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# 4

## Every Practitioner a “Knowledge Worker”: Promoting Evaluative Thinking to Enhance Learning and Adaptive Management in International Development

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### **Abstract**

*International community development involves complex, dynamic processes. Evaluation capacity building (ECB) designed to promote evaluative thinking among community development practitioners can foster more complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation for learning and adaptive management. Instead of simply executing technical processes based on predetermined plans, development practitioners can be “knowledge workers” who use evaluative thinking to promote collaboration, learning, and adaptation. In this chapter, framed in the context of the United States Agency for International Development’s ongoing efforts to become a more effective learning organization, we describe one such ECB initiative implemented by Catholic Relief Services in Zambia, Ethiopia, and Malawi. The chapter provides reflections on a practical application and empirical grounding of theoretical concepts related to complexity-aware and learning-focused evaluation. © 2018 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.*

## The Complexity and Learning Turns in International Development

There is a growing awareness that many aspects of economic and social development are complex, unpredictable, and ultimately uncontrollable (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Ramalingam, 2013; Ramalingam & Jones, 2008; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Governments, nongovernmental organizations, and international agencies have realized the need for a change in emphasis; a paradigm shift is taking place away from predominantly linear and reductionist models of change to ones that are more dynamic, reflective, and responsive. One important factor related to that shift is the longstanding, yet too often ignored, argument for more participatory and democratized program planning, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and knowledge generation (Anderson, Brown, & Jean, 2012; Chambers, 1997, 2008). Instead of simply being program deliverers focused on providing scripted, predetermined technical solutions to seemingly technical problems, development practitioners have the potential to be “knowledge workers” who use reflective practice to collaborate, reflect, and make real-time course corrections.

In light of this shift, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has updated its policies to make clear the agency’s desire to become a more effective learning organization whose interventions adapt and respond to new learning and to changing circumstances (USAID, 2017). The Agency’s policy guidance for its Program Cycle (ADS 201) states that:

USAID must be able to readily adapt programs in response to changes in context and new information. To do this, the Agency must create an enabling environment that encourages the design of more flexible programs, promotes intentional learning, minimizes the obstacles to modifying programs, and creates incentives for learning and managing adaptively (USAID, 2017, pp. 11–12).

Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA), a component of the USAID Program Cycle that had optional status from 2012 to 2016, became required in September 2016 with the release of revised policy guidance. CLA is how USAID operationalizes adaptive management in the Program Cycle. As the description of the learning and adapting aspects of the Program Cycle in the ADS 201 policy guidance states:

Strategic collaboration among a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, continuous learning, and adaptive management connect all components of the Program Cycle. Sources for learning include data from monitoring, portfolio reviews, research findings, evaluations, analyses, knowledge gained from experience, and other sources. These sources may be used to develop plans, implement projects, manage adaptively, and contribute to USAID’s knowledge base in order to improve development

outcomes. This helps ensure that USAID programming is coordinated with other development actors, grounded in evidence, and adjusted as necessary to remain relevant throughout implementation (USAID, 2017, p 15).

USAID has developed a CLA framework (USAID, 2016a) and a CLA toolkit (USAID, n.d.) that make explicit the purpose and processes of fully integrating CLA into USAID programming.

CLA and adaptive management are supported by complexity-aware M&E, which eschews the tendency to overemphasize preestablished linear causal pathways and is more sensitive to: “(1) a broader range of outcomes associated with the intervention or system (intended, unintended, positive or negative), (2) alternative causes from other actors and factors, and (3) the full range of non-linear pathways of contribution” (USAID, 2016b, p. 6). Examples of practical tools to do complexity-aware monitoring include Process Monitoring of Impacts (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011), Most Significant Change (Dart & Davies, 2003), Feedback Loops (<https://feedbacklabs.org/>), and Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012).

Within this changing landscape, Catholic Relief Services (CRS)—a large international nongovernmental organization that implements social transformation projects worldwide with funding from USAID and other sources—is working to promote evaluative thinking (ET) to further the agency’s strategic agenda for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL). Through a series of ongoing evaluation capacity building (ECB) initiatives, CRS seeks to foster a culture of ET among diverse project stakeholders, including in-country leadership and field-based staff who have regular contact with the communities CRS partners with and serves.

