

CASE STUDY

Integrating CLA to Support Cooperative Development in Kenya



Introduction

The Cooperative Leadership, Engagement, Advocacy, and Research (CLEAR) Program, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by Global Communities, supports worker cooperatives to build their business identity and improve their performance to remain competitive in the ever-changing, Kenyan business environment. Since 2015, CLEAR has supported 20 cooperatives in Kenya (ten worker cooperatives, five housing cooperatives and five producer cooperatives in coffee, dairy, poultry and banana value chains) and has witnessed the lasting impact of these cooperatives on the daily lives of their members and communities. From the [Women in Sustainable Energy and Entrepreneurship](#) cooperative that trains and supports women through employment opportunities in a male dominated field to the [Vision 4 Housing](#) cooperative that has increased members' opportunities for home ownership, cooperatives have demonstrated their ability to thrive in Kenya, support their members and positively impact communities.

In part, the success of the CLEAR program has been dependent on its ability to identify potential areas of improvement and actively adapt the program's implementation to best support cooperatives. This has been made possible through the program team embracing a collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) approach, starting with its design. USAID and Global Communities designed CLEAR with a CLA approach embedded into the program's three primary objectives: 1) Support the Government of Kenya in the development of cooperative policy, legislation and regulations, 2) Provide technical assistance to 15 Cooperative Businesses in housing and service sectors to improve their business performance and 3) Enhance cooperative networks to improve education and learning among cooperators. To achieve these objectives, CLEAR utilizes a number of approaches to generate, share, capture and apply learning. This includes the regular use of pause and reflect activities such as After Action Reviews (AARs) and Quarterly Data Review Sessions as well as the facilitation of a Community of Practice (CoP) focused on youth. Collectively, these activities have contributed to a culture of learning in the project, regular engagement of and networking between key stakeholders and the ability to adapt program implementation based on stakeholder input and data. The CLEAR team sees these activities as key pillars for the sustainability of cooperatives in Kenya. This case study will further explore CLEAR's approach to CLA, walk through key activities that the project has implemented and highlight specific lessons learned, adaptations and observed outcomes so far.

CLA is a methodology developed by USAID to embed learning and adaptive management into programs. CLA stands for:

- **Collaborating:** Are we collaborating with the right partners at the right time to address this challenge?
- **Learning:** Are we asking the most important questions and finding answers relevant to decision making?
- **Adapting:** Are we using the information we gather through collaboration and learning activities to make better decisions and adjust as necessary?
- **Enabling Conditions:** Are we working an organizational environment that support our CLA efforts?

After Action Reviews

While Kenyan cooperatives and their stakeholders are diverse, there is still an ample amount of learning that can be shared between them. However, when the CLEAR program started, there was very limited collaboration between key stakeholders such as the Kenyan government, universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unions and apex organizations. This challenge, in part, stemmed from limited human resources—as well as financial and operational support—for local partners to independently lead collaboration efforts. One way the CLEAR program began to address these issues was by engaging stakeholders in regular After Action Reviews (AARs) and creating a space where stakeholders could reflect upon and share learning that could be used to inform CLEAR's design and ongoing implementation.

Approach

AARs are a structured process for collecting, synthesizing and discussing feedback from a specific activity or event. They are often conducted with key stakeholders to reflect on an activity together and capture contextual learning. In response to the need for increased stakeholder engagement, CLEAR began conducting AARs with organizers (i.e., CLEAR staff, partner organizations, consultants) after every event or major activity to discuss successes, share challenges and capture learning.

The AAR process is typically led by CLEAR's CLA Officer who guides the AAR participants through a set of standard questions:

- 1) What did we expect?
- 2) What went well?
- 3) What did not go well (and why)?
- 4) What are our next steps?

The AAR participants discuss each question one at a time using rapid-fire brainstorming to share as many answers and perspectives as they can. The simple questions help facilitate a natural flow of conversation and allow the participants to jump around from question to question or topic to topic as needed. The AAR facilitator will often ask a team member to expand upon a specific success or challenge of interest to better capture additional context that can help inform next steps. Specifically, during the discussion, the facilitator focuses on recording any interesting knowledge that project participants may have shared during an activity, critical observations from the staff, or areas where the project participants or event organizers struggled.

To narrow in on the most critical topics for CLEAR, the facilitator focuses the discussion on thematic areas and higher-level observations rather than operational or logistical lessons learned. To ensure transparency, the AAR facilitator records the answers throughout the discussion on a shared document visible to the group. After all the responses have been shared, the team collectively reviews, adds anything that may be missing and groups related points. Following the AAR discussion, feedback is used to inform any immediate activities being conducted by the AAR participants and the final AAR summary document is stored on Global Communities' intranet site for review and use during CLEAR's quarterly assessment meetings.

