adaptive management approach" and pursued "evidence-based learning" through multiple forms of data: a survey of key stakeholders, focus groups and interviews, and an online form. These authors described other CLA practices including, quarterly internal pause and reflect sessions, semiannual check-ins with local partners, a "customer satisfaction tablet," and social media insights. The CLA report specified how the activity used a midterm evaluation and other data sources to adjust to programmatic implementation. The authors reported that "these processes helped [the IP] get inputs and feedback from clients and partners to quickly adapt programming to boost responsiveness, results, reach and outcomes," including

[22] "Building in CLA to Your Activity Design: A Remedy for Working in Closing Spaces," 2019

[23] "Testing Theory of Change for USAID in Niger Using "Structured Experiential Learning," 2022

[24] "Learning and Adapting Enables Civil Society Innovations in Cambodia," 2017

"increased CSO partnerships," "improved communication approaches," and adaptations that "increased income generated by the project 1,065%."

Another CLA case competition entry discussed how the activity had included primary data collection at all stages of program implementation.[25] This activity developed a toolkit with input from multiple focus group discussions with over 100 respondents, then used monitoring data (including post-training surveys) to inform ongoing adaptations and adjustments. In the entry, the CLA team felt that its approach "supported better development outcomes for diverse groups of young people as it ensured that toolkit content and training materials were authentic and relevant to young people's lives and communities." They also highlighted participant feedback describing how the toolkit had a positive impact on participants' lives and increased their confidence.

Given that less than half of the DRG entries into the CLA case competition include primary data collection, the frequency of primary data collection across all DRG activities is likely much lower.

KII Findings

Interview respondents emphasized the need to systematically solicit insight from project stakeholders in a structured way to permit analysis, such as through primary data collection (e.g., surveys, KIIs). As an example, the advocacy activity in West Africa described spending considerable time and energy to transform unstructured evidence and insight into analyzable data. A senior manager on that project recalled an early realization that they had to "do a proper network analysis with stakeholders and [keep] refreshing it" in order to maintain an adaptive programming approach.[26] This network analysis was a formal qualitative process that helped the program understand how the needs of its partner advocacy organizations evolved over time. Moreover, when partners recommended programming adaptations during coaching sessions, the activity conducted targeted qualitative assessments of those adaptations to assess their effectiveness.

This project adapted its programming approach iteratively as a consequence of combining the collaborative engagement process with more structured data generation. As an example, one advocacy cluster was attempting to push through a youth support bill through a local governing body. During an interview, a CLA specialist working on the project recalled that:

> *They got a sponsor that pushed it in the House at the state level. That sponsor eventually left … Somebody else came in, and for a selfish reason wanted to have something attached to his own name. So, he decided to step down on that youth bill and bring in another kind of bill … And so what do they do next? How do they need to strategize? During cluster coaching, they came up with a plan … If they can galvanize the public to write letters to their representatives in the house, then there's a likelihood that their bill might be brought forward, and that's what they did. They used public awareness, radio, TV, rallies to get the public to send letters to their representatives. So when in the House, this person basically said, "Oh, my people want me to support this. I'll support what my people want me to support."*[27]

The activity hired a third-party qualitative researcher to conduct KIIs with representatives and citizens in the areas where this letter writing campaign took place to determine if the cluster's proposed adaptation

[25] "Guyana Youth ALLIES Civic Education Toolkit," 2023

[26] Interview 1

[27] Interview 1

was working. The qualitative data collection in this instance determined that it had been an effective adaptation, and so the activity continued to invest in it.[28]

A security strengthening project in LAC developed a similar structure for generating learning that relied on quantitative evidence. It "consulted regularly with national authorities, local stakeholders, and international stakeholders to identify gaps"[29] in public service in remote areas and to generate methodologies to improve citizen and government relationships. To augment these consultations, the activity conducted "rapid perception surveys every three to six months."[30] Initially, the activity planned to conduct surveys every month; however, this was too onerous on Activity Managers, so calibrated instead to a quarterly process.[31]

Survey data fed into a "quarterly dashboard" that summarized the findings across communities and provided an evidentiary structure that Activity Managers could use to inform decision-making. Moreover, the Activity Managers used the surveys for a dual purpose: they could explore and validate hypotheses generated during the collaborative process and they could provide real-time tracking of the effect of interventions on community attitudes towards the government.[32] This constituted a substantial investment of time and energy, and the Activity Managers had to do a lot of work in the early days of the project to generate the proper learning culture (as discussed above). Yet, that early investment set the stage for strong integration of structured evidence in real time across the entire life of the activity.

The benefits to adaptation were clear. As an example, during dialogues with the communities and local stakeholders, the implementer learned that low levels of trust between citizens and the police were a key driver of overall discontent with the government. Stakeholders recommended that the Activity adapt its support to the police force to emphasize community policing. The implementer accordingly designed interventions to train police on how to interact with community members more positively and to engage actively with the community even when they were not directly responding to a crime.[33] This included things as simple as wearing informal clothing to community events and stopping to say hello to citizens during their patrol to explain why the police were there to more systematic reforms like reduced usage of stop-and-frisk.[34]

The LAC activity executed these interventions in accordance with the recommendations that emerged from the relatively unstructured collaborative engagement at the outset of the program, but then conducted regular surveys to gauge whether the community policing interventions were effective. They found that "people perceived the police not wearing their uniforms [all the time]" as a "leap of faith that changed how trustworthy they were perceived as. They were approachable now."[35] Because the structured data collection process corroborated the intuitions and recommendations of the collaborative process, the activity was able to confidently invest further in the community-based policing approach.

A youth support project in Southeast Asia also employed "rapid feedback loop studies" to provide flexible learning in response to specific interventions. As a specific example, the Activity was using a Facebook engagement tool to spread information to beneficiaries. To assess the efficacy of this approach, the Activity Managers organized a series of discussions to solicit insight from program staff and other key

[28] Interview 1
[29] Interview 2
[30] Interview 2
[31] Interview 2
[32] Interview 2
[33] Interview 2
[34] Interview 2
[35] Interview 2

stakeholders.[36] Using lessons and feedback generated during those conversations, they then deployed "microstudies" wherein "they had different messages and surveyed those who did see the message or didn't see the message."[37] Findings from this quantitative study then informed a series of focus group discussions to discuss the intervention and how to adapt based on lessons learned.

As with the LAC project, this activity's hybrid approach produced important adaptations. As an example, interviewees associated with this program recalled an intervention to increase donations to worthy children's causes. Generative workshops identified financial solvency as a critical barrier to children's support systems and argued that encouraging individual donations was a promising intervention focus.[38] The activity then developed an advertising campaign to promote donations and paired that campaign with a light-weight study (relying principally on observational statistical analysis).[39] The study found that many donations were going to orphanages, but orphanages in this context were not safe places for children. Instead, the program wanted to encourage donations to organizations that supported children staying with their families. They therefore adjusted the messaging of the campaign to encourage donations to different organizations, paired a similar study with the campaign, and found that the modified approach induced more effective donation behaviors.[40]

The common thread between these cases is *iterative adaptation* predicated on *structured primary data collection*. The specific primary data collection approach was different for each activity—the LAC program used regular public opinion surveys, the Southeast Asia program used statistical analysis of a social media campaign, and the West African program used qualitative key informant interviews—but the basic relationship between collaborative processes/stakeholder engagement and structured evidence held across activities. In each case, collaborative and unstructured evidence produced an initial intervention concept which the implementers then deployed alongside a light-weight structured evidence process.

The activities implemented the adaptation and tested it to either corroborate the intuition of the collaborative process or suggest possible revisions. Where primary data collection found the initial adaptation to be effective, they continued to invest in the approach. Otherwise, they adapted again and continued the learning process. Together with the DRG CLA case competition entry examples above, these findings suggest how purposefully integrating primary data collection actively supports CLA and adaptive management.

Finding 3.1.5: Several program teams in CLA case competition entries successfully combined unstructured evidence from collaborative processes with structured evidence, leading to systematic and testable program adaptations.

Selected CLA case competition entries complemented collaborative exercises with additional, structured data collection. Pause and reflect was most often reported alongside structured primary data collection (22%, N = 23), followed by AARs (8%, N = 8) and stocktaking (three percent, N = 3). For example, one entry described how, once they identified the challenge, they first conducted KIIs with CSOs, then held a pause and reflect session, then worked with their MEL team to inform additional qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. This led to an adaptation in the activity in which the team adopted a more flexible grants mechanism that "now contributes to [their] overall goal of increasing social cohesion," suggesting that this CLA process improved programmatic outcomes.[41] In addition, they highlighted how

[36] Interview 7

[37] Interview 7

[38] Interview 7

[39] Interview 7

[40] Interview 7

[41] "Actionable Learning - Adapting a Grants Process to Support Effective Programming," 2021

the pause and reflect sessions helped the team understand that "they were not learning for learning's sake but rather were learning to pivot where needed in order to better meet project objectives."

Another entry described their multifaceted CLA process, which included "mock sessions ahead of activities, observation during activities, and pause and reflect sessions and after-action reviews," followed by an "Activity-wide pause and reflect exercise" informed by KIIs with stakeholders.[42] A third case described how their midterm stocktaking review took place in two phases, the first of which was developing a "technical evidence base" from KIIs and focus group discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholders, which then informed strategic workshops focused on "joint analysis and decision-making."[43] The authors highlight how a facilitator documented the results and next steps from the workshop "to enable further action and provide a source of institutional memory for future decision-makers." The authors of this entry felt that their CLA processes enabled "activity adaptation to strategically support the [country] government's agenda and locally-led development results" and that the "inputs are better aligned with refining systems and strengthening processes." Together, these examples suggest that sequencing collaborative processes (such as pause and reflect or AARs) with structured data collection produce helpful programmatic adaptations.

Finding 3.1.6: PEAs and other types of assessments are accessible tools for incorporating structured evidence into DRG's CLA processes.

The RT identified and searched CLA case competition entries for common assessments that may be part of CLA processes. Key terms included "political economy analyses (PEAs)," "organizational capacity assessments (OCAs)," and "needs assessments." The team also more thoroughly reviewed the results for "assessment" as a CLA key term to identify reports that used an assessment as an integrated part of CLA—including whether those assessments described other kinds of data use (e.g., KIIs, surveys), and found that 26 percent of reports mentioned using assessments alongside either qualitative or quantitative data collection.