We posit that ECB focused on ET can encourage inquiry, learning, and adaptation throughout the programs and business practices of CRS, thereby supporting development that emphasizes CLA for emerging, innovative, and locally adapted solutions. Equipped with the awareness, knowledge, skills, and tools needed to intentionally practice ET in their day-to-day work, development practitioners can better engage in M&E and other management processes to contribute to learning and adaptive management. While other chapters in this volume expand the horizon of how to define ET—a welcome addition to the global understanding of this important concept—our work with CRS has historically defined ET as:

critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action (Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves, & Trochim, 2015, p. 378).

In our experience, promoting ET is a promising practice due to its ability to: support and nurture “reflective practitioners who are able and willing to challenge continuously their own assumptions and the assumptions of their colleagues in a constructive way which generates new insights and leads to the development of explicit wisdom” (Britton, 1998, p. 5); build trust between stakeholders to facilitate collective “sensemaking” (Schwandt, this issue); and elevate tacit and experiential local knowledge as a critical complement to “evidence-based” knowledge. In this way, we see ET as a way to help development staff and partners demystify theory and practice and restore their sense of purpose, curiosity, and passion for development (Lederach, Neufeldt, & Culbertson, 2007).

In short, we hope that *all* program staff and partners can see themselves not merely as “aid deliverers” but more valuably as “knowledge workers,” able to leverage ET in support of action for better outcomes. The notion of “knowledge worker” was popularized by management consultant Peter Drucker, who suggested, “The most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution, whether business or non-business, will be its knowledge workers and their productivity” (Drucker, 1999/2007, p. 116). Knowledge work differs from other forms of work in its emphasis on nonroutine problem-solving that requires a combination of convergent, divergent, and creative thinking (Reinhardt, Schmidt, Sloep, & Drachsler, 2011). Development practitioners often are *de facto* knowledge workers—in our work, we hope only to make that role more explicit and to foster it through ET-focused ECB in an effort to enhance adaptive management and learning in the face of complexity.

To that end, in the remainder of this chapter, we first discuss a number of interrelated notions that are salient to the ongoing paradigm shift in international development program planning and M&E introduced briefly above, many of which are drawn from various systems’ thinking domains. Then we describe USAID’s approach to working with complexity at the level of program policy and program implementation and evaluation support. Finally, we present the processes and some initial findings from our operationalization of these approaches with CRS programs in Ethiopia, Zambia, and Malawi, focusing on some specific examples and results from one CRS project in Zambia.

## **Nonlinearity**

Development initiatives tend to be founded on (a desired or assumed) certainty. Amidst the vagaries of the community development operating environment, certitude generates a sense of safety—a perception of lower risk—encouraging us to believe we can order, measure, and report on progress underpinned by a deterministic and reductionist view of the world. Positivist epistemologies and mechanistic ontologies influenced by Newton’s laws of physics, among other foundational traditions of western thought, paradigmatically encouraged us to believe that: all systems can be treated

like independent mechanical systems; the future can be predicted accurately from analyzing the past; relevant data both exists and can be measured and analyzed; problems can be reduced to largely independent parts (a consequence of assuming linear, proportional interactions); the parts of a system can be idealized and regarded as identical (i.e., assume all people in a class will react in the same way to the same stimuli); those qualities of the constituent parts that are more subjective and less tangible can be discounted; and, theories can either be built up from analyzing observations or, if developed top-down, can be tested against observations. Any such models or theories, once shown to fit, will continue to fit.

This epistemology and ontology have dominated development discourse for decades, sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly. As stated by British economist Paul Ormerod:

The world is seen as a machine, admittedly a complicated one, but one which can be controlled with the right pressure on this button, just the right amount of pull on that lever . . . everything can be quantified and targets can be not only set but also achieved, thanks to the cleverness of experts (Quoted in Ramalingam, 2013, p. 126).

McKegg and Wehipeihana (this issue) offer a glimpse of what ET looks like when approached from an indigenous Aotearoa cultural perspective. Even within western paradigms, there is a growing recognition that much development work operates in a domain that is not necessarily stable and predictable in nature. Linear causality cannot be assumed. Instead, fluidity, interconnectedness, adaptability, and uncertainty are often the natural order. This notion relates, too, to the concept of “emergence.”

