

Case Title:

Removing the blinders: Transitioning NAFKA II to an evidence-based project.

Name: Rodrigo Abed and Hamisi Mwangi

Organization: ACDI/VOCA

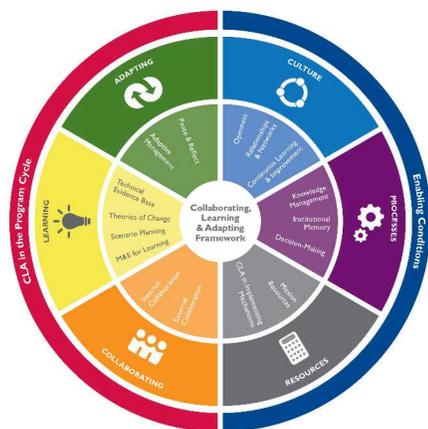
Summary:

The ability to design impactful interventions and make adaptive decisions during implementation requires a solid technical evidence base and an inquisitive implementation process. The Feed the Future Tanzania NAFKA II (i.e. NAFKA) program has recently undergone a shift to advance these goals, embedding more research around program interventions that allow all staff to operate with more than Performance Management Plan (PMP) indicators and observational findings, and reinforce an analytical culture.

In 2017, NAFKA amended its workplan to look at its long-standing programmatic approach and compliment it with research questions that transition our inferences about the potential path for the success of the project to a testable hypothesis. We decided to "remove our blinders" using research to prove the causal relationship between our interventions and their effectiveness, as well as to understand the factors that influence them. In addition, allowing our staff to be an active part of the whole research process helped them to develop a new skillset, evolving into thought leaders for initiatives they have been instrumental in developing, and giving them a different perspective of the learning process as well as a sense of ownership. However, the transition did not come without difficulties. In addressing a development challenge, we encountered an organizational one.

This case study explores how our program has embedded academic research into ongoing implementation-level studies in order to "remove the blinders" that can limit effective implementation. This approach supports the program in 1) adaptive management for enhanced impact; and 2) further developing NAFKA staff to expand skillsets for personal growth, industry leadership, and team culture.

Think about which subcomponents of the **Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework** are most reflected in your case so that you can reference them in your submission:



- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms



NAFAKA's staff interacting with farmers during a data collection session. This workshop was part of the project's efforts to understand how farmers use their time throughout the cropping season. Credit: Lucy Ngailo, NAFKA II.

1. What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

As a long-standing cereals value chain development project within USAID/Tanzania's economic growth portfolio, NAFAKA has historically focused on performance monitoring through formal indicators and surmised these statistics with experiences from the field through interactions with market actors and beneficiaries. However, even impactful interventions can be unsustainable due to the lack of studies on the 'why' behind their effectiveness and other unobservable contributing factors.

Therefore, in year two, we began to strengthen the technical evidence base for our theory of change by embracing an internal, evolving research agenda, aimed to test the causal relationships between key interventions and their impact as well as the factors that influenced them. Staff acknowledged that we needed to bring clarity to the path we were walking on and expand the research toolkit and the quality of methods we used to do that, while also being wise with the resources we had in our standard market development implementer budget to make it happen. We were confident that knowing what and why interventions worked would allow us to "remove the blinders" and to clearly identify the road ahead in the journey to generate sustainable impact.

This transition did not come without difficulties. In addressing a development challenge, we encountered an organizational one. The inclusion of research into our project required us to build our staff's capacity outside the traditional analytical summaries of PMP and summary tables to a more advanced understanding in hypothesis forming, statistics, and data analytics. Moreover, to guarantee the sustainability of this transition, we needed a culture that would embrace and understand how to use research-oriented data across the different project interventions to ensure that the constant generation of learning questions and testable hypotheses were being captured and imbedded into the program.

2. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

For NAFAKA's leadership, it was clear that using a research-based approach to evaluate the effectiveness of our primary activities must be integrated in the final two years of our program to improve the effectiveness of long-term change. Furthermore, NAFAKA's long-term presence in the cereals market has given us the position of thought leaders in the Tanzania cereals industry. As such, we had a unique opportunity to leverage our expertise to generate research around our program objectives that can lead to improved approaches not just for NAFAKA, but for the entire maize and rice value chains, allowing for continued economic growth in Tanzania's agricultural sector.

As a program that operates in 5 different regions of Tanzania, our staff is permanently occupied with trips to the field, reporting, and administrative responsibilities. This undermines their capacity to review their learnings and challenges. Consequently, we instituted mandatory meetings, at different levels of the project, to allow staff to pause and reflect on their experiences in the field. In addition, we acknowledge that developing an analytical culture takes time. Therefore, we had to make sure that everyone understood and embraced it across the project. NAFAKA's leadership created an environment that offers staff a safe space for continuous learning and improvement. In addition, we work hard to foster more and better relationships and networking among different units of the project through stronger internal collaboration.

However, this vision would not materialize if senior management simply imposed tasks to the staff without truly embracing the transition. We quickly realized that, to successfully make this happen, we needed a more inclusive approach beginning with junior-level staff. To cultivate the strong participative culture we were aiming for, change needed to come from the roots of the organization. The CLA framework was the perfect partner to walk us through this process.

3. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

In 2017, NAFKA began using research as part of a larger effort to develop an analytical culture that strengthens evidence-based design and ongoing adaptations. As a project, we took a set of steps to make sure the changes were presented in a digestible matter to ensure its impact. For example, as we began to include more research-focused discussions during quarterly meetings, our first step was to institute monthly regional meetings and expand on the use of our Timu NAFKA (“Team NAFKA” in Swahili) WhatsApp group to share key research findings in real time. For the monthly meetings, regional coordinators facilitate discussions that allowed field staff to take a step back and reflect on their own ideas about improving project interventions based on their observations. For instance, one research question set out to confirm if demonstration plots were truly shifting purchasing behaviors towards improved inputs. Another explored the most effective communication strategies to address barriers to household consumption of fortified maize in order to inform launching a new intervention stream.

This new and continuous process of pausing and reflecting coupled with the increased relationship and network among our staff gave them more confidence to generate testable hypotheses and awaken their curiosity. Recognizing the impact and amendments made to the program, based on the aforementioned research activities, boosted our staff’s interest and henceforth internal collaboration efforts. Therefore, senior staff decided to include junior staff, whose skillsets require less analytics (gender, farmer association management, data entry, agronomy, etc.), in the planning and execution of the studies. Allowing our staff to be an active part of the entire research process helped them to develop new skillsets, giving them a different perspective of the learning process as well as a sense of ownership for the projects. NAFKA also brought, for two consecutive years, technical research specialists who were able to work directly with the both junior- and senior-level staff.

The next step was to transition our CLA presentations in every quarterly meeting to focus on how to use our research to improve interventions. This was a good opportunity to present the progress we have made with the research studies and show results. Feedback was encouraging; staff were empowered to see how their thought process had been translated into tangible results and they were now eager to participate in the adaptive management process and be part of the decision-making journey to act on the technical evidence collected.

Using the momentum to further ingrain CLA into NAFKA’s day to day structure we continued building off of the two “CLA summits” initiated in year one which come before and after the annual report. With the prior research completed successfully, the program continued using the mantra of “all questions are good questions,” emphasizing that these meetings are designed to foster a safe-space environment where everyone can feel confident to share failures and mistakes so that everyone can learn. In addition, we continued to allocate time to discussing the potential learning questions and prioritizing themes that the program would address in the upcoming year. This was a good opportunity for everyone to showcase the work done in the regional and component meetings. The result was a filtered set of questions that would be incorporated into our learning agenda.