CLEAR works with several local partners including the Cooperative University of Kenya, United States International University – Africa and Strathmore Business School and technical consultants. These local partners are included in the AAR process to encourage external collaboration and provide an opportunity for partners to provide key input into the event reflection and planning for future activities.



Results

For the CLEAR team, AARs have been particularly helpful in facilitating collaboration between project staff and local partners to discuss expectations, outcomes and adaptations for future activities. This collaboration has allowed CLEAR to remain attuned to the needs and capabilities of partners and cooperatives—taking their feedback into account for future program activities. The program team also uses AARs to inform the project’s learning agenda, using feedback from participants to better understand existing data. By engaging local partners and stakeholders in AARs, the team has developed a greater awareness of how complex lessons are being understood and how local partners might interpret lessons differently than CLEAR staff.

As a specific example of AARs informing CLEAR’s implementation, AARs revealed the need for more communication with the Council of Governors – an organization established by law to provide a mechanism for consultation amongst County Governments, facilitate capacity building for governors and share information on how the counties are performing in Kenya. Previously, CLEAR was primarily working with individual counties and governors who were hesitant to collaborate. Based on feedback garnered through AARs, CLEAR began engaging more with the Council of Governors—contributing to greater success in forming relationships with counties and jointly planning activities, encouraging government participation in trainings and making headway on policy discussions. Having the support of the Council of Governors ultimately made other government entities (both local and regional) more amenable to collaborating with the CLEAR team and created the opportunity to influence cooperative friendly policies that improved the enabling environment for cooperatives in Kenya.

Additionally, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, CLEAR’s AAR process enabled open discussion about what activities were working well after shifting to an online format and what activities needed to be adapted further in the pandemic context. For example, through AARs, the CLEAR team identified that a particular cooperative had very few members with smartphones equipped for Zoom resulting in limited online interaction (through Zoom’s chat pod and other interactive features) by attendees. Some members were even coming together to huddle around one phone which was not COVID-safe nor an effective way to engage. To adapt, CLEAR shifted from Zoom to WhatsApp—sharing information through short audio clips and images and using the chat feature to interact.

Engaging local partners in AARs has been important for strengthening capacity and sustainability as partners will eventually take over program activities. Incorporating the input of partner organizations also helps ensure that CLEAR’s activities are designed to meet the needs of cooperatives. By including local partners in the AAR process, partners are not only learning that this approach can be helpful for reflecting on their current activities but also being equipped to utilize the AAR approach after CLEAR implementation has ended.

Quarterly Data Review Sessions

Seeking to better utilize monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data for learning, CLEAR designed two Quarterly Data Review Sessions. One session focused on reviewing performance monitoring data to identify indicators that were lagging and required additional attention to stay on target. The second session provided a dedicated space for discussing the project’s learning agenda questions.

Early on, however, the session focusing on M&E data became largely operational –often resulting in long and tedious discussions that centered more around identifying problems than exploring possible solutions. In contrast, the learning agenda meetings were much more organic and resulted in detailed discussions about ideas and solutions to challenges but rarely produced specific action items. After assessing the distinct challenges of these separate Quarterly Data Review Sessions, the team decided to adapt their approach and bring these two sessions together, resulting in a more effective approach for learning from data and applying this learning to program implementation.

Approach

Quarterly Data Review Sessions are conducted internally by the CLEAR team to review performance monitoring and evaluation data, discuss lessons learned and plan for the following quarter. The review process is led jointly by the CLEAR M&E Specialist and CLA Officer and brings together the whole project team to review the previous quarter's M&E data and lessons learned.

Prior to each session, the facilitators send updated performance monitoring data and completed AARs from the previous quarter to specific teams working on project interventions so that they can review and prepare reflections in advance. During the session, the M&E Specialist reminds attendees about the importance of using data for learning, reviews data and key indicators from the previous quarter and answers any questions about the

Sample Quarterly Data Review Session Agenda


Topic	Time Allotted
1. Introduction & Agenda Review	10 minutes
2. A reminder of Reporting Concepts	10 minutes
3. Highlights of Key MEL activities	10 minutes
4. Sharing of Quarterly Results	10 minutes
5. Reflective Breakout Sessions & Presentations	40 minutes
6. Question & Answer	20 minutes
7. Recommendations & Action Items	20 minutes

performance monitoring data from the team. The team then jointly reflects upon the indicators, reviewing areas of challenge and success, and discusses plans for how to apply lessons learned when implementing the next quarter's activities. Following this, the team moves into small breakout sessions (often grouped by technical area) to reflect on the data more deeply using key discussion questions. These questions are designed collaboratively with the M&E Specialist, CLA Officer and Technical Specialists in advance of the review to pinpoint certain areas of interest for that quarter. While each review session has slightly different questions, they may include questions such as "What were the top three lessons you learned this quarter?" or "How did you overcome an implementation challenge?" Following breakout discussions, each team reports key takeaways back to the larger group. The session ends with a reflection on the action items discussed and preliminary planning.