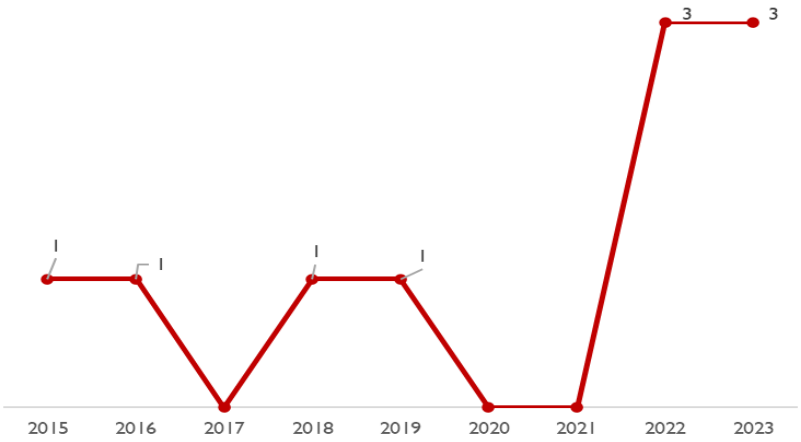
Among CLA case competition entries, 10% (N = 10; see Figure 1) of those analyzed mention the use of PEA. The number of PEAs in DRG CLA case competition entries has increased over time (see Figure 3, below), with the majority of them shared in the last two years. One early example from 2015 highlighted the utility of PEAs, describing how a PEA was adopted to "gain comprehensive, firsthand knowledge of the region, as opposed to information passing through implementing partners."[44] The Mission conducted interviews with key actors in the region and reported that it gained a "much better understanding of the motivations and power dynamics between regional actors" as a result. The report describes how this influenced activities, including increased support to local government and community leaders where needed.

[42] "CLA for Behavior Change in Public Participation in Kosovo," 2023

[43] "USAID/Liberia's Rapid, Cost-friendly, and Collaborative Evaluations," 2019

[44] "USAID/Colombia Introduces Political Economy Analysis to Better Adapt Programming to Local Contexts," 2015

Figure 3. Number of DRG CLA Case Competition Entries that conducted PEAs (N = 10; 2015–2023)



PEAs featured prominently in several of the cases that most thoroughly incorporated data usage. For instance, "rapid PEAs" were a core component of the "cluster review" approach employed by an international non-profit on an advocacy strengthening project and were a critical component of that project's ability to adapt in real time to changing circumstances.[45] It was also a core component of a security strengthening project in the LAC region that made heavy use of data.[46]

In interviews, program managers emphasized the importance of "rapid PEAs" and outcome harvesting to their learning process. During coaching sessions with clusters of advocacy groups, they would "go into what we call the political economy analysis and what that does is really is 'since the last time we met, what has changed with our issue, our stakeholder, our context?"[47] Again, this was a formal qualitative process facilitated by experts who understood how to extract concrete qualitative learning from the process and transform it into actionable recommendations.

Even fewer cases conducted an OCA (six percent, N = 5; see Figure 1). One such case exemplifies the integration of unstructured and structured evidence and described how their CLA "successfully implemented many adaptive management tools." The entry went on to list them:

> *After action review following major activities, regular learning sessions with USAID [activity] counterparts, learning summits with counterparts and economic stakeholders, pause and reflect sessions, and the use of rapid political economy analysis integrated with other organizational assessment and corruption vulnerability tools.*[48]

This CLA case noted that their CLA processes impacted outcomes because it "helped the project identify problems," implement adjustments to reverse the collapse of an e-procurement system and identify possible fraud cases that were handed over to the state prosecutor.

[45] Interview 1

[46] Interview 2

[47] Interview 8

[48] "CLA Drives Breakthrough Changes in Public Procurement," 2019

Finding 3.1.7. Third party data are infrequently incorporated into CLA case competition submissions.

A handful of reports (eight percent, N = 8; see Figure 1) mentioned varied indices (e.g., Index of Active Transparency, Community Organizational Performance Index, advocacy index). Where not mentioned in passing (e.g., how the country in which the Activity was operating rated highly on a specific index), indices were described as part of a suite of other data included in CLA, such as MEL data, evaluations, and OCAs.

One entry, however, developed an index for use. The authors emphasized the importance of engaging partners and aligning with similar initiatives, including incorporating other third-party data as part of their index. The entry emphasized that incorporating a CLA approach from the start was a reason the Activity's index development efforts were successful: "From the start, the Index design was submitted to learning processes nurtured by feedback from activities carried out with local networks, CSOs, and government institutions."[49] The Activity Managers then used the index to measure that the activity contributed to improved outcomes compared to nationwide. The authors felt this clear outcome "materializ[ed] the impacts of the actions carried out by the activity through its collaboration with other partners and through coordinated Index feedback and learning processes."

Respondents in interviews did not mention using third party data in their CLA processes.

Finding 3.1.8: Although often mentioned, substantive evaluation[50] use is less frequently described in CLA case competition entries.

Evaluations are often contractually required as part of an activity implementation, which may account for their prevalence in CLA case competition entries. The term "evaluation" was used substantively in over half of DRG CLA case reports (54%, N = 57; see Annex 7 for more). However, when specific types of evaluations were searched for, these appeared much less often. Of these, "mid-term evaluation" appeared most frequently (five percent of reports, N = 6), followed by "internal evaluation," "external evaluation," "final evaluation," "impact evaluation," and "performance evaluation" (each in just two percent of reports, N = 2), and "formative evaluation" appeared in one report (one percent) (see Finding 3.1.8 for more on impact evaluations). The team also searched for the terms "developmental evaluation" and "process evaluation," which did not appear in any reports.

Selected DRG CLA case competition entries described in some depth how they used mid-term evaluations (i.e., substantively, see footnote 57). One report described how evaluation data helped them to adapt the program to a changing external political context:

> *More specifically, interviews with training participants, government, and civil society partners conducted during our mid-term evaluation highlighted the need for a more focused and in-depth series of communication trainings. These interviews informed [the activity's] CLA approach. It helped us identify a specific sub-group of trainees who are critical for government communications, such as spokespersons and communication officers. We then offered them a series of tailored workshops.*[51]

The authors described how they worked closely with their Evidence & Learning team, which was "instrumental in encouraging and educating the program team on how best to integrate CLA approaches

[49] "Citizen Security and Social Integration Index in Colombia: From Measurement to Collaboration," 2022

[50] Reports including use of the term "evaluation" and its stems (evaluate, evaluating, evaluated) were removed from results when they only referred to non-activity focused evaluation (e.g., American Evaluation Association, or "re-evaluating continuation of activities") or only referenced the "Monitoring and Evaluation team" associated with the activity, with the aim of being as inclusive as possible of examples of evaluation in reports.

[51] "Collaborating in Armenia to Improve Government Communications," 2022

into our work." **This suggests that intentional collaboration with MEL and evidence and learning teams can build the capacity of data-informed CLA**. In addition, the authors highlighted the benefit of the tailored workshops (which were the product of CLA processes), including "the peer-to-peer learning and connection," among participants. The authors went on to highlight the preliminary organizational impact of their CLA processes, explaining:

> *Before CLA, team members were often distracted from the program's strategic goals, focusing mainly on indicators and day-to-day operations—process, not results. During staff meetings, we mostly discussed operational and technical details. Now, our staff meetings are aimed at analyzing programmatic and operational learning and identifying areas for improvement. This has contributed to an organizational culture more focused on strategy and results rather than on process and requirements.* [52]

The authors suggested that incorporating structured evidence as part of CLA helped them pivot away from accountability and towards a focus on achieving programmatic outcomes; their perceived success may have increased their confidence when taking a hybrid approach to including evidence in CLA.

Another DRG CLA case competition entry highlighted how primary data collection as part of CLA processes supported the activity's mid-term evaluation, suggesting that these processes can be mutually beneficial. Yet, another report indicated how the activity's formative evaluation was integral to its pause and reflect sessions, illustrating how structured evidence can support other CLA processes.[53] The authors articulated how the evidence they collected "has the potential to improve the effectiveness of program activities to ultimately reach the long-term outcome," suggesting that they feel that structured evidence-informed adaptations may ultimately support outcome achievement.

Finding 3.1.9: Research is rarely incorporated into DRG CLA processes.

The research team searched for selected research-related key terms: "randomized controlled trial (RCT)," "(quasi) experimental design," "impact evaluation," "academic," and "systematic reviews." Only "(quasi) experimental design" or "RCT" and "impact evaluation" appeared in case studies; the other terms did not appear or their use did not align with the use of research in CLA (e.g., reference to "academic partners"). Interview respondents did not discuss incorporating research into their work; this is unsurprising since respondents were drawn from CLA case competition entries.

Only three DRG CLA case competition entries (three percent) mentioned using an experimental or quasi-experimental design (including RCTs). Two of these case studies, both submitted in 2015, described the CLA processes for the same program in Uganda.[54] For this program, they identified 12 activity-supported districts with a comparison group (12 similar districts without activity support). Data were collected through questionnaires in the 24 districts in the study and complemented with a desk review. While the study found that the effects of activity's technical assistance were mixed across activity-supported districts and the comparison group, it did flag several TA components that had high impact. Both case studies outline how the study identified major factors that supported or hindered service delivery. These factors, where possible, were identified to continue or to be adapted (e.g., plans to consolidate technical assistance rather than initiate new areas over time), and how the program planned to use this information to continually hone the program focus and delivery.

