

COLLABORATING, LEARNING AND ADAPTING: EXPERIENCES FROM FIRST FOUR YEARS OF THE USAID COMMUNITY CONNECTOR PROJECT (JANUARY 2012 - JUNE 2015)



A child eating a locally available fruit in Dokolo district.
Photo by Benjamin Aisya.

This technical note is intended to highlight the key experiences regarding USAID Community Connector project structure, lessons, adaptations, and in some cases, results derived from applying the collaborating, learning and adapting approach through the first five Program Modules (January 2012 – June 2015).

INTRODUCTION

USAID Uganda Community Connector (CC) is Feed the Future's (FtF) flagship integrated nutrition and agriculture project in Uganda, providing innovative, multi-sectoral solutions to support comprehensive improvement in household food security, income and nutrition. CC is a fixed-price contract award mechanism, implemented by FHI 360 as the prime contractor and a consortium of eight additional partners. The project operates in 15 districts in Northern and Southwestern Uganda.

USAID designed CC using the collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) approach which places assimilation of new ideas and continuous incorporation of promising and best practices in the foreground of design for greater impact and sustainability. CC employs a modular approach to implementation, with six Program Modules (PMs), each designated for "Learning" or "Implementation," that lay the foundation for CLA.

Throughout the course of the project, CC has identified several lessons that have led to important improvements in project implementation to achieve its intended impacts. These lessons build on the original project design and span operational and technical aspects of implementation. In this technical note we will document these experiences, focusing mainly on the lessons and adaptations derived from applying the CLA approach through the first five PMs (January 2012 – June 2015) of the project.

EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FROM CC PROJECT DESIGN

Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Framework and Principles

Features

The underlying principle of CLA is that setting aside regular time for learning with stakeholders and making (sometimes substantial) changes to a project's approach and/or activities will lead to improved results within the timespan of the project. This principle is integrated into all aspects of the CC project design: CLA is explicitly emphasized throughout the award mechanism, technical design, project implementation, and activity monitoring and evaluation (for more information, please see the CC Technical Note No. 1 of this series, September 2014). This framework allowed for the following to take place:

- CLA enabled CC to allocate the necessary resources to spend time thinking, learning and making changes to the project activities and design. For instance, CC employed additional staff with experience in quality assurance and organizational development to lead the CLA process, and more resources (financial and personnel) were allocated to improving the quality of research and increasing the use of participatory techniques.
- CLA provided opportunities to develop and test innovative approaches that responded to complex issues and adapted to the highly dynamic environment in which the project operates.

For more information contact:

Robert Mwadime,
Chief of Party, Community Connector
FHI 360, Plot 15 Kitante Close
Kampala, Uganda
O: +256 772 517438
RMwadime@FHI360.org

David Wendt
Technical Advisor
FHI 360, 1825 Connecticut Ave NW
Washington, DC 20009
O: 202.884.3953
DWendt@FHI360.org

The Community Connector Project is implemented on behalf of USAID/Uganda by FHI 360 as the prime and by seven subcontractors: Self Help Africa, Village Enterprise, BRAC Uganda, Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU), Grameen Foundation, Gulu University, and Mbarara University of Science and Technology.