Following each Quarterly Data Review Session, the facilitators send out a summary of the discussion which includes the lessons learned, agreed upon milestones and action items and due dates. The team has an opportunity to review and provide any feedback online before the document is finalized.

Results

CLEAR's Quarterly Data Review Sessions have given the team dedicated time to reflect on their performance monitoring data, improving utilization of data and learning in the project. The review sessions have improved internal collaboration by incorporating global participation and enhancing collaboration across the organization. The reflection time has also been used to discuss cross-cutting themes, such as participation of women and youth, and share best practices (i.e., Zoom



training techniques)—ultimately contributing to a broader evidence base for both the project team and Global Communities to draw upon when implementing future activities.

Team leads have specifically observed that the entire CLEAR team is now more involved in M&E and has developed a deeper understanding of MEL practices following these Quarterly Data Review Sessions. As one team member describes, “It has made it [M&E] a joint effort instead of just a ‘submission’ of data.” As the entire project team became more involved in M&E, data review sessions helped distill key learning from M&E data while also revealing gaps in data collection. For example, the team discovered—despite conducting several CLA activities— data was not being collected to measure the impact of these activities. In response, the team worked with USAID to adapt the MEL plan to include indicators for these key activities.

The review sessions also help identify channels for dissemination of training materials and tools. When one technical team presents a lesson learned or tool, others help identify cooperatives, stakeholders or other groups to whom the information would be beneficial and could be disseminated. This process has fostered a culture of collaboration and open communication across activity areas which has helped teams supporting different activities align efforts, reduce possible duplication of effort and ultimately better support the program’s goals.

Finally, Quarterly Data Review Sessions have helped CLEAR identify specific content areas where cooperatives need additional support such as addressing gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Cooperative Development team shared that cooperatives were reporting domestic violence cases and required support in how to respond. In response, CLEAR’s Gender Specialist was then able to put together a rapid training for cooperative boards and gather materials they could use to determine how to react, respond, and report. The open dialogue also helped identify opportunities to capitalize on different teams’ skills. For example, the policy and legislative affairs team began to support coaching on governance within cooperatives.

Due to a continuously shifting environment combined with a large group of stakeholders, it can be difficult to identify the root challenges cooperative businesses face. However, taking the time to pause and reflect upon the project’s performance monitoring data and lessons learned provides CLEAR the space to connect data to learning and learning to action. This has enabled CLEAR to continually adapt project implementation to better support Kenyan cooperatives.

Communities of Practice

In Kenya, the rate of youth unemployment is high. With limited employment opportunities in the formal sector, self-employment and entrepreneurship have become increasingly common among Kenyan youth. However, there are few opportunities to access technical assistance or networks supportive to youth entrepreneurs.

Recognizing this barrier, the CLEAR team originally sought to contribute to positive youth development through the cooperative business model—working with the Cooperative University of Kenya to create programs that build entrepreneurship capacity for youth in cooperatives. However, widespread interest of youth in start-up businesses outside of cooperatives quickly grew. As a result, CLEAR established the Youth Entrepreneurship Roundtable (YERT), a Community of Practice (CoP) focused on youth in cooperatives and startup businesses that provides opportunities for

youth to network with each other and connect with business experts to support members' business ideas. Membership in YERT is open to both youth involved in cooperatives and start-up businesses.

Approach

CLEAR's YERT focuses on encouraging good business practices and promoting knowledge sharing about cooperatives and entrepreneurship. CLEAR utilized a CLA approach in both the initial design of YERT as well as when adapting it during COVID-19 (see excerpt "Actively Adapting YERT amidst the Pandemic").

YERT began as a focus group discussion in 2019 when 20 young cooperative entrepreneurs and business students from the Cooperative University of Kenya met in person to share experiences through peer-to-peer learning. The group was convened and facilitated by CLEAR project staff. From here, participants for the CoP were recruited through peer-to-peer networks of those who participated in the initial focus group as well as CLEAR's efforts to make the CoP visible through more traditional channels such as posting on social media and other community platforms.