[52] "Collaborating in Armenia to Improve Government Communications," 2022

[53] "Applying the Rapid Feedback MERL Approach with Family Care First Cambodia," 2017

[54] "Grants Improve Decentralized Service Delivery: Evidence from Uganda," 2015; "Integrated Planning and Budgeting Strengthens District Operational Plans in Uganda," 2015

The third CLA case competition entry described an activity in Eastern Europe.[55] The team collaborated with a local research partner to conduct an RCT to determine which behavioral messages would encourage tax compliance. They used the findings from the tax behavior study to provide partner municipalities with tailored technical assistance packages to improve revenue collection. This case highlighted that using the data in this way was part of the Activity's adaptive management approach in that the activity was able to be more flexible in the assistance it provided. Of the two reports that mention "impact evaluation," neither conducted an impact evaluation as part of the CLA case competition entry.[56]

For activities to undertake such rigorous designs and have them be valid and successful, specific and detailed steps must be taken, such as identifying a comparison group, developing instruments, ensuring data quality, and measuring change over time. The entries who undertook these designs mentioned the need for a well-developed indicator system and reliance on MEL teams to support their work, and that time and funding were barriers. One of these cases worked with a local research partner, who provided expertise in these approaches, which is another consideration when planning to undertake experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

DRG CLA case competition entries did not describe incorporating information from peer-reviewed literature. Challenges to academic literature use include its audience (academia) and use of jargon, accessibility (including cost), and timelines–finding studies that speak to the specific question or context in which CLA is being undertaken.[57]

Challenges to structured evidence (i.e., MEL data) tend to fall into two categories in literature on evidence use in program management: individual skill and capacity and organizational culture.[58] Within individual skill and capacity, barriers include research and data literacy, priority of other duties (i.e., time), accessibility, and clarity of implications for practice.[59] Organizational culture barriers include lack of incentives for evidence-based decision-making, inadequate funding for evidence-based programming, resistance to change, and political influence.[60]

3.2. THOUGH DATA ON PLANNING ARE LIMITED, IT IS TYPICALLY FOCUSED ON UNSTRUCTURED EVIDENCE; ADVANCED PLANNING CAN SUPPORT THE INTEGRATION OF STRUCTURED EVIDENCE AS PART OF DRG CLA.

The research team anticipated and confirmed through its review of DRG CLA case competition entries, that these documents infrequently described planning processes. Therefore, the RT relies on the limited KII data, during which the team probed on planning for the use of structured evidence as part of CLA. As a consequence, the RT's confidence level in RQ1 findings around planning is lower than around use (RQ2), as data are more limited. More research is needed to more comprehensively understand whether and how those undertaking CLA plan to incorporate varied forms of structured evidence.

[55] "It Takes Tax Morale to Raise Local Revenues," 2023

[56] "Collaborative Learning to ADAPT RISE Programs to Emerging Best Practices," 2015; "LEAPing in to Improve USAID DRG Program Design," 2022

[57] Humphries et al., 2014; Oliver et al., 2014

[58] Humphries et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2010; Kengia et al., 2023

[59] Humphries et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2010; Kengia et al., 2023; Poiroux et al., 2024

[60] Humphries et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2010

Finding 3.2.1: Most CLA planning to incorporate data is geared towards unstructured evidence, such as through informal discussions and reflections.

The research team selected interviewees because they worked on projects that incorporated evidence in some way. However, it is notable that planning to incorporate some element of personal experiences and unstructured evidence was universally a component of CLA planning among these respondents.

As an example, a program manager for a Middle East and North Africa region USAID Mission recalled how the goal of their CLA planning "was not to answer pre-defined questions. Rather, it was to figure out how to ask them and then to challenge the organizations to go back and use that enhanced understanding to make some decisions about what they would do to address it."[61] This respondent went on to explain that CLA planning oriented mostly around generating "a discussion… I would call it a small group discussion, that really was sort of the technical team trying to grapple honestly with the insights that we gained through the process and reaching a consensus."[62] This was a clear instance of personal experience and unstructured evidence driving decision-making.

A learning manager for a multi-country human rights consortium recalled that CLA planning was designed to "do the sense making" and was oriented initially around "structured learning gatherings."[63] This person's impression from the beginning was that the CLA process "would end up as nothing more than just a reflection on what [the consortium]... has learned about itself."[64]

Another example came from a youth resilience project in the LAC region, where a learning specialist working for an international non-profit recalled that early planning focused on "just kind of facilitating a conversation, trying to filter all those conversations, and to make… proposals for action."[65] According to this individual, "the learning agenda came later" and the learning agenda was not a core component of early planning.

Finding 3.2.2.: Relying on collaborative processes and personal experience are the default tools used when unplanned adaptation is required.

CLA is often critical when an activity experiences severe external shocks that require rapid and comprehensive adaptation. CLA case competition entries and interview data suggest that, when such adaptation is required on short notice, Activity Managers tend to rely disproportionately on unstructured data. This is because drawing from personal experience or collaborative processes is the least expensive, requires the least amount of infrastructure, and requires the least research literacy.

In interviews, several respondents discussed how decision-makers initiated CLA processes, such as collaborative meetings and stocktaking events, in reaction to changing implementation conditions. As an example, a USAID Mission in East Africa responded to the government retaking substantial territory from a powerful militant organization. This created new implementing opportunities and challenges, which required the Mission to revisit core components of its development approach.[66] Similarly, a youth resilience activity in the LAC region had to respond to a series of nationwide protests following unpopular tax legislation. The government wanted USAID to help understand youth grievances and demands in the wake of the protests, so this activity had to pivot its approach.

[61] Interview 4
[62] Interview 4
[63] Interview 6
[64] Interview 6
[65] Interview 9
[66] Interview 10

It did so by implementing "active listening" sessions at government-held dialogues. These sessions produced exclusively unstructured evidence, as this was the most time and labor efficient way to glean insight from hundreds of dialogues.[67] While the case report for this activity implied a structured data collection approach, interview follow-up revealed that it was more akin to the unstructured convening processes that dominate so much of CLA. "Listeners" at these dialogues did not influence proceedings in any way, have a structured note-taking approach, or produce a dataset of findings from the listening sessions. The general impression of the listeners defined the lessons they took from the sessions.

Analysis of DRG CLA case competition entries also suggested that planning through collaborative processes is a common reaction to unplanned adaptation requirements. One entry described how the Activity used collaboration to move a learning event online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.[68] Another case study described how the Activity responded to twin contextual shifts—a new political coalition and the COVID-19 pandemic—to adapt the "through pause and reflect exercises and strategy review sessions, the program [succeeded] in reporting the strategy to focus on increasing public engagement on priority policy reform issue areas while continuing to be responsive to requests for technical assistance."[69] Ultimately, incorporating unstructured evidence without prior planning may be favored because it does not require specific infrastructure or specialized knowledge, and can be executed well by many.

Finding 3.1.3. Advanced planning for incorporating structured evidence ensures the creation of processes to integrate this evidence into CLA.

A technical advisor for USAID in Southeast Asia described CLA as being incorporated "from the beginning… it was very much known from the beginning that we were going to be wanting to utilize as much learning as possible, so that when this piece [CLA] got brought in, it was already kind of a welcomed extra portion."[70] USAID hosted a kickoff event where:

> *All [the stakeholders] came to DC and had this generative conference where we came up with ideas around how to gather data and information to design the project. From really early on, the entire community was involved in the design process—people who weren't even getting money yet, contributing to ideas, thought leadership around how learning could be built into programs.*[71]

The respondent argued that, because the Mission communicated the intent of the learning process, solicited meaningful input from key actors, and created a clear structure for the role of implementers in CLA, subsequent evidence generation and usage was much smoother than it would otherwise have been.[72]

A program manager working for an international non-profit in Nigeria had a similar recollection, noting that "it was part of the plan from the beginning, from the onset."[73] This person described how, when generating "clusters" of advocacy organizations, they were:

> *Very deliberate about collaboration from the beginning, and because we were deliberate, before we engaged partners [in CLA] they would have already identified the capacity issues they wanted*

[67] Interview 9

[68] "LAC Private Sector Engagement Learning Gathering Raises the Bar for Online Meetings," 2021

[69] "Rapid Adaptation in Evolving Malaysia," 2021

[70] Interview 7

[71] Interview 7

[72] Interview 7

[73] Interview 8

to work on and identified the clusters that they thought would have the best skills to address the challenges.[74]

As with Cambodia, this respondent in Nigeria believes early incorporation of stakeholders and ownership generation was a defining feature of their successful CLA approach. Since the different cluster organizations knew what their learning goals were from the outset, they had a clear sense of mission and of their responsibilities in the learning process.

FINDINGS ON CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The RT found that in each of the cases that exhibited substantial structured evidence incorporation, unstructured evidence was thoughtfully paired with structured data collection processes. Critically, the data came from many sources and the data collection took many different forms: examples included both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as internal and external staff or partners. Cyclical integration of structured evidence alongside collaboration and learning provided a plurality of information to make informed and systematic program adaptations. Evidence integration was executed in ways that fit around program implementation because they were well- resourced (as discussed in Finding 3.2) and well planned (as discussed in Finding 3.1). In this way, standout examples of structured evidence integration were able to overcome the perceived rigidity of this form of evidence as well as transform unstructured evidence into usable information.

SUMMARY

RQ3: What are the challenges and lessons learned in planning for and using monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third party data to inform adaptations?

- Planning for CLA is associated with a higher use of structured evidence. Using structured evidence in CLA requires planning to generate grassroots buy in.
    - Organizational learning has greater chances of success when it is planned as part of core project implementation processes.
- Effective use of structured evidence in CLA requires investing resources, but this investment pays dividends.
- There is a perception that structured evidence including MEL data is at odds with CLA, but integrating varied evidence sources enhances CLA and programmatic adaptations. Structured evidence is an essential element of CLA integrated with or sequenced alongside unstructured evidence.

3.3. PLANNING FOR CLA IS ASSOCIATED WITH A HIGHER USE OF STRUCTURED EVIDENCE.

As discussed, incorporating structured evidence into CLA is challenging for many activities because it requires more energy, resources, and expertise. Planning is therefore essential to effective incorporation of these kinds of data. This is clear in both document analysis and interview findings.

[74] Interview 8

Finding 3.3.1: Using structured evidence in CLA requires planning to generate grassroots buy-in.

In interviews, for example, respondents repeatedly articulated the planning required to generate grassroots buy-in for evidence incorporation.[75] Learning is an active process that requires intentionality and thoughtfulness; token efforts will not produce actionable insight. Individuals who are asked to participate in CLA must understand why the process is worth their enthusiasm. They must feel a sense of ownership over the process and a sense of efficacy that justifies the time and energy required for meaningful participation.

In this vein, a senior manager for a security strengthening activity in Colombia implemented by an international non-profit emphasized the time and resources required to generate buy-in. They advised:

> *Be patient. The key is communication. Try to understand each of the parts. Create a digestible message from the data. Have constant communication between all the parties to align different priorities and perceptions. Transform the message in a way that is helpful and creates more bond than polarization.*[76]

This was critical for the activity in Colombia, for they were asking a lot of their partners and staff to support data collection and therefore ran a high risk of generating resentment or friction. The program staff's extensive communication with a broad array of stakeholders ensured that everyone understood their role in the process and why their time and attention was worthwhile.