PHOTO CREDIT: FHI 360

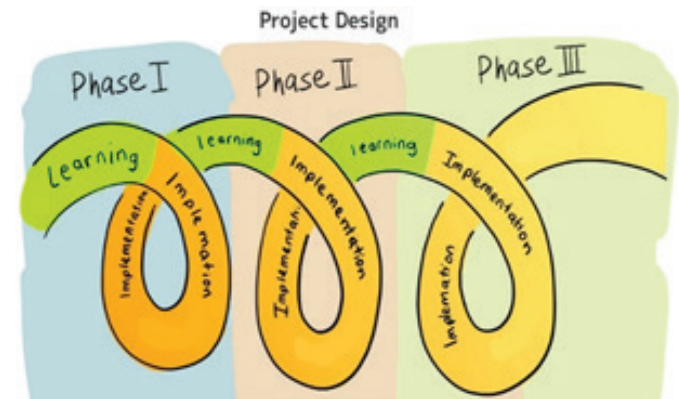
Lessons

- The support of USAID Uganda as both a donor and a partner is critical to effective learning and program adaptation. On a CLA project, modifications may need to be made to the contractual documents to reflect the evolutions of the project and a quick turnaround is needed to ensure minimal interruptions to programming and timely achievement of deliverables. For this, CC works in close partnership with USAID to ensure project success.
- Under a fixed-price contract mechanism, the consortium lead must be willing take on the risk of potential cost loses associated with needing to restart or revamp activities in response to learning. A project may invest significant infrastructural and human resources into implementing a particular approach, only to find that a different structure or arrangement is needed to be more effective. One example might be a regional office structure that is set up to reach the target populations, but later reconfigured to more effectively reach remote target populations. Such course corrections may be costly.
- A reliable monitoring, evaluation and learning agenda is needed to increase responsiveness and flexibility to make changes. To reduce the time spent in collecting, analyzing and disseminating project data, CC implemented an electronic data capture system which routinely collects monitoring and surveillance data and makes it available for real-time use at all project levels.
- A project needs to instill confidence in its own staff, partners and stakeholders that making learning and adaptation integral to the implementation process will result in more effective development work that can make a greater difference in the target communities. Some partners and stakeholders (e.g. district-level government personnel and community leaders) find the learning and adaption process difficult to accept as they are typically accustomed to only needing to report outputs (i.e. numbers) to the donor, irrespective of the effectiveness of the activities at beneficiary level.

Phased and Modular Design

Through six PMs of “learning” and “implementation,” the foundation for the CLA iterative project cycle was laid (see Figure 1). This cyclical design enabled CC to continuously engage local stakeholders, collect program data, identify barriers, and make adjustments to improve implementation. Stakeholders, including project staff, local government personnel, and community members are routinely engaged in the CLA process through regular meetings to facilitate communication and

FIGURE 1: ITERATIVE MODULAR APPROACH IN CC DESIGN.



knowledge sharing. This implied training representatives from local government and partner community based organizations (CBOs) in the focal districts on the CLA approach.

Features

- Dedicated learning cycles ensure learning activities are carried out and do not fall to a lower priority against other activities.
- The learning during each phase is focused on the theme of that particular phase: e.g. during the scale-up phase the learning focused on the barriers and facilitators to scaling up interventions and approaches that were found to be effective.
- The design of specific interventions at district and sub-county level is based on the results of the broadly participatory district assessments.
- Regular adjustments to plans and scopes of work for partners are required in order to focus the activities on the deliverables expected during that phase.

Lessons

CC's first PM lasted for six months and was found to be too short to adequately accomplish the initial learning. Extending this to one year on a new project would allow for more extensive and effective formative work for project design. More time for the first implementation module, PM2, would have allowed CC to more adequately pilot test new approaches for possible scale-up in later phases.

Funding Mechanism

Features

The CC project is a fixed-price, five-year contract. The features of this mechanism worked to the benefit of the CLA agenda within the project:

- First, the contractual approach removed administrative barriers that come with other granting mechanisms, allowing the project freedom to reallocate resources and make programming adjustments based on CLA. For instance, lessons from the field led CC to refine scopes of work for partners, redesign technical and management strategies, realign CC staff job descriptions to better fit project needs, and jointly review quarterly implementation progress among all partners – all of which were accomplished with minimal administrative burdens. The flexibility of the fixed-price contract mechanism also allowed CC to easily engage new partners such as Grameen Foundation and Village Enterprise to expand key program elements and add expertise to the team.
- Secondly, the mechanism placed the project focus on accomplishing targets, allowing the project to continually determine and adapt for the best course of action. Partner roles and budget allocations were realigned to address implementation challenges and/or to increase efficiency in attaining the agreed targets. When the project noted that the activities within focal districts were “too thin on the ground”, the number of districts was reduced from 18 to 15 while keeping the number of households to be reached remained the same.

Lessons

Based on scope or work, capacity and project needs, CC chose to flow-down the fixed-price contract mechanism to some partners; and a cost reimbursable contract mechanism to others. While CC found the management of a fixed-priced subcontract to be easier to manage (less paperwork) and more result-oriented, not all of the consortium partners were familiar with the mechanism or favored it. With partners at varying levels of capacity and experience to manage subawards, some were unaccustomed to and less prepared for the internal controls that need to be put in place to effectively managed a fixed-price subcontract (e.g. cost containment, cash flow management, pipeline monitoring, deliverable monitoring, etc.). As a result, the prime contractor can incur significant risk in accomplishing prime contract deliverables if partners are struggling to accomplish theirs. To ensure each partner is successful in accomplishing deliverables, a careful analysis of financial and management capacity and experience coupled with investments in ongoing training and mentoring is required in order to manage expectations, educate partners on new mechanisms, and assist them in managing the subcontract.

