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## Taking stock of USAID's efforts to promote learning



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[USAID LEARN](#) [2] recently convened [a day-long event](#) [3] in Washington DC to recognize and celebrate progress in implementing USAID's [collaborating, learning, and adapting \(CLA\) strategy](#) [4].

CLA, which is often referred to in the context of the USAID Program Cycle, is essentially a set of principles and operational processes to enable USAID to become a more effective learning organization and thereby a more effective development organization.

The event was replete with knowledge management disciples from USAID Washington, some Missions, and a lot of implementing partners. The event was definitely aimed at the CLA in-crowd—the people who believe that learning is or should be an intrinsic part of development programming and are actively trying to figure out how to build in and use learning processes in our work.

Still, it was refreshing to be in a room full of people talking about things like reflecting on experience, stakeholder engagement, learning agendas, peer-to-peer sharing, and creating an organizational culture of learning—values that we try to apply in our work supporting learning on the USAID ASSIST Project.



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Organizational diagnostic chart filled out by participants in Moving the Needle 2015, November 17, 2015. Photo by Lani Marquez.

There was diversity in how we approach CLA. Some of the experiences shared were the high-level, long-range kind—learning over multiple years of a project to influence the next five-year development strategy. But there were also many examples that resonated with the kind of real-time learning leading to immediate action that we do in health care improvement work.

I participated in a role play around reporting expectations that underscored the importance of direct dialogue ([learning through conversation!](#) [6]) to resolve conflict. There was also a participatory demonstration of an organizational diagnostic tool used by the USAID Mission in Uganda to take

periodic “temperature checks” of the entire Mission team to see how well their learning culture is being practiced.

The day also highlighted the top 20 and the ultimate winners of the [CLA case study competition](#) [7] held earlier this year. I was proud my colleagues Stella Mwita and John Byabagambi submitted entries on their innovative work supporting a national learning platform for [the Partnership for HIV-Free Survival](#) [8] in Tanzania and promoting inter-facility, inter-implementing partner, and inter-country learning to improve [voluntary medical male circumcision](#) [9] in Uganda, respectively.

The key points made throughout the day about CLA were that it is intentional and reflective, it creates opportunities for connection and learning, it’s strategic—learning that matters and not simply data hoarding—and that it fosters a culture of iterative improvement.

The day ended with a clever exercise of 5-4-3-2-1. Name 5 things you learned; 4 actions you will take; 3 things you heard about that you are already doing; 2 things you will stop doing; and 1 remaining question. After reflecting on these things individually, we moved to flipcharts posted around the room to offer our thoughts in a brief conversation with others. It was a fitting way to wrap up the day.

I felt good about the direction that USAID ASSIST has taken to incorporate an explicit learning agenda in all of our country activities, focused how what we are trying to learn through the improvement work, how will that learning be spread to others in country and globally, and what tangible products can we develop that capture that learning to guide others.

Moving the Needle made me feel hopeful that USAID’s commitment to learning is taking on very real expressions in a number of Missions and programs as well as in the [USAID Learning Lab](#) [10] resources. I can’t wait to see more.

**Topic(s):** [Improvement Science](#) [11]

[Knowledge Management](#) [12]

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**Links**

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<http://www.dexisonline.com/our-work/portfolio/project/learning-and-knowledge-management-learn/>

[3] <https://usaidlearninglab.org/events/moving-needle-2015-better-development-programming-through-collaborating,-learning,-and>

[4] <https://usaidlearninglab.org/faq/collaborating-learning-and-adapting-cla>

[5] [https://www.usaidassist.org/sites/default/files/styles/content-zoom/public/organizational\\_diagnostic.jpg?itok=yO0ixJ6m](https://www.usaidassist.org/sites/default/files/styles/content-zoom/public/organizational_diagnostic.jpg?itok=yO0ixJ6m)

[6] <https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/simple-rules-knowledge-management>

[7] <https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/first-cla-case-competition-sparks-larger-conversation-about-learning>

[8] <https://www.usaidassist.org/partnership-hiv-free-survival>

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