The importance of buy in was also highlighted in CLA case competition entries. One CLA case competition entry described how "institutional and donor commitment was the defining factor enabling the implementation of the CLA approach," encapsulating funding, time, and overall buy-in to the process.[77] This CLA case described an approach that included collaboration with USAID and academic partners; reviewing reporting, baseline assessments, and MEL data; and collecting data via interviews and questionnaires. The authors described how throughout their CLA processes:

> *All partners inherited the responsibility to contribute to [CLA], giving access to and supporting the identification of program data and the contact information of relevant stakeholders. In sum, this led to a more formal and rigorous CLA implementation.*

This case highlights how this shared responsibility enhanced their CLA, including by incorporating multiple data sources and stakeholder engagement. Cultivating that sense of shared responsibility required planning early in the process to take effect.

Finding 3.3.2: Organizational learning has greater chances of success when it is planned as part of core project implementation processes.

In interviews, respondents outlined a process by which an integrated learning process identified specific questions or gaps in knowledge and then dedicated research personnel produced structured evidence. One USAID Mission MEL specialist said that CLA became a priority "because there were questions no one could answer. We were not generating enough evidence nor time to step back and think about it."[78]

[75] Interview 2, Interview 5, Interview 6, Interview 9

[76] Interview 2

[77] "CLA Improving DRG Programs in Countries Going Through Post-Conflict Transitions," 2021

[78] Interview 5

This person went on to describe the process as mapping existing challenges or learning gaps and creating an agenda to answer gaps. They outlined the following steps:

> *Identify questions we are asking ourselves, identify who in our portfolio can provide information on this question to help us engage intentionally on it (not answer it), do we have eval or indicator data that would help us further fill it out, if we don't have it, where we would go get it.*[79]

This iterative process of identifying challenges, commissioning rapid research, and incorporating the findings in real-time is an outstanding example of how an activity can merge programming and structured evidence processes. This merger, in turn, permits the use of robust structured evidence in decision-making because the relationship between programming and data collection is already aligned.

Several other activities the research team explored through interviews articulated a similar process. In West Africa, the previously mentioned advocacy project[80] designed an approach wherein learning and implementation processes were nearly indistinguishable. The activity was built around "clusters" of advocacy organizations organized into different subject matter areas. Each cluster received coaching from activity technical specialists to help them learn about their needs and to grow their capacity to conduct advocacy. The cluster system was simultaneously the structure for learning and the structure for activity implementation. Coaching sessions served "principally to help [the clusters] learn and then grow their capacity to advocate."[81] They also provided collaboration opportunities, which then generated learning questions and priorities for future data collection activities.[82] In this case, learning and implementation were constantly interacting and feeding information into one another, permitting real-time adaptation of advocacy approaches underpinned by multiple sources of both structured and unstructured evidence. For an example of how this approach produced adaptation, refer to the "KII Findings" section of finding 3.1.4 above.

The USAID Technical Advisor in Southeast Asia described the close relationship between learning and implementation as "building the airplane as it was flying."[83] This was not an easy process and required substantial commitment: "Some days that felt great, made us very flexible. Other days it felt like, 'does anyone know what's going on?' When things weren't getting done, it could be difficult."[84] However, they insisted that they "couldn't do the work without . . . constantly taking evidence in from [MEL] pieces and building it into the project plan."[85] This level of integration and reciprocity between learning from structured data and implementation requires planning. Indeed, this respondent noted that they had intended this dynamic from the beginning, in part because the activity was undertaking a Collective Impact approach. The tight connection between learning and evidence should be a foundational element of activity design and should be maintained by staff who understand their role in the process. Examples of adaptations produced by this hybrid approach are again found in the "KII findings" section of finding 3.1.4 above.

Overall, the activities the research team examined that were best able to functionally and systematically incorporate evidence made CLA a defining feature of implementation. In several cases, it was difficult to distinguish "learning" processes from implementation because of how closely they were intertwined. This level of coordination and overlap between implementation and learning is necessary, as a more bifurcated and punctuated approach prevents the real-time transmission of information. Program staff must convey

[79] Interview 5
[80] Interview 8
[81] Interview 8
[82] Interview 8
[83] Interview 7
[84] Interview 7
[85] Interview 7

the learning needs of the project, and learning staff must articulate research findings in a way that permits adaptation. The more integrated these processes are, the more readily this transmission occurs. The kind of data structuring discussed above would be very difficult to achieve in the absence of substantial overlap between learning and implementation.

3.4. EFFECTIVE USE OF STRUCTURED EVIDENCE IN CLA REQUIRES INVESTING RESOURCES, INCLUDING MONEY, TIME, AND STAFF EXPERTISE. HOWEVER, THIS INVESTMENT PAYS DIVIDENDS.

The most successful examples of incorporating both structured and unstructured evidence into CLA devoted substantial resources to learning and often had a dedicated MEL contractor attached to the Mission. There were costs associated with these processes, however they were also essential to how effectively the activities were able to learn and make appropriate adaptations in real-time . One example of worthwhile resource allocation is dedicated research personnel. While learning processes should be interlinked with program implementation (as discussed above), the data suggest there is substantial value in offloading some portion of the primary data collection approach to non-programming staff (e.g., external evaluators, MEL Platform personnel). This is because collecting and analyzing structured data requires both specific expertise and dedicated bandwidth. Given other demands on their time, program staff may not have the capability to conduct primary data collection or structure data from collaborative processes, even though they may be aware of this need.

In interviews, a contractor respondent noted that "without a [MEL] contractor, we wouldn't have had the capacity to pull and distill this data into anything more observable than just 'read these evaluations.'"[86] One USAID technical advisor agreed that resource allocation was crucial:

> *It would've been really hard to—as the people who brought that process to the table, hadn't shown up with the resources, saying 'we're willing to help fund the data and generation of research' which is a key component of this. I think there would've been a lot more spinning in space, piecing together learning from other places.*[87]

Another example of resource allocation is budget, which is important regardless of which personnel are responsible for research activities. The program manager for an advocacy project in Nigeria recalled that "there was a budget dedicated to this from the beginning, and it was devoted both to coaching for partners but also helping partners identify gaps and challenges."[88] Sufficient budget ensured both that the activity could afford to pursue learning priorities and that a decision to siphon funds from activity implementation did not engender bitterness in the partners or activity staff. In all of these cases, the extent of learning necessary to fully incorporate robust evidence required time and money that was well outside the normal parameters of activity implementation.

In CLA case competition entry analysis, oft-mentioned challenges included time and resources, including the need for flexible or longer-than-usual timelines. For instance, a family care activity in Southeast Asia described how integrating the MEL Consortium into activity planning and development:

[86] Interview 5

[87] Interview 8

[88] Interview 8

Led to a longer timeline for developing the theory of change, honing in on which implementing partners should work with the Consortium, and getting to the formative research phase, including both the literature review and field research.[89]

This entry noted the time needed to build capacity among partners for using MEL data to drive learning. Interviewees emphasized that successful incorporation of evidence into CLA processes is underpinned by a substantial amount of work and intent to use the data collected. To quote a senior program manager interviewed, "learning is not business as usual."[90] By this, the respondent did not mean that learning is atypical at USAID—quite the opposite—but that functional learning does not happen by accident. In the same vein, a CLA case competition entry highlighted the following gaps in learning processes:

- *Learning is too often the discipline of one or a few individuals (MEL staff and/or senior staff).*
- *Learning, as a systematized process, routinely occurs during reporting periods, a quantitative or qualitative evaluation/assessment, close-out… and rarely other times.*
- *Learning agendas are generally captured through a research-oriented line of questioning that may cultivate the attention of specialist staff but is otherwise removed from the day-to-day experiences of the larger team.*[91]

This entry went on to describe how to overcome these gaps, they articulated a central learning question and "reoriented each existing source of knowledge and data towards this central learning question." These data sources included project data, an ex-post analysis of activity-level learning events, an annual learning survey, and USAID-commissioned evaluations and case studies.

These examples support the idea that learning happens at an individual level at all times spontaneously and organically, however organizational learning must be an intentional process. This intentionality is resource-intensive, but the effort is worthwhile, for in its absence, meaningful learning is difficult or impossible. The "black box" connecting unstructured evidence to decision-making makes consequent adaptations unpredictable because they do not emerge from a process that can minimize bias and adjudicate between competing ideas of best practice. The "dividend" in this case is the ability of structured learning to minimize the arbitrary nature of unstructured learning and therefore produce adaptations that are more representative of the collaborative process and less subject to idiosyncratic whim.

3.5: THERE IS A PERCEPTION THAT STRUCTURED EVIDENCE—INCLUDING MEL DATA—IS AT ODDS WITH CLA, BUT INTEGRATING VARIED EVIDENCE SOURCES ENHANCES CLA AND ADAPTATIONS.

As discussed in prior sections, one-third of CLA cases reviewed in this study relied on only unstructured evidence. One reason that emerged in interviews is the notion that structured evidence is too rigid and not well-suited to CLA. The research team intentionally selected some respondents from projects that relied on unstructured evidence (e.g., personal experience, stakeholder engagement, meetings, etc.). In these interviews, respondents justified the reliance on these unstructured evidence sources by arguing that other forms of evidence were not fit-to-purpose.

For instance, a youth resilience activity in LAC referenced above in the Q1 response submitted more than a thousand proposals to the government to provide recommendations for how to respond to youth

[89] "Applying the Rapid Feedback MERL Approach with Family Care First Cambodia," 2017

[90] Interview 5

[91] "Human Rights Support Mechanism: How to Operationalize Learning across a Consortium," 2019

grievances. The details of the proposals emerged from "active listening" sessions during more than 500 government-hosted dialogues. As discussed above, this process appeared to have a structured element to it, but further examination via interview suggested otherwise. Activity managers of this project recalled that these proposals emerged almost exclusively from the unstructured evidence from youth participants in these dialogues rather than from a more systematic data collection process.

One CLA specialist noted that "we didn't go into these conversations with any kind of specific learning questions: we were just kind of facilitating a conversation, trying to filter all those conversations and produce some policy documents that the government could use."[92] As a consequence, they were not entirely clear how the observations gleaned during active listening produced any specific proposal. To the extent that documentation occurred during the active listening sessions, it was done informally without reference to a broader analytical strategy that would permit structured learning.