## **Emergence**

The “Cynefin” framework—first described by Kurtz and Snowden (2003), then popularized in evaluation by Patton (2010)—addresses the idea that development interventions can take place in domains that may be classified as simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic. In the complex domain, processes are unpredictable and nonlinear, inevitably producing unintended consequences. This domain—so ubiquitous in social development precisely because we are working with autonomous, agentic people each facing individual resource constraints and opportunities—means that we cannot know with certainty what outcomes will result from specific interventions regardless of whether they have worked well elsewhere, or that the research-evidence base is robust. We will still have expectations and targets, but our approach in the complex domain is one where we monitor our interventions intensively. Such monitoring is required to discover and comprehend what patterns of response emerge—monitoring as a process that supports evaluation—and the extent to which they might differ from our earlier expectations.

Snowden usefully contrasts the idea that “best practices” are a legitimate knowledge product of activities that take place in the simple domain, while in the complex domain the focus is more on the discovery of “emerging practices.” The centrality of the notion of emergence in complexity thinking is challenging for an aid community that is used to speaking with confidence about what works and what does not, where the prevailing incentives have been biased toward “scaling-up” best practices that have worked well in one setting to any number of other locations. In contrast, complexity obliges development practitioners to feel comfortable with not necessarily always having all the answers. As Kania and Kramer (2013) state in their discussion of collective impact, “success favors those who embrace the uncertainty of the journey, even as they remain clear-eyed about their destination” (p. 7). This requires humility and modesty about the future outcomes of interventions, particularly about those outcomes that are expected to be sustained over time, beyond project closure (Cekan, 2016).

It is because development interventions often occur in complex settings that we should not be expected to always know what is happening and why. To understand what is emerging, we need to allow and encourage more time spent *not knowing*. We need curiosity, coupled with an outward-facing perspective that accepts the need to engage with others who have different, but no less valuable, sensemaking perspectives. The importance of multiple perspectives in development has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere in relation to the notion of participation—while a review of the participatory development literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is noteworthy that many participatory approaches are implicitly or explicitly framed as ideal for working in complex environments and for fostering learning (Anderson et al., 2012; Barefoot Collective, 2011; Chambers, 1997, 2008).

### **Adaptive Management**

As stated by O’Donnell, “Adaptive management is an approach to tackling international development challenges that are complex” (1999, p. 3). Adaptive management is contrasted with a more “ordered systems” management approach in which project implementation adheres verbatim to a clearly articulated original project plan and associated milestones with little regard for changes taking place externally. A humorous description of the ordered systems approach can be found in a video entitled “How to Organize a Children’s Party” (Snowden, 2009). A challenge inherent in the ordered systems approach arises when there are unanticipated outcomes. Guijt (2008) describes it this way:

The disjunction principally occurs in the epistemic perspective that underlies mainstream monitoring. The predominantly positivist and “development-as-project” vision that guides such monitoring is inconsistent with the emergent and non-linear nature of institutional change that occurs through “messy”

partnerships and that is increasingly central in rural development and resource management. It is also inconsistent with the everyday reality of monitoring as a continual informal dialogue among development actors, not bound by official monitoring procedures and protocols (p. 287).

When the operating environment is so dynamic, it is vital that project managers are empowered to manage adaptively, encompassing “probing, sensing, and responding” activities (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003) that lead to learning and that inform decisions about future project direction. To be attuned to the unintended consequences that may emerge from project implementation, development practitioners benefit from “an appetite to take appropriate risks and make course corrections in their work when needed” (O’Donnell, 2016, p. 3). The popularity of adaptive management in development is evidenced by the recent creation of a vibrant online community of more than 400 development practitioners and scholars who actively share resources and ideas about the opportunities and challenges of “doing development differently” (see <https://groups.google.com/d/forum/adaptdev>). Adaptive management works best within a learning organization (Argyris & Schön, 1996). While a full review of the literature on learning organizations (Cohen & Sproul, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Senge, 1990; Wang & Ahmed, 2003) is beyond the scope of this chapter, this quotation from Argyris and Schön is apt, as it exemplifies the linkages between adaptive management and organizational learning:

Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organizational behalf. They experience a surprising mismatch between expected and actual results of action and respond to that mismatch through a process of thought and further action that leads them to modify their images of organization or their understandings of organizational phenomena and to restructure their activities so as to bring outcomes and expectations into line, thereby changing organizational theory in use (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 16).