Award Fee as an Incentive

The award fee gives both the contractor and USAID an opportunity to revisit and restate, at the onset of each new PM, what high-level outputs they each want to see. The award fee criteria are divided into business management and technical

categories and are jointly negotiated and agreed-upon, making them a strength/advantage for a CLA project.

Features

- The award fee criteria permitted flexibility and adaptation to project deliverables over the course of the project, including adding elements that were not initially envisioned but later deemed important to project success. Examples include: CC engagement in all District Operational Plan meetings because of the added motivation of the award fee, targeting youth, producing a number of technical notes (such as this one) and accessing resources from partnerships with external partners such as with UNICEF to improve the quality and coverage of CC activities.
- The inclusion of “business management” and “technical” criteria within the award fee was a unique choice by USAID Uganda. Scoring contractors on the basis of their program management performance (e.g. “subcontracts executed on-time”) is probably a positive aspect, motivating the contractor to look more critically at its own internal processes and systems for program management.

Lessons

The main disadvantage to the award fee is that it can move the focus from the quality of work to the accomplishment of agreed-upon outputs, leading to hurried and potentially sub-optimal work in an effort to obtain the fee. For a CLA project where the scope of work is not fixed throughout the life of project and there are difficulties in determining all deliverables in advance, we suggest an award fee be used judiciously.

Evaluation Partners in Design of the Project

Features

The project was originally designed with two external evaluators to support project learning, provide baseline data and conduct additional population-based surveys in six CC districts for indicators reported in the CC Performance Monitoring Plan (PMP). The first external evaluator, Innovation for Poverty Action (IPA), was to conduct a study on the dynamics between gender and nutrition interventions. The second, a consortium under the Nutrition Innovation Lab in Africa (NILA) (formerly Nutrition-CRSP), was to conduct impact evaluations through cohort studies. Unfortunately these evaluations were developed by the evaluators disconnected from CC and, from the start, they were not sufficiently engaged in CC implementation to understand the information needs; i.e. that as a CLA project CC was going to regularly and significantly change its interventions, ideally using results from the work of these evaluators. In addition, the local university research partners on the CC project team who are supposed to conduct learning activities had sub-optimal research capacities, both in terms of technical expertise and human resources, and so project learning was hindered.

Lessons

- For it to be more useful, the external evaluations should be designed side-by-side with the project. All implementers should sit at the table from the beginning in order to ensure the information being collected and examined feeds into the CLA needs of the project. For example, to design an evaluation that measures the success of particular project approaches or examines the effectiveness of the project’s feedback loops for adaptation requires the evaluator to be intimately knowledgeable on the approaches and CLA agenda.
- Evaluation partners are perhaps most useful for identifying evidence-based practices that projects can use to improve interventions. For example, NILA provided such information to CC on nutrition and environmental enteropathy, as well as on the interplay between nutrition and growing vegetables/fruits.
- It is important for a project to have backup or alternative plans in place when relying on external evaluators for results that are essential for project design and management, particularly under a contract mechanism. As a result of the challenges described above, the external evaluators were unable to conduct the baseline, requiring CC to quickly to reallocate its own resources in order to invest in baseline surveys for four additional districts. Later in the life of the project, CC also leveraged resources from UNICEF to carry out critical assessments in five additional districts.

EXPERIENCES ON OPERATIONAL AND TECHNICAL LESSONS AND ADAPTATIONS

As part of the design of CC, USAID Uganda identified five Core Implementing Principles (CIP). Experiences from using three of the CIP are discussed here: a) working with local systems and capacities, b) use of comprehensive assessments in the design of CC activities among vulnerable populations, and c) enhancing existing models and structures.

Working with Local Systems and Capacities

In this section we present experiences from working with three groups a) local partners within the consortium, b) local government subject matter specialists, and c) local producer groups engaged through subgrants.