A project manager also recalled that the extensive collaborative process they organized to answer critical questions about programming adaptation could not utilize data, as the country context restricted the use of almost any form of quantitative data—external or internal. This individual noted that, "it was less of a data driven process than it was sort of… taking that ambition to have a meaningful impact and seeing through discussion what that meant."[93]

Relatedly, respondents suggested that they feel relying on unstructured evidence was an easier lift. A USAID program manager, when asked about the role of structured evidence in the process of soliciting perspectives from Mission staff and implementing partners in AARs, said "don't overthink it… it's very natural," implying that structured evidence felt inorganic or stilted to program managers. This respondent felt that the fluidity of the context in the country required a commensurately fluid process that precluded the systematic incorporation of structured evidence.[94] Individuals would come to a CLA session, be it an AAR or a mid-course stocktaking, and their perspective served as the primary or exclusive data source for the Mission's decision-making. This respondent emphasized that the Mission knew all of its implementing partners well and could therefore adjudicate between potentially competing perspectives. They could "feel consensus" in the room when it emerged.[95]

Finding 3.5.1: Contrary to this perception, structured evidence is an essential element of CLA integrated with or sequenced alongside collaborative processes.

The challenge of CLA—and indeed any learning process—is to transform scattered pieces of information into useful, specific data that can inform decision-making. Anything has the potential to be data, whether it is the number of votes cast in an election, the amount of tax revenue generated, the attitude of a community towards corruption, or even just an individual's opinions about the government's proper role in taxation. The research team adopted a broad understanding of evidence and data in its approach, in that it can come from anywhere (inclusive of everything from RCTs to observations or collaborative processes), but information must be captured, structured, and analyzed in such a way that it can facilitate systematic learning—i.e., transformed into structured evidence.

Activities that use only unstructured evidence struggle to articulate how they systematically adapted their programs. The research team asked every interview respondent to reflect on how they adjudicated between competing ideas or distilled a wide variety of perspectives into discrete lessons for use by

[92] Interview 9

[93] Interview 3

[94] Interview 4

[95] Interview 4

program managers. When programs used only unstructured evidence to generate learning, the respondents could not articulate the exact process or referred to the "felt consensus" in the room.

By contrast, respondents from projects that did make use of structured evidence treated the outcomes of the collaborative process as a *jumping off point* for learning, followed by structured data collection to validate assumptions and gain more evidence. These examples have been lifted up throughout this report. These include a previously described example (see Finding 3.1.4) that paired consultations with stakeholders with rapid quarterly perception surveys to measure how program adaptations influenced outcomes over time.[96] An advocacy project in West Africa paired CSO cluster coaching sessions with rapid PEAs and targeted qualitative research to validate claims made during collaborative activities and explore progress on key advocacy initiatives.[97] A youth support project in Southeast Asia paired "rapid feedback loop studies" and "microstudies" with unstructured evidence from after-action reviews and pause-and-reflect sessions to explore messaging efficacy and generate actionable programming recommendations.[98] A CLA case competition entry from USAID/Liberia (discussed in Finding 3.1.2) described how their midterm stocktaking review took place in two phases, the first of which was developing a "technical evidence base" from KIIs and FGDs with key stakeholders, which then informed strategic workshops focused on "joint analysis and decision-making."[99] **These examples demonstrate that structured evidence is compatible with CLA if it is executed nimbly and in alignment with collaborative and learning processes, which then contribute to meaningful learning and informed adaptations.**

CONCLUSIONS FOR OVERARCHING HYPOTHESIS

The RT's team findings across the research questions (RQ1, 2, and 3) provide strong evidence of the ***plausibility*** of the hypothesis that ***IF*** MEL is planned and used to inform CLA, ***THEN*** adaptations are more likely to lead to program outcomes. However, data and research design constraints prevent the RT from making strong conclusions about the direct validity of this hypothesis. The challenge is two-fold: first, there was no variation in the extent to which respondents and case documentation reported CLA producing adaptation. Everyone said that their CLA - regardless of whether and how they incorporated MEL data - produced valuable adaptations. Second, the RT is not in a position to assess differences in outcomes produced by these adaptations, as this would require a research design that included a comparison group and an approach to testing the causality of adaptations leading to programmatic outcomes (i.e., an experimental or quasi-experimental design).

However, this report does conclude that in the absence of a structured data generation approach, the link between evidence and programming decisions is either lost or is impossible to observe and verify. When programs rely on unstructured evidence to generate learning (i.e., when evidence usage is limited to meetings, after-action reviews, and other forms of convening), a set of idiosyncratic personal preferences, prior opinions, communication styles, and organizational incentives inform what an activity gleans from these collaborative processes. Indeed, behavioral science literature suggests that decision-makers "often make irrational choices and tend to rely on mental shortcuts" to manage complexity; this can include choosing the simplest option, confirmation bias, sunk cost bias, and "group think."[100]

This is akin to the "felt consensus" described in interviews, which is not systematic and cannot be tested; this is not best practice for adaptive management.[101] Perhaps in many cases, the most beneficial lessons

[96] Interview 2

[97] Interview 1

[98] Interview 7

[99] "USAID/Liberia's Rapid, Cost-friendly, and Collaborative Evaluations," 2019

[100] Hernandez et al., 2019, p. 6)

[101] Rogers & Macfarlane, 2020

emerged and a program took the learning from CLA and went on to improve outcomes. However, it is also possible that the incomplete or invalid lessons emerged and either did nothing to move the activity towards its objectives—or perhaps even did harm. It is unclear which ***voices*** were included (or excluded) in decision-making. The goal of stakeholder engagement is to produce an inclusive program cycle; when idiosyncrasy and arbitrary impressions determine which opinions hold sway, inclusivity will not emerge except by chance. Structured evidence, by contrast, can provide a foundation from which to adjudicate fairly between competing ideas and perspectives, as well as transparency on which ideas and conclusions informed decision-making.

This report provides examples of instances where a hybrid approach produced important activity adaptations. The RT found that incorporating structured evidence alongside unstructured evidence often produced *iterative* adaptations. In the data collected for this tudy, an initial adaptation often emerged from collaborative engagement and was then paired with structured evidence. That data either validated the conclusions of the original collaborative process—in which case the intervention proceeded—or suggested that further adaptation was necessary. It is in this ability to test and iterate that the hybrid approach is clearly superior, and is in line with adaptive management best practices.[102] The RT concludes that CLA featuring an interactive hybrid approach is more likely to allow programs to continually hone in the most effective adaptations, as well as capture the valuable lessons from stakeholder engagement and execute interventions that respond to program participants' needs.

This report does not suggest that the collaborative element (i.e., unstructured evidence) of CLA is unimportant or that it produces poor-quality learning. Broad and deep collaboration is an essential component of adaptive learning and data drawn directly from the perspectives of activity stakeholders is irreplaceable. The research team does argue, however, that it is very difficult to produce *functional* learning from an approach that excludes multiple and varied sources of evidence. Hybrid approaches which pair unstructured evidence with structured evidence can avoid these pitfalls while preserving the substantial value gained from an inclusive and open-minded learning process. Moreover, this kind of approach can help to ensure that an equitable array of voices is heard by working to offset varied forms of unconscious bias. ***Taken together, these two conclusions provide evidence that the hypothesis in question is plausible, for structured data clarifies the relationship between evidence and decision-making and permits systematic and iterative adaptation.***

[102] Rogers & Macfarlane, 2020

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ANNEX 1: LIST OF DRG CLA DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

A Collaborative Design - A CLA Approach to Ensuring REM Representation in Yemen

A Collaborative, Learning and Adapting Approach - Pioneering the Maldives First Bar Exam

A Constellation of Stars With Purpose, or How to Navigate the MEL Maze

A Cultural Shift in Using Data to Improve Child Outcomes in Moldova

A Culture of Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptability - Examples from Lebanon

A Data-Driven CLA Approach to Address Illegal Charcoal in Malawi

Actionable Learning - Adapting a Grants Process to Support Effective Programming

Adaptive Collaboration with Stakeholders in the Time of COVID-19 in Senegal

Applying CLA to for More Reliable and Sustainable Electricity Services in Libya

Applying CLA to Increase Private Sector Participation in Local Governance in Uganda

Applying the Rapid Feedback MERL Approach with Family Care First Cambodia

Ask Questions, Generate Learning, Use Learning (Wash, Rinse, Repeat)

Building a Women's Empowerment Strategy and Coalition Through Co-Creation in Egypt

Building in CLA to Your Activity Design - A Remedy for Working in Closing Spaces

Building Systems for Evidence Utilization at the DRG Center

Citizen Security - CLA to Strengthen Evidence Based Decision Making in the Caribbean

Citizen Security and Social Integration Index in Colombia - From Measurement to Collaboration

CLA Behavior Change in Public Participation in Kosovo

CLA Cultures and Outcomes in USAID Morocco's FORSATY Program

CLA Drives Breakthrough Changes in Public Procurement

CLA for Sustained Impact and a Model for Issue-Based Policy Making in Africa

CLA Improving DRG Programs in Countries Going Through Post-Conflict Transitions

CLA in Developing Effective Models of Legal Representation - CCHR Human Rights Defenders Project

CLA in Safe Spaces to Promote Learning in Food Security Programming in Madagascar

CLA Mainstreams Locally Tailored Solutions to Improve Natural Resources Management and Prevent Conflicts

CLA to Promote Vibrant Information for a Just, Prosperous, and Inclusive Mozambique

Cluster Reviews for Results in Nigeria - CLA to Enhance Transparency and Accountability

Co-creating Organizational Development Interventions with CSOs for Systemic Change

Collaborating and Adaptive Programming to Better Understand Rumor Management and Prevent Inter-Communal Violence in Myanmar

Collaborating in Armenia to Improve Government Communications

Collaborating, Learning and Adapting to Build Resilience in Fragile States

Collaborative Learning - The Way Forward to Protected Areas in Bangladesh

Collaborative Learning to Adapt RISE Programs to Emerging Best Practices

Collective Agency and Community Interaction For Pacamán

Community Voices for Policy Development - Applying Human-Centered Design in Tanzania

Context Analysis and Flexible Partnership in South and Central Syria

Development in Challenging Times - Strengthening Local Capacity and Partnership

Empathy Strategy - A CLA Approach from Colombia

Encouraging a CLA Culture

Enhancing Locally Led Development in Kenya

Fostering Transparent Public Dialogue in Colombia

From Implementing to Coaching - Building Local Civil Society in Niger

Gaining Stakeholder Buy-in Through Building Trust and Sustaining Change in Municipalities

Grants Improve Decentralized Service Delivery - Evidence From Uganda

Greater Evidence and Participation - Using CLA to Learn for Stabilization in Yemen

