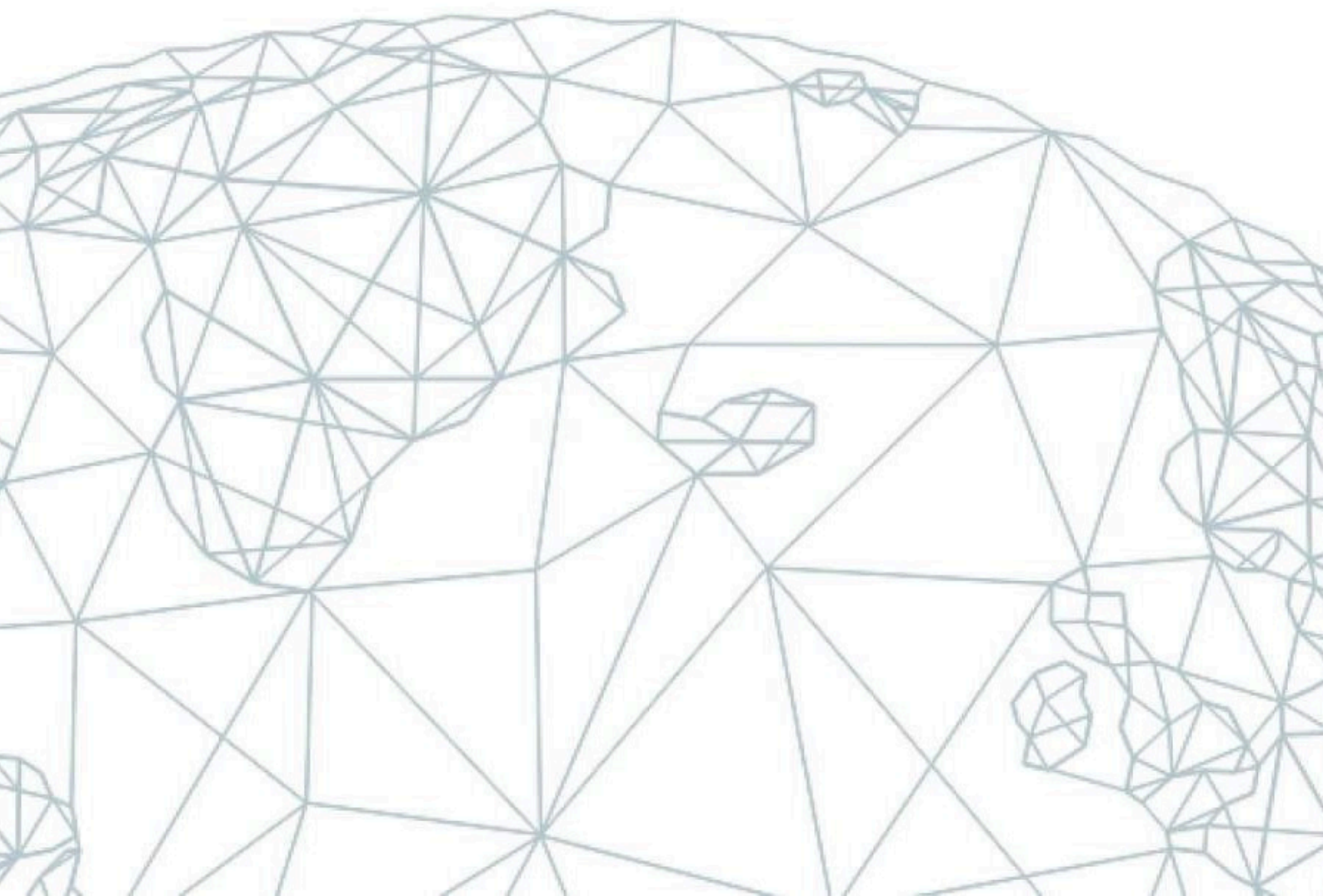




Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA): facts and misconceptions

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If you are struggling to integrate CLA in your work and across your project or organization, the experts at Acute Incite have your back! Keep reading for some common myths around CLA and tips to dispel them at your organization.

1. CLA is unrealistic and burdensome. (Who has time?)

False. There are very few required elements of CLA and plenty of flexibility.

Top tip:

A CLA approach plans for incremental change, so you can customize processes and practices to local and program contexts.