BOX 1: EXPERIENCES WORKING WITH PAID AGRICULTURAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

After two years of working with Agricultural Service Providers (ASPs), CC conducted a cross-sectional assessment to explore factors that are important to the success of ASPs. In this assessment, we learnt that: 1) the most successful model of ASP support is one where both the ASP and the CC group members have invested and mutually benefit from the relationship; and 2) it is important to focus on simple activities with high chance of success in order to improve chances for adoption and sustainability (for more information, please see CC Technical Note No. 5 of this series, August 2015).

a) Working with local partners within the consortium

From the start, CC placed Ugandan organizations – Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO), Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU), and two regional universities (Gulu and Mbarara Universities) - as partners in the forefront in the consortium. Each partner brought to the consortium its own organizational capacities, mandates, and experiences from working in local communities. However, they also bring their own aspirations and expectations, which need to be skillfully managed. Collaboration suffers most when conflicting partner aspirations impede project implementation. For example, partner staff working on the project may not fully grasp the CLA approach and may therefore be unsupportive. Most partners also come to the table with institutional capacity needs that impact success, such as difficulty in adapting their systems to comply with donor or subcontract rules and regulations. Conducting capacity needs assessments for partner organizations and allocating sufficient resources to address those needs therefore must be an important part of the project. The management of partner activities and the subcontracts themselves should also be viewed as an ongoing capacity building exercise. Over the course of implementation, CC has observed, through monitoring of subcontracts, deliverables, and quarterly partner meetings, improvements in the performance of local partners in various areas, e.g. management of the subcontract and compliance to terms, monitoring of activities, and use of monitoring data for management.

Lessons

The prime contractor should make explicit in the subcontracting process and the subcontract itself which technical and administrative capacity gaps have been documented and what the plans are to these gaps, including setting performance indicators where appropriate. Otherwise, these capacity building needs may be overlooked and resources focused only on achieving other project results.

b) Working with local government subject matter specialists

CC was designed to work closely with local government subject matter specialists at district and sub-county levels and specifically the Uganda's National Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS) program to deliver extension services in the project's targeted sub-counties. Working directly with local government institutions poses challenges such as overly bureaucratic processes which hamper implementation, accountability and compliance issues, and frequent attrition (e.g. transfers) of trained and experienced government staff which make achieving long-term sustainability of activities difficult, especially in hard-to-reach communities. At the end of Phase I of CC (2014), the Government of Uganda suspended the NAADS program and the project was forced to redesign its approach and invest in using agricultural service provision (ASPs) in all 15 districts to support selected enterprises.

Lessons

- At the district level, there are wide variations in capacity of government actors to provide leadership in adapting project activities, and this impact sustainability. In some cases, due to financial and human resource constraints, it is unrealistic to expect that district-level government institutions will be able to take on and sustain the majority of a project's interventions.
- Engaging private sector businesses or entrepreneurs (such as ASPs) offers promise for delivering and/or sustaining extension services to communities, including to marginalized

and hard-to-reach populations. However, CC has found that this approach generally requires some subsidization of initial inputs and incubation through grants or other means until the system can function independently or be profitable.

c) Working with local producer groups using the granting mechanism

The CC grants program was initially designed to provide community groups in very remote areas with funds from which they could procure services not otherwise accessible to them, such as agricultural extension support from subject matter specialists, transportation for agricultural produce, or support from the business community. The grant program then shifted focus to select CC community groups that could use grant funding to reach vulnerable households outside of their group as a way to increase the project's coverage. CC also expanded the grants program to CBOs who could support CC activities in very remote areas where sub-county government officials were not involved. During implementation, a number of factors required CC to re-think the grants program design: a) concerns over lack of objectivity/favoritism for particular recipients by sub-county officials, b) the collapse of NAADS described above, and c) limited capacity of producer groups to undertake the paper work required in the granting process.