Guyana Youth ALLIES Civic Education Toolkit

How It All Fits Together - USAID Strategic Communications in Kenya

Human Rights Support Mechanism - How to Operationalize Learning Across a Consortium

If You Don't Succeed, Learn, Adapt, and Try Again - Shejeh Salams Story

Implementing QMS at DDA to Become WHO Listened Regulatory Authority

Increasing Advocacy Impact through Networks in Lebanon - A Collaborative and Adaptive Learning

Increasing Locally-Led Development Solutions in Ethiopia

Indigenous Childhood Observatory of Northern Cauca

Integrated Planning and Budgeting Strengthens District Operational Plans in Uganda

Inter-Program Collaboration for Youth in Colombia

It Takes Tax Morale to Raise Local Revenues

LAC Private Sector Engagement Learning Gathering Raises the Bar for Online Meetings

LEAPing in to Improve USAID DRG Program Design

Learning and Adapting Enables Civil Society Innovations in Cambodia

Learning by Doing - Adaptive Management in Kosovo

Learning by Doing... What You Are Already Doing - The CLA Workshop

Learning to Learn in Liberia - A CLA Approach to Effective Advocacy

Libya Taqarib Project Channels the CLA of Local Politics

Libyan Municipalities Dampen Conflict Through Pride in Shared Identity

Ma Mya - The Power of a Visual Archetype for Human-Centered CLA

Made in Vietnam - From Bureaucratic Standstill to Diplomatic Breakthrough

Making Evidence Accessible with the LACLEARN Evidence Help Desk

Meaningful Data Disaggregation for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Outcomes

Navigating an Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka With Continuous Learning

Nothing About Us, Without Us

Nuyok Adaptive Management to Improve Integration and Service Delivery in Uganda

One Good Idea for Better Collaborating, Learning and Adapting

Overcoming Distrust by Thinking and Working Politically

Pausing and Reflecting Pays Dividends for Nascent Ethiopian CSOs

Pivoting in Response to Contextual Changes - Adaptive Management in Mozambique

Post Activity Reviews - A Means to Ensuring Impactful Development Interventions

Promoting Fulbe Inclusion in Upper West Ghana Through Action-Research

Protecting Food, Water and Wildlife to Strengthen Resilience in Zimbabwe

Rapid Adaptation in Evolving Malaysia

Regional Integration to Create Safer Communities

Reimagining Support for Jordan's Democratic Development

Resourced CLA Accelerates the Journey to Self-Reliance and Resilience in the Sahel

SAFE STEPS - An Alliance to Save Lives in Colombia

Scenario Planning in Sudan - CLA Impact in a Conflict Environment

Seeing in Systems, Working in Networks - CLA for Adaptive Peacebuilding in Myanmar

Shae Thot - Integrating Governance into Community-Driven Development Programming in Myanmar

Strategic Alignment to Improve Access to Justice in Mexico

Strengthening Accountability Institutions to Improve Service Delivery

Strengthening Nepal's Medicines Regulatory Capacity Through and Indicator Based Tool

Stronger Local Partners and Systems Through Collaborative and Adaptive Mindsets

Surfing the Wave - A Civic Education Pivot to Support Revolutionary Change in Sudan

Testing Theory of Change for USAID in Niger Using Structured Experiential Learning

The Civil Society Innovation Initiative's Process Historian Approach to CLA

The CLA Way for Partnerships to Combat Human Trafficking

Transforming Security Paradigms Through Responsiveness Virtuous Feedback Loops

USAID-Armenia's Community-Led Development Approach

USAID-/Colombia Introduces Political Economy Analysis to Better Adapt Programming to Local Contexts

USAID-Liberia's Rapid, Cost-Friendly, and Collaborative Evaluations

USAID-/Moldova ME Challenger - Desmystifying CLA

USAID-/Peru Adaptive Management in Rapidity Shifting Contexts

USAID-/Ukraine - Learning and Adapting in Uncertainty

Using CLA to Position Frontier County Governments for Effective Disaster Response

Using CLA to Promote Transparency With Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination

What's New - High-Frequency Mobile Communication Drives Resilience Learning in Somalia

Youth Resilience Activity Brings CLA to the National Stage in Historic Colombia Pact with Youth

ANNEX 2: SUPPLEMENTAL METHODS INFORMATION

RESEARCH QUESTION	DATA SOURCES	ANALYSIS METHOD	ILLUSTRATIVE INDICATORS
1. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data ***planned*** to inform DRG CLA vis-à-vis other goals?	Desk review CLA case studies DRG program documents KIIs	Content analysis Thematic analysis	• Percent of respondents who report having spent considerable time planning to incorporate MEL into CLA decision-making • Percent of programmatic planning documents that articulate a process for incorporating MEL into CLA decision-making
2. To what extent are monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data ***used*** to inform DRG programmatic adaptations vis-à-vis other inputs?	Desk review CLA case studies DRG program documents KIIs	Content analysis Thematic analysis	• Percent of respondents who report at least one instance in which MEL data changed intervention approach/strategy during the course of implementation • Percent of project reporting documents that articulate instances in which intervention approach/strategy changed as a result of MEL inputs during program implementation
3. What are the challenges and lessons learned in planning for and using monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third-party data to inform adaptations?	Desk review KIIs	Content analysis Thematic analysis	Discussion of challenges to use data in CLA Discussion of lessons learned or future intention to use data in CLA
4. Is there evidence that supports or contradicts the hypothesis that IF MEL is planned and used to inform CLA THEN adaptations are more likely to lead to program outcomes?	Desk review CLA case studies DRG program documents KIIs	Content analysis Thematic analysis	Percent of KII and document observations that demonstrate a link between MEL incorporation into CLA and programmatic adaptation

ANNEX 2A: SUPPLEMENTAL DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

PHASE 1: DESK RESEARCH & DOCUMENT CODING

In Phase 1, the research team conducted a review of existing CLA guidance and data-informed adaptive management from USAID and other donors and implementers (see Annex I for a reference list of these documents). Then, the researchers reviewed an initial sample of ten CLA case competition entries to familiarize themselves with the data and develop an initial coding schema. After reviewing these entries, the research team decided to focus only on CLA case competition entries from the DRG sector.

This decision deviated from the concept note, which planned to select a sample of roughly 100 CLA case competition entries, prioritizing DRG entries and geographic diversity. Upon review and discussion, the research team determined that focusing on 115 DRG CLA case competition entries would enable an in-depth analysis of CLA entries in this sector, which would lend themselves best to informing CLA guidance for DRG activities. In addition, the research team determined that there was no reason to believe that DRG entries to the CLA case competition are substantively different from those from other sectors. This pivot enabled a multiple case study approach to exploring data and evidence use within DRG CLA case competition entries, in which multiple data sources were gathered across selected cases.

From the 115 DRG CLA case competition entries posted online to the USAID Learning Lab, the team was able to work with 105 PDFs (nine files were not able to be downloaded, and one file was corrupt and unable to be coded). The entries were from 2015 to 2023 (the 2024 CLA case competition concluded during this research).

During Phase 1, the research team made two additional adjustments to the research design articulated in the concept note. After consultation with USAID, the team decided to continue the case study approach and further explore the CLA case competition studies chosen in Phase 1. In addition, and after consultation with USAID, the team elected to use a stratified approach to sampling and invite stakeholders from data-informed and non-data-informed examples of CLA to participate in interviews in Phase 2. The aim was to enable a more thorough exploration of barriers to use of CLA and adaptive management, and the benefits and lessons learned. The research team selected cases based on coding for structured data or evidence use and those that did *not* include in-depth discussion data or evidence use (e.g., focused more on stakeholder engagement or collaboration).

Prior to beginning Phase 2, the research team searched the DEC for activity and MEL reports from the selected case studies. This yielded few results, with few specific documents available for activities of interest.

PHASE 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The research team intended to interview representatives from a maximum of 10 cases, five from CLA cases that made strong use of data and five from CLA cases that did not. The research team invited stakeholders from 20 cases to participate (an oversample to try to offset anticipated challenges with response rates) in an interview about their CLA case competition submission; of these, and in line with the intended design, 10 were examples of data use and 10 were not.[103] A total of 33 interviewees were invited to participate in a KII or group KII via email, if an email address was available, or through LinkedIn. Respondents were asked to identify others from the CLA case who may be interested in participating. Of those invited, 27 percent (N = 13) responded to the invitation and completed an interview; the research team sent one reminder to those who didn't respond. Of these, nine respondents were from CLA cases

[103] To compensate for anticipated response rates, the research team oversampled the number of cases to reach the target number of CLA cases (n = 10) for KIIs and group KIIs.

identified as having strong data collection use and four from CLA cases lacking data use. The research team conducted interviews virtually (e.g., using Google Meet or Zoom) between October 15 and November 15, 2024. The research team conducted nine interviews with the 13 respondents: seven with individual respondents and two group KIIs of three respondents each. If the respondent consented, interviews were recorded and transcribed; a notetaker joined the conversation and the Supernormal AI tool generated notes from the conversation. Interviews ranged in duration from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Topics discussed included reflecting on the CLA process, the decision to use data as part of decision-making about an activity or initiative (or not), and recommendations to facilitate data or evidence use going forward (see Annex 3 for the interview guide).

Also in Phase 2, researchers identified CLA experts to participate in KIIs. To identify respondents, the researchers used purposive sampling, with the aim of including varied perspectives (e.g., Mission, USAID/Washington, academic). The research team relied on personal networks to invite CLA experts to participate in an interview. A total of five respondents were invited, and three participated in two interviews (one interview with two respondents, one individual interview). Interviews were conducted virtually (e.g., using Google Meet or Zoom) between October 24 and November 5, 2024. After respondents consented, the research team recorded all interviews (both audio and video) after obtaining consent from the respondents and used the Supernormal AI tool to generate a transcript. This transcript was augmented by notes from at least one dedicated notetaker. Interviews ranged in duration from 20 minutes to 60 minutes. Topics discussed included reflecting on the CLA process, the decision to use data as part of decision-making about an activity or initiative (or not), and recommendations to facilitate data or evidence use going forward (see Annex 3 for the interview guide).