### **Evaluative Thinking for Adaptive Management**

How does ET support adaptive management? The challenge facing managers is to encourage a focus on research, inquiry, and reflective practice (Archibald, Neubauer, & Brookfield, this issue), not necessarily on immediately providing solutions. Brookfield (2012) writes that, “action may be the point of critical thinking, but it will only be informed if it springs from a good understanding of a situation” (p. 89). ET applied to theory of change pathway models (as described in greater detail in Archibald, Sharrock, Buckley, & Cook, 2016) helps staff and partners to draw upon and, at the same time, “demystify” theory (Lederach et al., 2007). By identifying and questioning the validity of assumptions, staff and partners can subsequently develop learning questions and an associated learning agenda to improve

understandings of realities that, in turn, help to improve project practice. This requires inquisitiveness, a key element of ET: “We live in a complex world, we often don’t know what is going on, and we won’t be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time not knowing . . . curiosity is what we need.” (Wheatley, 2002, pp. 34–35). ET helps propel curiosity into informed action—as Schwandt, Ofir, Lucks, El-Saddick, and D’Errico (2016) point out in their discussion of the role of evaluation in achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): “Evaluative thinking is indispensable for informed choices” (p. 3).

As depicted in the case study examples below, ET can also play a significant role in adaptive management through its contributions to the way in which MEAL data are used. By helping development and humanitarian actors engage more readily with processes of continuous reflection and learning, ET can facilitate the emergence of demand-led adaptive practices. Such adaptations may include modifying statements of anticipated results; and adapting approaches employed to both achieve and evaluate results. Applying ET skills can help ensure that research-based evidence is combined with practice-based knowledge and local, context-based experience in developing and implementing development strategies and programs. This in turn can increase the relevance and sustainability of development and humanitarian interventions by emphasizing iterative development, and the testing and refinement of interventions in partnership with local communities and other development actors. This iterative approach is grounded in continuous learning. It involves testing what works and what does not, aligning interventions with local priorities and conditions (even as they shift), and using tighter feedback, learning, and reporting loops. Thus, adaptation based on careful and critical thinking can complement the longer-cycle critical thinking and learning that more formal evaluation events provide.

To date, there has generally been insufficient attention paid to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that staff and partners need to support growing demands for more complexity-aware monitoring (USAID, 2016b), and ultimately, more adaptive management for better development results. To address this lack, and to help USAID and its partners become more like learning organizations, USAID has developed a number policies and frameworks, which we describe below.

### **USAID’s Approach to Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting in the Face of Complexity**

USAID has long been one of the biggest and most influential bilateral aid donors in most of the countries in which it works, so the stakes are high when it comes to the Agency’s ability to deliver effective development assistance. Yet USAID’s investments in program evaluation have been uneven—very strong at some points in its institutional history, and quite weak



at others—and its ability to learn from evaluations and implementation experience, and apply that learning to improve current programs and inform future ones, has been even more uneven.

USAID’s application of good practices declined even further in the mid-2000s, as strategic planning and design processes were abandoned in favor of a focus on individual activities. In 2010, the Agency began to reinstate strategic planning backed by strong analysis, project and activity designs that emphasize strategic and program coherence, performance monitoring to inform implementation, and program evaluation. This move toward strengthening planning processes for stronger analysis around what works and what does not to build evidence-based programming created the opportunity for Agency staff to ask what else they needed to do in order to ensure their development assistance is as effective as possible. “What else?” was answered with the development of a new component of the USAID Program Cycle. CLA is USAID’s approach to strengthening organizational learning and operationalizing adaptive management. It is also part of a range of efforts in the Agency to align with and advance the growing emphasis in the broader field of international development on complexity, the limits of our knowledge about what works, and the uncertainties inherent in the places we work—all of which require a more learning-focused and iterative-adaptive approach to planning and implementing development assistance, such as the approaches described in this chapter.

USAID and its partners have always collaborated, learned, and adapted. However, they have not always done so in a way that is systematic, intentional, well resourced, and well understood. Establishing CLA as an intellectual framework, a body of practices, and an essential component of USAID’s programming policy has better equipped the Agency and its partners to articulate and respond to the dynamic circumstances in which they work, as well as the complexities of fostering development in increasingly uncertain contexts. As stated in the CLA Toolkit page on “Understanding CLA,” integrating CLA into USAID’s work helps to ensure that “programs are coordinated with others, grounded in a strong evidence base, and iteratively adapted to remain relevant throughout implementation. . . . [CLA] enables USAID to be an effective learning organization and thereby a more effective development organization” (USAID, n.d.).