Lessons

- Small grants (\$2,000 or less) to community groups can be an effective way to move essential resources to communities and expand the reach of a project, especially when compared alongside the effectiveness of larger grants to CBOs. However, there are few USAID-funded projects in Uganda with experience giving such a large volume of small grants and therefore a limited evidence-base for the most effective way to manage such a program, including tackling issues such as how to streamline internal management procedures for competing and issuing such a large volume of small grants at community level; how to ensure compliance when recipients are community groups with limited structures and systems; and how to mitigate fraud and conflict within and among groups and communities. There is a need to further document the lessons learned by CC in undertaking this approach and evaluate its effectiveness in increasing coverage to vulnerable households.
- The granting process is greatly aided if local leaders (including political and community development officers) are sensitized on the process and have the opportunity to participate in the identification of the qualifying groups and verification of their performance. Currently, the process is carried out by project staff based as close to the groups as possible.

BOX 2: LESSONS FROM PM 5 ON IMPLEMENTING GRANTS

To understand better how grants could be more effectively implemented to achieve the intended results, CC included grants as one of four topics selected for learning studies in PM5. There were a number of lessons learned from this study: a) larger grants to very small CBOs can be easier to administer, can reach more households, and allow for better quality assurance measures, but lack the additional benefits of strengthening and investing in groups; b) larger grants to a cluster of groups in the same area and with the same interest requires more capacity building support than a single group grant, but can accomplish more; and c) providing in-kind grants to small groups is a more simplified and effective way to support very vulnerable households in starting small businesses (for more information please see CC Technical Note No. 7, August 2015).

IMPLEMENTATION OF CC ACTIVITIES AMONG VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

a) Reaching communities that are in remote areas with CC interventions

During PMI and PM3, CC conducted livelihood zoning for sub-counties and collected data on drivers of food insecurity, gender inequities, and poor nutrition in these areas. Through a participatory process, the project and stakeholders used this information to identify and prioritize target sub-counties within districts. The sub-counties that had the greatest needs in terms of agricultural livelihood and nutritional support were also the hardest to reach because of long distances and poor transportation infrastructure, which make the cost of doing business in these communities much higher. Hard-to-reach sub-counties are also out-of-reach from other FtF project activities, making linkages between CC and other projects in these areas difficult or impossible. Local governments at all levels often have in place plans to implement activities that were in line with/in support of CC activities, but did not have the required resources. This provides a great opportunity to support locally-owned initiatives, while also demonstrating that the CC project is well-aligned with local needs and priorities.

Lessons

- Generally speaking, development projects and government employees will avoid remote and hard-to-reach communities because of the high cost and effort required to accomplish goals. There may be higher transport costs, greater capacity building needs, human resource limitations, unwillingness or inability for project staff to be posted in or travel to remote locations, requirements for special equipment to conduct activities in these areas, and so forth. For example, female CC staff working in hard-to-reach communities such as Omia Pachwa in Agago, Okwalogweng in Dokolo, Kicuzi in Ibanda and Nyabwishenya in Kisoro faced huge challenges related to personal housing and security, and eventually had to be shifted to less remote sites. Unless projects are specifically mandated in their design to reach these remote areas—and show evidence that they are reaching the most vulnerable communities--it is unlikely that they will establish a presence there. As a result, these populations have the least linkages to agriculture, livelihood, health and other services and to markets.
- There have been some successes under CC. In some communities where CC was able to identify individuals within communities that were knowledgeable, had skills and could provide support to community group members in selected activities, CC was able to work with these individuals to reach more households. In 8 of its 54

targeted sub-counties, CC found successful government subject matter specialists in place and was able to establish performance-based contracts with the sub-county technical teams to motivate them to implement their planned activities. This enabled CC to reach additional households for a time; however, persistent compliance issues with the contracts made the process untenable in the end.

b) Reaching vulnerable households with CC interventions

CC's approach to engage targeted communities was to identify and prioritize working with existing community groups to increase the potential for sustainability. Literature has shown that groups which are in existence before a project enters the picture are more likely to continue on after the project ends than groups that are formed under the project. However, CC quickly learned that working solely with existing community groups meant that the most vulnerable households would be excluded from the project, since they were generally not members of existing groups. Data from the Makerere University School of Public Health indicated that households of the same income levels which do not participate in existing community groups have a consistently poorer nutritional status. For CC, working with only existing groups also meant that younger couples and the youth (aged <25 years) would be excluded since most were not in groups (for more information on how CC modified its approach to reach more youth, please see Technical Note No. 2 of this series, August 2014).