While the CoP initially met in person on a quarterly basis for day-long workshops, YERT pivoted to monthly, virtual meetings in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. During these two-hour sessions, CLEAR staff or guest speakers shared formal presentations and facilitated Question and Answer (Q&A) discussions on specific topics of interest identified by the group's participants. While the CLEAR team coordinated these meetings and recruited external experts to provide additional learning and networking opportunities for members, YERT members provided regular feedback and helped identify meeting topics through annual surveys. Topics varied based on the needs and interests of the group but have included gender and cooperative businesses, marketing for subject matter experts, service and product development and attracting investors. These virtual sessions were hosted on Zoom and typically included a presentation from a business expert or advisor, with time for members to ask questions, followed by breakout discussions where members could dive deeper into how they might incorporate learning from the sessions into their own businesses.

Actively Adapting YERT amidst the Pandemic

At the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, YERT members reached out to CLEAR with requests to maintain the group and be trained on business skills that would help them survive the pandemic. In response, CLEAR conducted interviews and program indicator assessments to understand member needs and then adapted to meet these needs during the pandemic.

Assessments revealed a continued need for members to collaborate with one another as well as access expert advice on sustaining their businesses (given difficulty accessing other support). Members also reported the need for technical support in developing adaptive business strategies, business plans, marketing approaches, and customer service relations.

Based on these assessments, a collaborative decision was made to adapt YERT from a physical group discussion to a virtual Zoom platform— where young entrepreneurs could share experiences, explore how to rebuild their businesses, and network with business experts and advisors. To support this transition, CLEAR provided in-depth support to familiarize members with Zoom and offered guidance on building relationships, networking, and learning in a virtual environment. Further feedback from YERT members led to adapting the meeting schedule as well, switching from a quarterly to a monthly meeting and reducing the meeting duration from a full day to 2-hour sessions.


As YERT continues to adapt based on the needs of members and resources available, the CLEAR team has started to explore additional meeting mechanisms to promote further knowledge sharing between YERT members. As COVID-19 restrictions have lifted and in-person activities have resumed, the team has started to lay the groundwork for two annual, in-person learning sessions where YERT participants will be able to share what they have learned throughout their own business journeys and other youth entrepreneurship support organizations can share their experiences as well – continuing to expand YERT’s role as a resource to bring together young entrepreneurs and support their business success. In 2023, for instance, CLEAR organized a physical YERT session in collaboration with the Democracy At Work Institute and Cooperative University of Kenya to introduce youth entrepreneurs to the worker cooperative model and its benefits. From this session, participants learned the difference between worker cooperatives and other types of cooperatives and developed a better understanding of the skills required for them to form worker cooperatives.



Results

By allowing the activity to adapt to meet the needs of the participants and respond to a changing operating environment (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), YERT membership has grown from 20 members in Nairobi County in 2019 to over 500 members across 11 counties in Kenya in 2022. The success of YERT so far has been rooted in its ability to be flexible, understand the needs of its members and support valuable knowledge sharing and networking between members.

YERT has enabled CLEAR to better understand the needs of youth entrepreneurs and reach more youth stakeholders through business entrepreneurship trainings. For example, through YERT, the CLEAR team learned that youth were struggling to market their businesses, especially after COVID-19. Young entrepreneurs knew they needed to break through the market but reported that marketing costs were too high. In response, CLEAR conducted a digital marketing training session through YERT. Many YERT members were then able to reinvigorate their social media platforms and began selling and marketing their products from there. As one YERT member shared, “After that intensive training on content marketing on social media we went ahead and opened two pages. One on Facebook and another on LinkedIn...We started the pages from scratch and our posts organically reach an average of 300 to 500 people. Clearly, we are growing, and we will keep growing our social media presence and eventually be able to convert our followers to customers.” Not only did this training benefit YERT members, but the success of this training led the CLEAR team to develop a marketing training program used for its work with other cooperatives as well. Through CLEAR’s continued M&E activities and direct engagement of youth, data will be collected and used to explore this and other critical success factors underpinning the most effective youth entrepreneurship activities—positioning YERT to continue to provide insights that can influence policy and action for positive youth development.