Drawing from the fields of knowledge management, organizational learning, and organizational development, CLA is designed to support better development in several respects. First, it provides a holistic framework for organizational learning and adaptive management that enables staff and partners to acknowledge the range of factors that affect the success (or otherwise) of their development efforts, and to identify, apply, and share ways to put the components of the system in place to increase prospects for program effectiveness. With a CLA approach, staff and partners can better understand impediments and enablers both to learning and to desired development outcomes, and can put in place practices such as “pause and

**Figure 4.1. The USAID collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) framework.**



reflect” moments among staff to assess implementation and plan for adaptations, or scope activities to test different approaches and pivot nimbly based on real-time learning. An example of one such activity from CRS in Malawi, a joint midterm review using ET, is described on the USAID Learning Lab blog (Sharrock, Haddle, & Fredenburg, 2017). This relatively simple intentional CLA event embedded into a regular meeting allowed the CRS staff to update their theory of change diagrams, their Assumptions Table, and their Indicator Performance Tracking Table, all reflecting the reality of program implementation over the previous 2 years. In ways such as this, over time, a CLA approach can strengthen practices that had previously been treated as unplanned afterthoughts, and can help institutionalize and support those practices with staff time and funding.

The CLA framework, depicted in Figure 4.1, consists of practices that support strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management in planning and implementing programs, and also support the necessary enabling conditions of culture, processes, and resources.

Staff can use a CLA Maturity Tool (USAID, 2016a) to conduct team-level CLA self-assessment and action planning. This tool and process are centered around CLA's sixteen subcomponents, described at five degrees of maturity, and are used with an appreciative approach to identify strengths to build on in areas staff define as priorities. As USAID has worked to refine and institutionalize CLA, the importance of enabling conditions has emerged as a significant lesson. Staff using the CLA Maturity Tool often gravitate toward the enabling conditions side of the framework first, as a major source of impediments to effective development, and as a place where they can see opportunities to remove significant obstacles through some achievable near- and medium-term goals.

### **Case Studies from Catholic Relief Services**

Among other foci, one of USAID's current initiatives in this domain involves organizing an annual CLA Case Competition (<https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition>) to identify and learn from real-life examples of CLA as practiced by country missions (i.e., USAID offices abroad) and implementing partners (i.e., nongovernmental organizations and other groups that implement projects with USAID funding). In that vein, in this section we demonstrate a tangible application of USAID's CLA approach as manifested through a series of capacity building workshops focused on promoting ET. Specifically, we present an approach we have used with CRS in Zambia, Ethiopia, and Malawi, and then describe some of the positive adaptive management and development outcome results to which this ET CLA work contributed.

### **Entering the System**

In the world of ECB, the opportunity to focus effort primarily on ET, rather than on the more traditional knowledge and technical skills associated with MEAL, has historically been uneven. However, as the recognition that ET and an organizational culture that promotes ET are foundational to what we mean by “capacity” increases (Fierro et al., this issue), organizations and ECB professionals will increasingly seek out and develop approaches to this work that are both concrete (in that they offer materials and tools that can be used immediately) and flexible (in that they can be modified and customized to a particular context while maintaining fidelity to a core set of empirical principles). For the past 5 years, CRS has been at the forefront of this effort. This section describes the principles and strategies that have guided the ET capacity building (ETCB) work at CRS.

As we describe below, reflecting on the USAID CLA Maturity Tool, CRS demonstrates a number of key enabling conditions that helped our ETCB intervention contribute to learning and adaptive management. For example, effective capacity building depends on genuine commitment and