To overcome some of these challenges CC made the following adaptations: a) sub-contracted Village Enterprise (VE) to complement CC's existing livelihood activities and reach more youth with new youth-focused groups and livelihoods activities; b) made small grants available on a competitive basis to successful and highly motivated community groups who committed to engage neighbors from vulnerable households and outside community groups; c) developed the Family Life School (FLS) model which targets pregnant and postpartum women in the community through both health care services and community outreach (for more information on FLS, see Technical Note No. 8, August 2015); and d) implemented a primary school model that works with over 70 schools to implement student clubs that promote healthy behaviors, and communicate key messages through music, dance and hands-on learning in school sites. In turn, children in these schools are expected to pass on the healthy behavior messages to their parents and other community members were they live.

Lessons

- To be able to reach vulnerable households, a vulnerability assessment is needed in each locality and programs must be designed to meet the specific needs of the different target groups, e.g. youth, teenage mothers, people living with HIV, school-going girls and boys, etc.

- Local leaders, including political and faith-based, must be engaged in designing, planning, implementing and monitoring the performance of a program to mitigate vulnerability of local communities. Issues of gender and linkages to markets are key in any effort to reduce vulnerability.

ENHANCING EXISTING MODELS AND STRUCTURES IN CC INTERVENTIONS

CC has endeavored to use and enhance several successful program models from Uganda. Some of these include: a) a village entrepreneur model as a means of incentivizing volunteers working for the project; b) the village saving and loaning association (VSLA) model that promotes savings while building productive assets and wealth; and c) nutrition clubs (referred to as Family Life Schools in the CC project) to deliver multisectoral nutrition interventions at community level. Each of these is discussed in further detail below.

a) Incentivizing volunteers in an integrated project

In Uganda, the village entrepreneur model was introduced by BRAC, one of CC consortium partners, to promote entrepreneurship and financial stability of small businesses through sales of in-demand, socially beneficial goods which also promote project objectives, e.g. soap for handwashing, fortified oil/floor/salt, fuel-efficient cook stoves, improved seeds for different crops such as maize or vegetables, and solar lamps. The volunteers ("Promoters") are offered these goods to sell to communities ("Goods for Life" bag) at a subsidized cost and linked to supply chains for replenishment. Although the first bag of goods is offered to the Promoter for free, the profit incurred through sales is designed to motivate them to restock and continue selling goods to communities. CC introduced this approach among its Promoters based on a key hypothesis for integrated development: volunteers would have increased incomes as a result of selling items, which would in turn motivate them to visit more homes in the community to expand sales. In the process, Promoters pass along project messages relating to health, gender, agriculture and nutrition to this wider audience. Additionally, Promoters may be motivated to access hard-to-reach communities, thereby improving the supply of good that improve the health, wealth and food security status of households. (For a further discussion of lessons learned on this approach, please see CC Technical Note No. 4.)

Lessons

- Such an approach works best in areas with a well-established supply chain for the goods being promoted. In this case, the approach has worked well in areas within a seven kilometer radius of the BRAC micro-finance

branches, where the goods are replenished. Most CC sites are located 50-100 kilometers from BRAC branches, making the replenishment goods and the flow of cash more challenging (unless they are using mobile-money) and potentially less sustainable as Promoters are unable to compete with local businesses.

- Over-saturation of Promoters within a given geographic area in an effort to increase program reach should be avoided, as it undermines the marketing and sale of these goods and limits profit margin. CC matches one Promoter to each CC community group (average 30 people), whereas the original BRAC model places one entrepreneur for every 100 households.
- This approach might be more effective and sustainable if implemented by a non-NGO/non-development partner. CC found that when the village entrepreneur model was introduced to volunteers, there was an expectation among communities, leaders and the volunteers themselves that the goods would continually be provided free of charge because they were sourced through a development project, and the business perspective was not immediately adopted. As a result, some Promoters initially used and did not see the goods; others, such cook stoves, had a very slow absorption rate among communities because they were accustomed to receiving them for free.

b) The village savings and loan association model

Within CC, the VSLA approach is used to build community group cohesion, as well as facilitate the integration of other CC interventions. The approach has been widely used in Uganda - in the project's first year, CC registered 1,269 community groups, approximately 40% of which were already participating in a VSLA. In this model as it is currently used in Uganda, group members save funds throughout the year and then receive those funds back as a lump sum at end of the calendar year, usually in December. Since December is a holiday season in Uganda, instead of using the money received to purchase productive assets and/or other inputs for business or entrepreneurial ventures, most of the savings were being used to support holiday celebrations, travel, etc. and were not being used to increase the overall economic status of a household. To improve the likelihood that group members would save money to invest in more productive assets or improve financial stability, CC worked with local leaders to propose a more appropriate time for distributing the savings funds (i.e. outside the holiday season). In addition, CC worked with local leaders to develop and introduce a peer accountability system that encouraged group members to save towards a predetermined purpose, termed as saving with a purpose (SWAP).