ANNEX 2B: SUPPLEMENTAL DATA ANALYSIS INFORMATION

PHASE 1: DESK RESEARCH & DOCUMENT CODING

Researchers undertook a two-pronged analytical approach to the content analysis of CLA case competition documents, which enabled a focused coding process: first, the research team identified codes that were keyword based (i.e., searchable based on specific terms appearing in the case competition entries), and coded for these using automated tools in NVivo, a qualitative software with the ability to search for keywords and phrases; second, the team used Dedoose, another qualitative software that specializes in collaborative analyses, for the manual coding process for the rest of the codes (see Annex 3 for the codebook). In addition to these codes, the RT's initial analytical approach included the three categories of evidence articulated in the Mission Use of Evidence study (research evidence, contextual evidence, and experiential evidence); this analytical lens was dropped in favor of exploring the use of structured versus unstructured evidence.

The team used a consensus approach to coding: four team members participated in coding and each case study had two coders who reviewed each other's coding. The team met weekly during the analytical process to clarify definitions for the codes and their applications. The research team tracked notes and decision-making around inclusion in Phase 2 for each case study in the spreadsheet.

PHASE 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Due to the small number of interviews, the research team conducted analysis manually. Following interviews, the research team would review notes and begin to sort findings by thematic category. The team would then meet on weekly calls to discuss preliminary findings, lay out thematic categories for analysis, and address alignment or divergence across data sources. A Research Assistant on the project reviewed the primary findings of the Team Lead following the interviews. The Research Assistant then

reviewed the original recordings to assess whether the findings were representative of the data and to ensure that the respondents' answers were faithfully conveyed.

ANNEX 3: CODEBOOKS

ANNEX 3A: MANUAL CODING OF CLA CASE COMPETITION ENTRIES (DEDOOSE)

The RT read and manually coded for each of the below concepts in the DRG CLA case competition entries from 2015-2023 (N = 105).

CODE NAME	TYPE	DEFINITION
Data presence	-	Is there evidence of data use as part of the CLA case? Include references to "data" generally, without specificity. Note: include examples of future intention to use data and can revisit later.
-	Qualitative	Code specifically for evidence of formal qual data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups, etc.)
-	Quantitative	Code specifically for evidence of formal quant data collection (e.g., survey, econometric analysis, etc)
Inclusion	-	Is there evidence that the CLA process incorporates marginalized and/or minority voices (e.g. women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, disabled individuals, etc.)
Localization	-	Is there evidence that the CLA process centralizes and incorporates local voices and actors? Note that simply interviewing local actors is not sufficient to qualify for this code: rather, local actors should have some demonstrated degree of ownership over the CLA process
Stakeholder engagement	-	Including voices outside of the Mission; engaging with stakeholders and communities. This would include non-formal qualitative data collection and experiential evidence.
Influence	-	Is there some evidence that CLA influenced a programmatic approach? Code for non-specific references to influence; do note code for planned data use (i.e., influence must have happened)
-	Organizational culture change	CLA case describes a shift towards a more CLA-driven organizational posture (e.g., data, collaboration, etc.)
-	Intervention/ activity change	CLA case describes specific changes towards intervention practice or implementation; may be co-coded with timeliness, as appropriate
Challenges	-	Challenges around the use of data as part of the CLA process
Lessons learned	-	Lessons learned about the use of data as part of the CLA process

ANNEX 3B: KEYWORD-BASED CODING OF CLA CASE COMPETITION ENTRIES (NVIVO)

The RT used automated coding capabilities to search and code for each of the below concepts in the DRG CLA case competition entries 2015-2023 (N = 105). Each code was reviewed for accuracy and to match the specified definition.

CODE	DEFINITION
CLA Key Terms	Organizational top-level code
Action research	-
Adaptive management	-
After action review	-
Assessment(s) only	Mentions of assessment without added detail
Needs assessment	-
OCA	Organizational Capacity Assessment
Complexity aware	-
Evidence	-
Index	-
Indicators	-
Pause and reflect	-
Performance monitoring	-
Monitoring	-
Performance	-
Political Economy Analysis	-
Quarterly or annual review	-
Research	-
(Quasi) experimental design	Includes RCT (randomized controlled trial)
Academic studies or literature	-
Impact evaluation	-
Stocktaking	-
Data presence	Mentions of primary data collection or use
Other data collection	Forms of data collection that fall outside common qualitative/quantitative techniques

CODE	DEFINITION
Observation	-
Participatory Mapping	-
SNA	-
Qualitative data only	Non-specific mentions of qualitative data
FGD	-
KIIs	Includes in-depth interview, qualitative interview
Qualitative interviews	-
Quantitative data only	Non-specific mentions of quantitative data
Questionnaire	-
Survey	-
Evaluation	Descriptions of substantive evaluation use
Developmental evaluation	-
External evaluation	-
Final evaluation	-
Formative evaluation	-
Impact evaluation	-
Internal evaluation	-
Midterm evaluation	-
Performance evaluation	-
Process evaluation	-
Stakeholder engagement	Organizational code (coding for this category in Dedoose manually)
Inclusion	Inclusion of marginalized or vulnerable populations
Localization	Mentions of localization
Participatory	-
Vulnerable populations	-
Theory of Change	Mentions of theories of change

ANNEX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDES

ANNEX 4A: CLA CASE KII INSTRUMENT

INTRODUCTION

- What is your current role?
- What is your experience with CLA, generally?
- Tell me about your role in _____ activity.
    - How long were you involved?
    - What did you contribute to?
- Tell me about your role in the CLA processes for _____ activity.

CLA PROCESS

- Why did you decide to undertake CLA for _____ activity?
    - Prior to undertaking CLA, did you think it would be useful? If so, why? If not, why not?
    - After CLA, was it a useful process? Why or why not?
    - What resources did you have for CLA? How invested was leadership/key decision-makers in CLA?
- How did you determine what you were going to do for CLA?
    - What data did you include in CLA?
    - Why did you decide to include data as part of CLA?
        - Tell me about how you determined what data you needed for your CLA processes.
        - How, if at all, did you plan to use data (e.g., monitoring data, evaluations, etc.) to inform CLA? How did you actually use data to inform CLA?
        - To what extent did using data as part of CLA improve your learning? How? If not, why not?
    - How did you choose which stakeholders to involve in your CLA process?
    - Was there a specific issue you wanted to address? If so, what was it?
    - To what extent was CLA part of a broader learning process about _____ activity? Why?
    - What challenges did you encounter as part of the CLA process, if any? For data use, specifically?
    - What enablers supported CLA? What enabled data use, specifically?
    - What, if anything, surprised you during CLA for _____ activity?
- Tell me about a decision you made to make a change/adaptation.
    - What role did CLA play in that decision?
    - What was the mechanism by which CLA influenced the decision-making process?

    - Which key decision makers were convinced by a CLA finding and how did they access the information from the CLA process?
    - Did these decisionmakers believe in the value of CLA from the outset or were they convinced by the value of the process?
- Tell me about an adaptation you made to _____ activity due to something you learned from CLA.
    - How, if at all, did that adaptation support achievement of program outcomes? If so, why? If not, why not?
- If you could change anything about the CLA you undertook with _____ activity, what would it be? Why would you change that?
- Imagine you hadn't decided to include data as part of CLA. What would've been different about CLA for ___ activity?
    - How, if at all, would the achievement of program outcomes differed?
- Have you worked on projects that were less effective at using CLA?
    - If so, what differentiates this (successful) CLA process from one that was less successful?
- After participating in CLA, how, if at all, did the organizational culture shift? If so, why? If not, why not?

CLOSING

- How would you encourage the use of data (e.g., monitoring, evaluations, third party data) as part of CLA?
    - What supports are needed?
    - What barriers exist?
- Anything else you would like to share about CLA and ___ activity? About data use as part of CLA?

Thank you!

ANNEX 4B: CLA THOUGHT LEADER GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

- Tell me about your current role. What do you do? About how long have you been doing this work?
- What is your professional experience with CLA or adaptive management?
- How did you initially become interested in CLA?
- Why did you decide to pursue it as a research interest?
- Have you ever personally implemented a CLA project? If so, please provide some brief background.

CLA FUNDAMENTALS

- In your experience, how do you define CLA?
- What do you see as its role in the management process?

- How, if at all, do you differentiate between CLA and more traditional forms of learning or program adaptation?

CLA AND DATA

- How, if at all, should data be incorporated into CLA?
    - What do you see as the optimal role of data in CLA?
    - Are there specific kinds of data that you consider essential for good CLA? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
- Do you consider any specific kind of research methodology as essential for good CLA? If so, what research methodology? Why is it essential? If not, why not?
- We know that there can be competing needs for rigorous data collection and speedy program adaptation. How do you think programs should balance these needs?

CLA AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- What kinds of stakeholders do you think need to be involved in CLA in order for it to be effective?
    - Can there be too much stakeholder involvement? If so, why is that? How can you tell? If not, why not?
    - Can too broad a set of stakeholders produce delays or challenges?
- What, if anything, is the role of marginalized communities in CLA? (i.e. women, youth, disabled individuals, etc.)
    - *If a role: How should marginalized communities be engaged? How, if at all, should it differ by various groups?*
    - *If no role: Why should marginalized communities not be engaged?*
- Often there are many different actors who have a stake in programing and likely want their voices heard. How should program managers handle that?
    - In the same vein, there is often the need to hear a wide array of voices and also make expedient decisions. How should program implementers handle this balance?
- Anything else you would like to share about CLA and ___ activity? About data use as part of CLA?

Thank you!

ANNEX 5: ORAL CONSENT SCRIPT

Hello and thank you for agreeing to talk with us. My name is [name of interviewer/moderator]. Together with me is [names]. We are working with The Cloudburst Group/Evaluasi. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has hired us to conduct research on Collaboration, Learning, and Adapting, or CLA, and adaptive management.

This research is being conducted by Learning, Evaluation and Research (LER) contract on behalf of the DRG Bureau. The purpose of this study is to improve the understanding of the use of data and evidence to strengthen CLA efforts in the DRG sector. The results from this study will be used to integrate findings and examples into our Evidence to Action training suite. The goal is to understand how USAID can use data and evidence intentionally and systematically to improve implementation and adaptation of DRG programs complementing the use of evidence. The study focuses on understanding how monitoring data, internal and external evaluations, and third party data are planned and used to inform DRG CLA practices. It also explores the challenges and lessons learned in using these data sources to inform adaptations. Finally, the study aims to find evidence to support or contradict the hypothesis that well-planned and used MEL can improve the effectiveness of CLA adaptations.

The aim of our discussion today is to learn about your experiences with CLA and adaptive management. Our role here is to ask questions and listen to your opinions and experiences.