CLEAR has also found that engaging youth and business development experts as partners in decision-making around YERT has fostered increased ownership by members and increased motivation to engage further in their startup journey. Members have reported having improved their business and financial plans, adopted digital marketing tools (such as Canva), and increased their use of social media marketing platforms (such as LinkedIn and Facebook) to market and increase their business sales. As one YERT member reports, “I have gained a lot from you guys, I can now manage my business properly...Initially, capitalizing and becoming stable was my main problem but now I can say I find it easy. Thank you for all the sessions we have had, and I personally look forward to more that are yet to come.” Moreover, while CLEAR initially played the convener role and recruited members to join YERT, YERT members have recently taken up mobilization activities by referring their peers to join YERT and suggesting topics and speakers for sessions. This has started to shift CLEAR’s support from leading and managing the CoP to a more advisory role and has allowed network members to take more direct ownership of the platform. Such a shift in ownership suggests there may be continued support for YERT even after CLEAR project activities have concluded.


Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Based on these experiences integrating CLA into the CLEAR project design and implementation, learning from stakeholder engagement and collaboration and adapting these CLA activities over time, CLEAR recommends the following to others seeking to better incorporate CLA into their project activities:

Dedicate Resources for CLA: CLEAR’s CLA approach was enabled by having dedicated resources, including a CLA Officer and M&E Specialist at the project level as well as technical support from Global Communities’ global staff. These positions were critical in ensuring that AARs, Quarterly Data Review Sessions, and the YERT CoP were put into practice and had access to sufficient support for the coordination and facilitation of activities. Having these positions requires dedicated program funds to hire staff to specifically support CLA activities. As the CLEAR team experienced, technical teams are often very busy planning and implementing program activities which sometimes resulted in missed opportunities to capture learning.

Foster a Culture for CLA: CLEAR’s primary obstacle for CLA implementation at the start of the project was generating team buy-in. Despite having dedicated individuals to facilitate CLA, the team was initially reluctant to engage in CLA activities given the time and effort requirements. To address this, CLEAR’s CLA Officer coached and supported the team through brainstorming sessions, facilitated outline development and led nearly every AAR. The team received significant coaching from the CLA Officer and Global Communities’ global Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team to reflect on learning questions and think beyond the operational aspects. Along with the Quarterly Data Review Sessions where project staff can regularly discuss project data, CLEAR has also found that co-creating learning agendas and learning questions as a team can be a helpful step in generating CLA buy-in of team members.

Build Capacity among Team Members on CLA: CLEAR was designed with a dedicated CLA aspect, but, at the time, the concept was still new to the team and many partners. To address this, the CLEAR team underwent training and worked closely with project partners to incorporate CLA into their operations. The team has also participated in discussions and re-fresher trainings on CLA with the local USAID mission, USAID Washington and other Global Communities programs.



Engage with Local Stakeholders to Build CLA Capacity: Throughout implementation, the CLEAR team observed the importance of regularly engaging local stakeholders and fostering local ownership of project goals and activities. In CLEAR, this has been supported through the regular engagement of stakeholders in AARs where stakeholders not only provided feedback on activities but also helped shape project activities going forward. Through this participation, local stakeholders also grew their own capacity for facilitating AARs—building their understanding of the importance of pausing and reflecting and equipping them with a CLA approach that they can apply in their own work. This approach has improved CLEAR’s relationship with stakeholders, increased their engagement and promoted a unified vision for the program and partners.

Create Collaboration Networks: As seen through the YERT CoP, having a dedicated collaboration space for stakeholders with shared interests provides a critical tool for knowledge dissemination to and learning from local stakeholders. By fostering local networks where stakeholders can connect with one another and share ideas, a project can both learn from local stakeholders as well as help stakeholders grow their capacity for networking. These spaces not only allow for multi-directional learning but also (as seen in the case of YERT) create mechanisms for sustainability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By embracing the principles of CLA and embedding these activities into the project, CLEAR has been able to foster a culture of learning amongst project staff and local stakeholders, effectively engage with and support networking between stakeholders and actively adapt program implementation based on stakeholder input and data. Internal collaboration amongst the CLEAR team has been institutionalized through Quarterly Data Review Sessions while external collaboration with and between stakeholders has been supported through both AARs and the YERT CoP—strengthening the overall cooperative sector by linking different stakeholders together and providing ongoing support networks. AARs and the YERT CoP have also provided regular pathways for feedback loops between stakeholders and the project. Moreover, these CLA approaches have been increasingly adopted by local stakeholders as demonstrated by the participation of local partners in AARs and the increased leadership roles being taken on by YERT CoP members.

Overall, the use of these CLA approaches has not only contributed to more effective project outcomes supporting the cooperative sector but also helped strengthen the capacities of local stakeholders to adopt CLA approaches themselves and support the sustainability of cooperatives beyond the life of the project.