Lessons

Over 75% of CC groups have adopted the SWAP approach, with some modifications to unique contexts. For example, some groups have set up two parallel savings account that members contribute to: one that is specifically for the festive period and another which is for wealth-building or meeting another agreed-upon need such as school fees. Other groups have continued with one savings account but have two distribution periods in the year: one during the festive period and another to coincide with the start of the farming season or the commencement of the school year. Most CC VSLAs have shown interest in being linked to banks, but long distances typically inhibit such engagement.

c) Using Family Life Schools to deliver multisectoral nutrition interventions at community level

The FLS approach was developed by CC in partnership with UNICEF and five of the target districts to integrate evidence-based nutrition interventions into other project activities such as VSLA and income generating activities (IGA). FLS (initially called "nutrition clubs") target parents during the first 1000 days of a child's life (i.e. from conception to the child's second birthday) to promote improved nutrition. FLS also provide an opportunity for health care workers to monitor the nutrition status of both the mother and baby so that they can be referred to appropriate services for malnutrition. Each class is six to eight sessions, with one session held each month. Services are provided by trained community volunteers who use simplified job aids in the local language and are supervised by CBO or government health care workers. As of June 2015, there were 551 functional FLSs with 24,755 registered beneficiaries in the 15 CC districts. Approximately 19,700 women (79.6%) had participated in FLS classes at least once during the quarter of April - June 2015. A number of partners within the CC consortium (VE and Self Help Africa) have adopted the approach in their activities in other geographical areas, the CC's two university partners have introduced the approach to their students. UNICEF has also employed the approach in five districts. Even with this uptake, in the CC districts only 30% of those in need are reached by FLS.

Lessons

- There is a need to expand the FLS model to reach a higher proportion of parents, but the approach is expensive in terms of financial and human resource requirements.
- Local structures, networks and systems need to be more fully engaged in the implementation of FLS. At present, the design and planning is done mainly by development partners, with only some involvement of district and sub-county government workers.

- Government structures are not yet at a point where they can be relied upon to scale-up FLS services. Most government departments have limited personnel at sub-county levels and those who are there are not motivated to reach remote areas. Currently, CBOs seem best-positioned to lead this work

ADDITIONAL LESSONS LEARNED ON CLA

CC has successfully used the CLA approach to continuously engage local stakeholders, review and revise its intervention strategies and adapt to a wide variety of contexts. The project has hosted three learning events in Uganda to share lessons with USAID and other stakeholders. In 2015, the USAID LEARN project identified CC as a landmark project and is producing a video on adaptive management in CC to disseminate widely to development partners. As a result of the CLA approach, CC has been able to collect and use information to identify and address barriers to improve implementation, coverage, cost-effectiveness, and timeliness of activities – changes intended ultimately to improve impact and sustainability.

Finally, here are some additional lessons CC has learned from applying CLA:

1. For CLA to be successful, meaningful engagement of all stakeholders is critical, from government officials to donor representatives to program beneficiaries.
2. Partners and staff on a project must be flexible and open to the possibility that scopes of work may be redefined to better align with needs as challenges are identified and addressed.
3. Not all challenges identified through the CLA process are amenable to change. In some cases, adaptations may require institutional policy change which may or may not be possible within the period of performance. The key to success is to identify and focus resources on implementing those changes which are feasible within the context of the project and have the greatest likelihood of improving or increasing impact.
4. It is imperative that a project carefully identify the point at which it must "stop the learning" in order to focus on achieving results within the period of performance. Intensive learning and adaptation on a large-scale cannot continue until the end of the project without diminishing returns on investment, and the project must determine when to shift the focus and resources away from such learning to primarily implementing.