Your identity will be kept confidential and it will not be possible for you to be identified in our study report. Please note that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers in this discussion. We would like everyone to share their experience and give feedback, either positive or negative. Your replies will not influence whether a project comes here in the future, but will help to inform USAID about designing such types of projects and how they can be effective in future.

(if a group KII) We ask that everyone here respect each person's privacy and confidentiality, and not repeat what is said during this discussion. But, please remember that other participants in the group may accidentally share what was said.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose not to answer any question or stop participating at any time. You are not obligated to answer any question that you are not comfortable with. This discussion will last approximately XX minutes. The information you give will be stored safely and shared anonymously with USAID.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Noelle Wyman Roth at noelle.wymanroth@cloudburstgroup.com.

Do you agree to participate in today's discussion?

Do you agree to be recorded?

(if USAID) Are you comfortable with AI tools generating a transcript and/or notes of this conversation?

May we begin?

ANNEX 6: CLA CASE DOCUMENT CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

The research team identified key terms used in CLA to search for in the DRG CLA case competition entries. These terms included: after action review, assessments, complexity aware, evidence, indicators, pause and reflect, performance monitoring, research, and stocktaking.

The most frequently appearing term in reports was "assessments" (62%, N = 65 reports), followed by "evidence" (57%, N = 60), "indicators" (51%, N = 54), and "pause and reflect" (51%, N = 54).

The rest of the terms appeared in less than half of the reports. "Research" appeared in 37% of reports (N = 39), and "after action review" in 11% (N = 12). "Performance monitoring" and "stocktaking" each appeared in five percent of reports (N = 5), "quarterly review" or "annual review" appeared in four percent (N = 4), and the term "complexity aware" was used in just two (2%) of the analyzed reports.

DATA PRESENCE TERMS

The research team also searched for terms related to both qualitative and quantitative data collection in the DRG CLA case competition submissions. For both these types of primary data collection, the team searched for specific types of data collection (e.g., surveys, focus groups), as well as broader mentions of this type of data (e.g., "quantitative data collection") without specific mentions to how these data were collected. Overall, 44% of reports (N = 46) mentioned collecting primary data.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Some type of qualitative data collection using these terms was mentioned in roughly one-quarter of reports (26%, N = 27). The most often used qualitative data term in DRG CLA reports was "FGDs," which appeared in 13% of reports (N = 14). "KIIs" were used in 10% of reports (N = 10). A small number of reports mentioned "qualitative interviews" or "in-depth interviews" (five percent, N = 5), and the same number included broad mentions of "qualitative data" without specific descriptions of what types of data were collected.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Quantitative data collection was mentioned more frequently than qualitative data, with one-third of reports (35%, N = 37) discussing some type of quantitative data collection. Within that number, the term "surveys" appeared most frequently (28%, N = 29), and "questionnaires" appeared much less frequently (5%, N = 5). A small number of reports (five percent, N = 5) also mentioned "quantitative data" without specific descriptions of what types of data were collected.

EVALUATION TERMS

The research team searched for "evaluation" and related types of evaluation in the DRG CLA case competition entries. Reports including use of the term "evaluation" and its stems (evaluate, evaluating, evaluated) were removed from results when they only referred to non-activity focused evaluation (e.g., American Evaluation Association, or "re-evaluating continuation of activities") or only referenced the MEL team associated with the activity, aiming to be inclusive of examples of evaluation in reports.

The term "evaluation" appeared in over half of case studies (54%, N = 57). However, when specific types of evaluations were searched for, these appeared much less frequently. "Impact evaluation" and "performance evaluation" were used in just two case studies each (two percent of reports), and "formative evaluation" appeared in one (1%). The team also searched for the terms "developmental evaluation" and "process evaluation," which did not appear in any CLA case competition entries included for analysis.

ANNEX 7: EXAMPLES OF DETAILED THEORY OF CHANGE FROM DRG CLA CASE COMPETITION ENTRIES

A COLLABORATIVE DESIGN - A CLA APPROACH TO ENSURING REM REPRESENTATION IN YEMEN

"The "Advancing Tolerance in Middle East North Africa" program, implemented by Search for Common Ground (Search), aims to understand and address key risks of violence and marginalization that religious and ethnic minority (REM) communities face. In Yemen, the program team carried out the first activity design process, which resulted in the development of several activity streams that directly contributed to addressing many of the key risks, as identified in research. However, as the team analyzed the final research findings, we noticed an additional and recurring theme emerge in the data: REM communities felt under-represented and lacked the means and opportunity to express and advocate for their needs and rights. Our initial design did not address this concern. ***Without integrating these elements, our program risked ignoring a core driver of fragility facing the communities that this program sought to support.*** Not only was a CLA approach necessary in gaining the appropriate perspectives, but without it, we risked not integrating a core element of sustainability in the activity design…

As our team transitioned from the research and analysis phase to the activity design and implementation phase of the program, we faced a central challenge: to ensure that our program design promotes REM community advocacy and representation, while also prioritizing key risks identified in the research. More precisely, our task within the program team and in consultation with our USAID Yemen counterparts was to develop and validate programming streams that: 1) served to address the risks and needs identified in the research; 2) yielded the greatest chance of impact and sustainability; and 3) included tools for REM communities to express and advocate for their needs and rights. Without integrating these elements, our program risked ignoring a core driver of fragility in the target communities. As such, not only was a CLA approach necessary in gaining the appropriate perspective, but without it, we risked not integrating a core element of sustainability in the activity design. To this end, ***we recognized the need to apply adaptive management and technical evidence-based design to our overall design process. Specifically, we needed to apply additional tools for analysis, solicit varied perspectives and inputs, and modify our draft theory of change and logical framework.*** These elements together formed a CLA approach aimed at calibrating our design process to favor more needs-driven activity streams. By using a CLA-rooted approach to address the challenges we experienced, it allowed us to pause, reflect, and pivot our design without restarting. While prolonging the design process required an investment in time and resources, we also recognized the value in re-examining our processes and assumptions…

Modified Logical Framework: While much effort was put on capturing research lessons to inform the design, we also revisited and expanded the logical framework to ensure that it adequately represented REM needs. As a result, our theory of change and logical framework shifted from a focus on specific risks affecting REM communities to structural but targeted root causes within REM communities."

A COLLABORATIVE, LEARNING AND ADAPTING APPROACH - PIONEERING THE MALDIVES FIRST BAR EXAM

"In the face of a court case, and multiple amendments being submitted to the parliament, BCM and ABA ROLI took ***a proactive approach to monitor whether the original assumptions in the theory of change still held true,*** by closely monitoring political developments and opinions expressed by key stakeholders, including the parliament, judiciary, law students, legal professionals, and the public on media and social media platforms. This enabled us to remain informed about potential impacts on program

activities, seize opportunities and address challenges by conducting proactive scenario planning and developing contingency plans accordingly…

Through the adoption of CLA principles, several key aspects of our collaboration have been positively impacted, resulting in tangible benefits for ABA ROLI. One notable change brought about is the cultivation of a culture of openness and transparency. This shift has allowed for the free exchange of ideas and the sharing of insights between ABA ROLI, BCM, and USAID. ***The atmosphere of open dialogue has fostered pause and reflect sessions, reviews of the theory of change assumptions and whole team buy-in to address challenges, leading to informed decision-making and improved outcomes.*** Our collaborative efforts have been greatly strengthened through the relationships and networks established during the project. We have relied heavily on the strong relationships built with the BCM secretariat, Committee of Experts, Subject Matter Experts, Members of Parliament, and both the old and new Executive Committee members of the BCM. These connections have provided us with valuable expertise, support, and resources, enhancing the overall effectiveness of our collaboration."

TRANSFORMING SECURITY PARADIGMS THROUGH RESPONSIVENESS VIRTUOUS FEEDBACK LOOPS

"The 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP guerrilla evidence the need to renew the justice and security paradigms operational over six decades of conflict. Building on best practices to support war-to-peace transitions, ***the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP) adapted its community-based dialogue methodologies to the Colombian context developing a theory of change to improve relationships among local institutions and communities by measuring frequency and quality of service, performance, and fairness (lack of biases and institutional stereotypes) of justice and security service provision in remote, conflict-affected rural areas***…

The theory of change (TOC) overall goal seeks to activate "responsiveness (virtuous) cycles" by improving the relationships between communities and security and justice providers generating trust and legitimacy in the short, medium, and long-term. ***The activity designed a condensed measuring framework through dashboards (https://bit.ly/3ySKjmq) to evaluate the TOC dynamically in real time.*** The M&E toolbox includes quarterly dashboards, risk assessments, monthly perception surveys of social leaders the subject matter experts, and pre and post activities polls by both communities and providers. The anonymous and untraceable findings are presented in an aggregated fashion through feedback loops, to local parties, national stakeholders, and policy makers to address prejudices, historical, cultural, and institutional legacies affecting the service provision. These findings have also fed the USAID/Colombia mission to adopt innovative methodologies, develop new indicators and improve the way data is gathered & analyzed in conflict affected territories. USIP permanently reviews its do-no-harm policy, risk assessment ratings and operational approach as each regional context is changing and territorial control disputes continue to happen."

TESTING THEORY OF CHANGE FOR USAID IN NIGER USING "STRUCTURED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING"

"In mid-2019, USAID/Senegal awarded FSVC a cooperative agreement to implement the "SHIGA" activity with the goal, "civil society more effectively engage the government while key government institutions are more effective in their mandate and responsive to citizen needs." In its proposal, FSVC emphasized CLA approaches and tools, including "emergent" design precepts to support adaptive management. The approach included the use of "Structured Experiential Learning" ("MeE") which supports CLA and emergent design through trials of design alternatives to test what works best and explain why. FSVC's use of a form of MeE in Niger appears to be among the first experiential applications on a USAID project…

Like all development efforts, **SHIGA's ToC was high-level, linked to the activity's goal and objectives.** ToCs or development hypotheses however also exist throughout various levels of the logical (or results) framework as these ToCs, like many assumptions, are often implicit. In this case, the issue arose in conjunction with Objective 1 work involving interventions to strengthen CSO advocacy efforts. The ToC in question was that working in multi-organization coalitions improved such efforts through collaboration and collective action. This "design variable" is common yet it was questioned by experienced incubation cohort 1 CSOs when the FSVC SHIGA team recommended they work together in the final phase of incubation (a project supported by a small grant). As a result, the FSVC SHIGA team decided to test/validate the ToC using structured experiential learning, or MeE…"