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Understanding CLA

On this page: [What is it?](#) | [How do I get started?](#) | [Important Tips](#)

What is it?

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) is a set of practices that help us improve our development effectiveness. Learning has always been part of USAID's work, and most USAID missions and implementing partners are already practicing CLA in some way. Our aim now is to make CLA more systematic and intentional throughout the Program Cycle, and to dedicate the resources necessary to make it happen.

According to USAID's Program Cycle guidance (ADS 201.3.5.19), "Strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management link together all components of the Program Cycle." Integrating CLA into our work helps to ensure that our programs are coordinated with others, grounded in a strong evidence base, and iteratively adapted to remain relevant throughout implementation. The systematic application of CLA approaches, led by people who have the knowledge and resources to carry them out, enables USAID to be an effective learning organization and thereby a more effective development organization.

In the simplest terms, integrating collaborating, learning, and adapting throughout the Program Cycle can help development practitioners address the above challenges by thinking through:

- **Collaborating:** Are we collaborating with the right partners at the right time to promote synergy over stove-piping?
- **Learning:** Are we asking the most important questions and finding answers that are relevant to decision making?
- **Adapting:** Are we using the information that we gather through collaboration and learning activities to make better decisions and make adjustments as necessary?
- **Enabling Conditions:** Are we working in an organizational environment that supports our collaborating, learning, and adapting efforts?

How do I get started?

Explore the CLA Framework. The CLA Framework describes the elements we include when we think about a holistic approach to CLA. The framework recognizes the diversity of what CLA can look like in various organizations and contexts while giving CLA structure, clarity, and coherence across two key dimensions:

- **CLA in the Program Cycle:** how CLA is incorporated throughout Program Cycle processes, including strategy, project and activity design and implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Enabling Conditions:** how an organization's culture, business processes, and resource allocation support CLA integration.

The framework further explains those dimensions through 6 components—Collaborating, Learning, Adapting, Culture, Processes, and Resources— and 16 subcomponents that offer a more detailed picture of what CLA can entail.



CLA Framework

Learn about what others are doing in CLA. The CLA Framework explains all of the elements that make up a holistic approach to CLA, but it also helps to see what that can look like in practice. Through the CLA Case Competition, we have collected a wealth of examples of CLA in action, both within USAID and among implementing partners. We hope that reading the winning and finalist cases, or the shorter blog posts written about them, will spark ideas about what might work in your own context.

Consider how CLA can support your implementation of the Program Cycle. There are many things an organization or team can do to improve internal and external coordination, collaborate and learn more effectively, and adapt when things change. The points below are intended to help you start thinking about your existing CLA practices as well as opportunities for intentionally strengthening CLA in targeted areas. It can help to build upon the foundation you already have by identifying your existing CLA activities (such as M&E activities, Portfolio Reviews, After Action Reviews, and Implementing Partners meetings) and how they are working. A self-assessment process using a tool like the CLA Maturity Matrix can help with this. From here you and your team can start to plan how to build on activities that are working well and identify places where you could see results improve by investing more, or more systematically, in CLA to support your objectives.

Incorporate CLA principles. The Program Cycle guidance offers key considerations for CLA approaches, including:

- Building upon existing CLA efforts and reinforcing current processes and practices rather than creating new ones.
- Recognizing that collaboration and coordination take time and should be approached strategically, guided by Mission priorities.
- Valuing and using all forms of knowledge—tacit, experiential and contextual—for design and adaptive management.
- Documenting, disseminating, and using knowledge and learning internally and among implementing partners and local and regional actors to help spread effective practices widely for improved development.

Important Tips

- **One size does not fit all.** One of the most important points about CLA is that it looks different in every mission or bureau—and that's as it should be. CLA isn't about following a template but about really thinking about what works for your situation and context. The solutions are as diverse as the needs—let's embrace that.

- **Get people involved strategically.** To be successful, Missions should encourage strong participation of technical and supporting offices. In many cases, CLA efforts may be housed in and managed by the program office, but technical teams have strong roles to play in identifying and implementing the CLA approach. Implementing partners, government counterparts and other stakeholders should be strongly encouraged to participate.
- **Share the results.** If you hear about CLA efforts that others in your team or Mission are working on, help to tell the story. ProgramNet's [CLA Community of Practice](#) for USAID staff, the "[Framing CLA](#)" [blog series](#), and the annual [CLA Case Competition](#) are all great ways to share. Additionally, help others across the Mission recognize the CLA potential in the work that they are already doing. Sharing the learning will enable the Mission to identify ways to adapt its programming to be more effective, replicate or scale-up promising practices, and avoid repeating unsuccessful approaches. Everyone at the Mission has a role to play in making our programs more effective, so share information broadly.

Tools

[Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting \(CLA\) Framework and Maturity Matrix Overview](#)

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[Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting for More Effective Development Programs](#)

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Additional Tools