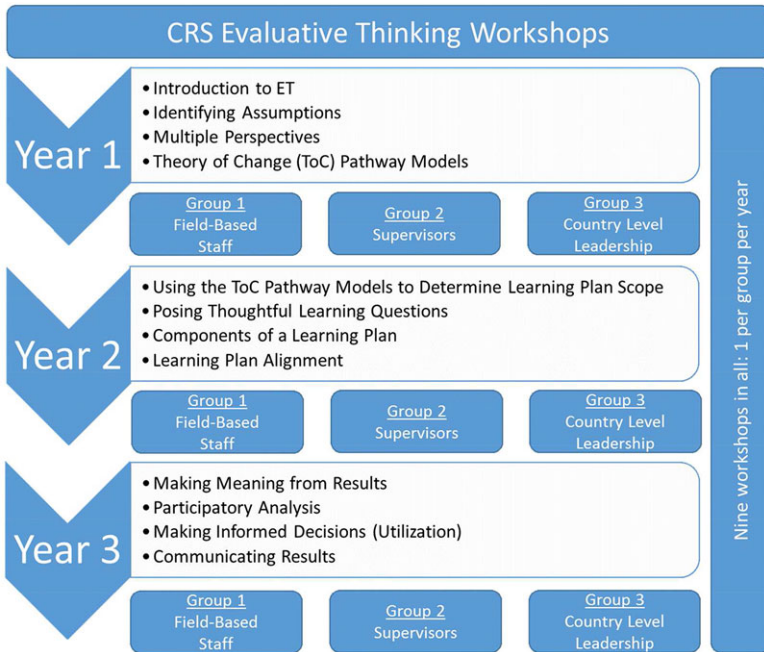
engagement on the part of program staff and leadership as well as those facilitating the capacity building effort. In order to foster commitment and engagement, it is critical that the individuals expected to participate in any workshop or meeting understand what the work will entail, what the goal is, and why it might be important and useful to them. This is not as easy as it may sound. Most programs and organizations have never focused on thinking skills or “habits of mind” as an area of professional development. Leadership and other key stakeholders within the CRS case example country programs have encouraged an environment that is conducive to such acceptance. In addition, as described elsewhere in this volume, even those who are interested in promoting ET have not always agreed on what it is. Finding the clearest way to describe ETCB in each context will depend on the advice and support of local partners and champions—those early adopters who step forward first.

It is equally, if not more, important that the ETCB facilitators understand the program and organization from a systems perspective—how the organization is structured, how communication takes place, and how decisions are made at the current level of evaluation capacity. This includes an understanding of the resources, policies, and shared norms and values currently in place that either support or inhibit monitoring, evaluation, ET, and all forms of organizational learning. For the ETCB facilitator, getting an accurate and complete picture of an organization before engaging in any ETCB activities is a challenge, with inevitably imperfect results. Navigating the unknown, beginning with the acknowledgment that “we don’t know what we think we know,” and identifying our own assumptions, allows the ETCB facilitator to better navigate the consequences of these factors as they become apparent.

## **Our Approach**

The previously established key principles for promoting ET (Buckley et al., 2015) have been central to the development of an approach and set of materials designed to promote ET within the large, diverse, and dynamic context of USAID funding and the CRS organization system. As in all ECB efforts, it has also been essential to recognize the local cultural contexts of our efforts as well as the individual organizational cultures that exist within each country program and project. A taste of the variety of ways these factors have influenced our work are described in detail in the case studies below. What has remained consistent across our efforts to promote ET within CRS is the importance of: engaging staff at all levels of the system hierarchy (Principles III and V); maintaining a sustained connection via ongoing accompaniment and other intentional efforts to check back in (Principle III); offering numerous opportunities to practice ET in an incremental way (Principles II, IV, and V); and focusing on the power and value of participating staff’s knowledge and expertise (Buckley et al., 2015).

**Figure 4.2. The partition of evaluative thinking workshops across groups and years.**



The ET materials developed with CRS include a volume of nine workshop packages (Sharrock, Buckley, & Archibald, 2017). The workshops are designed for three participant groups (field-based staff, supervisors, and country-level leadership) to be sequentially implemented over a 3-year period. The topics covered in each workshop follow the sequential components of the definition of ET presented by Buckley et al. (2015). Each package includes all the materials necessary to facilitate the workshop (including slides, handouts, videos, and agendas) as well as general tips, possible modifications, and plans for following up with participants between workshops. These workshop facilitator guides are freely available and can be accessed at <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/how-we-work/our-commitment-monitoring-evaluation-accountability-and-learning>. Schwandt (2008) stated that there is already a plethora of evaluation toolkits; what we need now are more “evaluation thinking” kits. While thinking cannot be contained in a kit, these workshop guides are perhaps a step in the right direction toward Schwandt’s vision. Figure 4.2 depicts the distribution of topics in the workshops across the three levels of the organizational hierarchy and across the 3 years of workshop implementation.