2. CLA is just another word for M&E. (Isn't it all about evidence?)

False. The most effective M&E allows learning to be identified and then applied by quickly adapting your program, operations, or both. CLA goes beyond evidence and focuses on the “so what,” or—more specifically—the “now what.”

Top tip:

There is no standard definition of evidence. It can be more flexible and operational than people think. For example, sometimes informal observations can test your activities’ assumptions that influence how you implement them. The key is directing evidence towards action and adaptation. CLA allows teams and programs to be as dynamic as the complex environments in which they operate. Iterative learning is everyone’s job.

3. CLA isn't required for emergency humanitarian assistance (HA) programs. (How is it relevant for short-term HA programs?)

True. CLA plans are not a requirement for short-term emergency programs. However, collaborating, learning, and adapting are urgently needed and relevant where the stakes are high, and the environment is complex.

Top tip:

Most programs are already doing CLA without recognizing it. For example, regular after-action reviews (AARs) are a standard practice. Your ability to convey what you learned and how you adapted is as important for your organization as your ability to rapidly respond in the moment. You are doing it whether it is “required” or not.

4. CLA is just another word for adaptive management. (Why does it require more specialized knowledge or skills than basic project management?)

True. CLA is USAID’s term for adaptive management. It is also an intentional, systematic, and resourced approach to iterative learning that requires a shared understanding, adaptive mindsets, foundational practices and processes, and cultivating an intentional whole-team approach for continual improvement.

Top tip:

Perennial challenges to CLA include leadership buy-in, time, and money. When leadership is on board, time and money become less of a challenge. (In fact, a CLA approach should lead to improved efficiencies!) Don’t let the day-to-day pull of focusing on deliverables push this to the side. Make sure time and budget is set aside and your Chief of Party (COP)—and broader project or organizational leadership— is onboard.

5. USAID Learning Lab has everything you need to know about CLA. (Who needs training?)

False. USAID's Learning Lab does provide a tremendous number of resources, tools, good practices, and CLA case studies.

As with many resource libraries, the volume of content can be overwhelming and may not offer the contextualization of how it can be fully adapted to your specific needs (e.g., how to create systematic CLA plans adapted for your program's context and culture).

Top tip:

Build staff capacity at all levels to understand, design, develop, and implement effective CLA plans and processes. These are critical at every stage: from the initial proposal and start-up of a new project through the final evaluation, close-out, and possible follow-on. To create an enabling environment for learning, every level of an organization needs to have a shared understanding and speak the same language.

Everyone (from business development staff and Chiefs of Party to program and operations staff) can benefit from training together. That said, when critical masses prove difficult to gather, start small. Showing the value through individual or team-specific exercises can highlight proof of concept to transform a skeptic into a champion.

6. Implementation of CLA is people-dependent. (Why should we care about it when our current USAID counterpart isn't focused on it?)

True. CLA does depend on people, but people rotate in and out.

Top tip:

Remaining committed to iteratively learning and adapting from Day One is the best way to systematically increase your impact during implementation. Additionally, it will showcase your demonstrated ability to adaptively manage; your capacity to create an enabling environment for learning within your program and organization; and the likelihood of having a strong, effective, meaningful partnership with USAID over time. Sooner or later, USAID will want to know what you learned along the way and how you nimbly adapted.

7. The greatest recurring challenge to CLA is evidence. (Won't having the M&E team report to a Senior Learning Advisor fix this?)

False. The greatest recurring challenges are related to organizational culture, relationships, and risk. M&E is only one means of supporting continual learning.

Top tip:

To achieve continual operational and programmatic improvements for increased impact, learning must be everyone's job. It begins with collaboration. Design and use your CLA plan to effectively partner with USAID. Open and honest collaboration and communication reduce risk for all.

8. CLA helps win proposals.

True. You increase your chance of winning by demonstrating your past ability to iteratively learn and adapt. Plus writing realistic, practical, and informed CLA plans within your proposal not only shows you share USAID's priorities, it proves you know how to deliver them.

Top tip:

Review how well your programs are implementing their existing CLA plans. The true power of CLA is lost when you cannot tell a story about what you have learned, how you learned it, and the way you responded. Lessons big or small are only as good as they are applied to your programs and operations; it is the application that will set you apart. Make demonstrating your organization's commitment to learning and adaptive management part of your culture.