The decision to segregate the workshops into staff groups was very intentional. In order for there to be a cultural shift across a country program, no one group must be allowed to think that ET, or any aspect of MEAL, is the work solely of another group. Each group will practice and use ET in a unique way, and each must work to support and promote ET within the other two groups from their own unique perspective. To that end, the workshop agendas have time allotted for discussion, role-play, and brainstorming around barriers and contributors to ET in the participating program's context. The second, and perhaps more critical, reason for separating the participants by group is to allow each group to brainstorm and speak as freely as possible without fear of judgment or retribution from a "boss" or "subordinate." Adding power dynamics to the equation can help address the frequent criticism of some organizational learning theory which finds it lacking in its conceptualization of power hierarchies within organizations (Greenwood, 1997). We have found that this dynamic can play out in a wide variety of ways depending on the local and organizational cultural influences. While the staff of one country program may find it stifling to participate in ET activities in the presence of their supervisors, another may find it beneficial and even inspiring. Understanding these differences, as best one can, before engaging in these workshops, and allowing for flexibility in participation (i.e., who will attend which workshop) is critical for maximizing impact.

The workshop schedule was also designed with the principles for promoting ET in mind. First, the workshops are designed to take place annually for 3 years. Having a sustained relationship with a country program, rather than a one-time interaction, facilitates the establishment of ET habits. The return visits include reference to what was learned and practiced in the previous year, including the daily practices of staff outside of the workshop. The length of each workshop is also important. The workshops for Group 3 participants are designed as one-day or half-day agendas. There are two reasons for this. First, country-level leadership is often unable to commit more than this amount of time to attending. Second, though the ET workshops are focused on developing ET among all staff, there is a focus on harnessing the perspective and expertise of those closer to the program (field staff and supervisors) who have historically been thought of as receivers rather than drivers of learning and development. The workshops for Groups 1 (field-based staff) and 2 (supervisors) are each 3-day workshops. One of the benefits of dedicating this much time to ET exercises is that it allows the participants to truly practice, and work their way in to deeper and more evaluative conversations. For example, following ET Principle II (Buckley et al., 2015), in the first workshop (Group 1, Year 1) participants are asked, to identify the assumptions made by fictional characters on Day 1 and are not asked to identify the paradigmatic assumptions underlying their program's theory of change until late on Day 2 (Sharrock et al., 2017).

## Examples From the Mawa Project in Zambia

To demonstrate how USAID’s CLA approach can be made tangible for a community development project through ETCB support, we share some examples from one CRS case in which ETCB is associated with learning and adaptive management. Our case described here was selected as a winner of the 2017 USAID CLA case competition hosted by USAID (see <https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-case-competition>).<sup>1</sup> This case involves the Feed the Future Zambia “Mawa Project” (2012–2017), funded by USAID and implemented by a CRS-led consortium in Chipata and Lundazi districts in the Eastern Province of Zambia. The Mawa project was designed to bridge the gap between agriculture and nutrition by engaging participants in four key project interventions: using improved farming practices that increase and diversify production; saving money for specific goals and accessing loans; investing time and resources in maternal, infant, and young child feeding and care practices; and making positive changes to gender dynamics that affect agriculture and nutrition outcomes. The multi-sectoral design of Mawa means that impact depends on collaboration, synergy, and learning between teams.

In the Mawa project, emboldened with their new ET skills and an operating environment that encouraged staff to practice CLA, staff were able to reflect self-critically on the feedback they received from participating farmers who had applied project-promoted technologies to their own fields. One example concerned a particular challenge associated with the adoption of ripping, a land preparation technology. This technology affected women farmers in particular, due to the increased requirements for weeding labor that it generated. Ripping initially saves labor during preparation and planting but later triggers the growth of weeds which necessitates an increased demand for labor, throughout the growing season, which typically falls on women and children. In response, all those involved started deliberating over the feasibility and acceptability of alternatives. In 2015, following extensive internal and external consultation aided by specific ET techniques (e.g., the creation and analysis of theory of change pathway model diagrams to help identify and pose learning questions about key assumption), Mawa management encouraged new, adapted demonstration plots that directly addressed the problem of weeds, while simultaneously adding a nutrient rich crop to the harvest, improving soil health, and maintaining a good maize yield. The demo plots enabled staff to test in a “safe-fail” manner an adapted technology in direct response to the weeding concerns that had been earlier expressed. Farmers were encouraged to ask questions about what they were seeing and hearing, and to observe and make sense of each demo plot by directly comparing the various intercrops.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of CRS Zambia’s Erin Baldrige, who contributed to writing the winning CLA case example presented in this section.

In another concrete example of how ET-informed CLA fostered adaptive management and improved development outcomes for Mawa, field-based and senior staff have also been utilizing the M&E system for learning by collectively analyzing annual survey data to test assumptions in the project's theory of change. For example, they asked: Does diversifying production lead to diverse diets, and how? Staff found that households who grow legumes that are easy to process at home (such as groundnuts) are twice as likely to have young children who consume legumes than those who grow soya (which is difficult to process, and is more likely to be sold due to high market demand). Staff then wanted to understand what motivates a farmer to grow legumes that are easy to process at home, so they initiated rapid cycles of small scale evaluative monitoring at the demo plots.

In this way, ET and CLA have encouraged project staff to approach monitoring in support of evaluation. Examining the monitoring data has provided opportunities for program staff to actively seek and engage with a wider array of perspectives in interpreting analyses of the data. Building relationships with both field staff and project individuals around conversations concerning the validity of assumptions that underpin ongoing interventions has been very fruitful, with field staff demonstrating their desire to contribute meaningfully to decision-making. These findings, plus an overall better understanding of the relationships between data from different project components, have helped Mawa management to make adjustments in the project's implementation and also to inform subsequent interventions. Front line and management staff alike credit the ETCB workshop series with helping them have the skills and the space to do this type of CLA.

## Conclusion

In recognition of the complexity inherent in international development and the importance of strategic collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptive management—with their emphasis on nonlinearity, emergence, and participation—USAID is taking strides to become a more effective development organization by becoming a more effective learning organization, especially through its focus on complexity-aware M&E and on the CLA approach; in doing so, it is encouraging its implementing partners to follow suit. In this chapter, we have reviewed those developments and provided a tangible example of how building capacity for ET can help development practitioners become knowledge workers who are able to actively engage in learning and adaptive management. Beyond this chapter, there is also useful and growing evidence of the contribution that CLA and ET generally make to organizational effectiveness and development results. The leading clearinghouse of such evidence has resulted from USAID's recent Evidence Base for CLA (EB4CLA) work, which gathers and synthesizes evidence to answer the questions of whether, how, and under what conditions CLA



contributes to organizational effectiveness and development results, and how we can measure that contribution (see <https://usaidlearninglab.org/eb4cla>). To conclude, we are brought back to the notion introduced above, of the need to demystify theory and reinvigorate practice, which for us points toward a set of recommendations to deepen and expand this CLA and ET work with USAID, CRS, and other development organizations, through a sense of curiosity. Lederach et al. (2007) offer some suggestions for how to invigorate this sense of wonder. We leave you with their very pertinent and helpful suggestions:

- Keep asking why—Ask why not only about the nature of the project, but about how particular activities are related to project outcomes. How and why are they connected?
- When you ask why, listen for “because”—When people, especially local partners, explain why they think something works the way it does they often start their explanation with some form of “because.” Listen carefully for this explanation. Dig deeper. Go beyond the initial “because” to find the reasons and unspoken ideas behind the rationale. This often leads to uncovering unspoken assumptions and implicit theories of change.
- Learn from failure—When things do not go the way we had hoped they would, find an opportunity to stop, think, and reflect at a deeper level. The great gift of failure is that it so often promotes learning, while the tragedy of success is that it is easy to assume things happened exactly as expected neglecting the opportunity to learn. Take advantage of failure to frame it as learning, not disaster.
- Watch carefully for the unexpected—Little things along the way that almost go unnoticed and unexpected changes often give us insight into complexity of the change process. Become attentive to these moments.
- Discuss your projects with different people—Too often [we] talk only with like-minded people. The more diverse the range of people you talk to about your ideas and projects, the more likely you are to encounter different perspectives and other ways of explaining change processes, in turn greatly increasing your curiosity about how things really are working. (p. 5)

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