The last step we took was to ensure that all staff share their use of the research in program interventions through WhatsApp, that senior staff share findings at quarterly meetings, and then use the annual meeting to reflect on the entire process through sharing that year’s final learning agenda before beginning the process again for the upcoming year.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

The inclusion of the CLA pause and reflect approach to work planning has allowed staff a longer timeline for strategic thinking regarding what further information is needed for their key program interventions. These sessions resulted in the inclusion of staff members from different departments of the project to work on studies with a scope that expands their skillset while providing an opportunity to better understand beneficiary behaviors. For example, M&E data entry staff were able to get to know the farmers whose data they are inputting, retain a better understanding of the program's impact, and work in interdisciplinary teams. With staff having different backgrounds, these interactions enhanced teamwork, spirit, and team culture while strengthening the commitment to learning from each other.

A survey of the staff conducted after their participation in the research studies showed that 75% of staff had a different perspective about research activities, as well as:

- Increased awareness of what can be achieved through research and as a result, staff plan to suggest more research questions relevant to their area of work;
- Clearer understanding of the objectives and the importance of the project research activities;
- Higher level of engagement with the project.

Additionally, there are more requests for NAFKA staff to participate in conferences, implementer collaboration activities, and government councils. In the past year, NAFKA's research and programmatic work continues to be recognized by various rice and maize value chain actors which continues to increase our staff's external collaboration including:

- Membership appointment on Government of Tanzania's nutrition policy council;
- Lead coordinator appointment on regional commodity trade and commodity compliance issues;
- Lead coordinator appointment on cross-collaboration with other USAID Economic Growth partners.

5. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

We have greatly benefited from these strategies to generate evidence and to use the insights to make informed decisions. We have been working on 5 research projects; select findings include:

- a) Barrier Analysis (BA) and behavior change communication (BCC) research on how to introduce the consumption of fortified maize. Findings informed NAFKA's decision to use SMS messaging to target "household influencers" and perform sensitization launches. Findings shifted focus from leaflets and radio messaging redirecting project funds to utilizing our database to SMS messages to female heads of households and working with government officials for launches. This intervention is ongoing, but to date NAFKA has been able to influence local government authorities to purchase fortified maize flour for their school feeding programs.
- b) Demonstration plots lead to an 8% increase in farmers procuring improved inputs; research found that farmers are, on average, 30% more likely to purchase improved inputs if they can access the technology. Therefore, through our last-mile market access and demonstration plot trainings our approach can lead to an estimated 38% increase in adopting improved technology. This research allowed NAFKA to leverage a 15% increase in seeds provided from agricultural input companies during the 2018/2019 planting season increasing the supply of quality inputs to NAFKA's last mile input suppliers.
- c) Farmers are recording in journals how they use their time throughout the cropping season. To date, results show that women bear a higher work burden but lack financial control. However, women who are part of our producer organizations (POs) and participate on NAFKA's trainings are reporting they have more power in household financial decision-making. Therefore, we are working on increasing women's participations in POs.

Two other ongoing projects are: a social network analysis to understand value chain relationships; and a farmer willingness-to-pay study on extension services.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

Several factors enabled the effective integration of CLA in NAFKA. NAFKA's leadership created an environment that offers internal collaboration for continuous learning and improvement. ACIDI/VOCA supported field level practice with an internal "CLA Playbook" with tips, examples, and resources to help project teams operationalize CLA, and launched a CLA Community of Practice newsletter as a way to exchange and share resources across ACIDI/VOCA's projects. Our donor, USAID Tanzania, strongly supported the approach through conducting several CLA training and meetings. Our staff have led segments of these trainings which have been a great source of sharing and learning. Finally, the USAID Learning Lab provides inspirational resources that enhance our staff's skills and knowledge base.

A key part of conducting research and generating learning questions is critical thinking. At times, we found ourselves in meetings in which staff were not sharing their insights, perhaps out of fear of embarrassment in front of other staff. Another obstacle we faced is that research-based findings (using t-tests and/or regressions) require time for results to be presented in a digestible manner. These challenges further highlight the importance of the pause and reflect aspect, internal collaboration, scenario planning, and the use of the WhatsApp group chats that allow for an inclusive atmosphere so that our work is not lost in translation. Moreover, in April, NAFKA will begin releasing thematic 1-page documents that will highlight how our research, implementation and CLA work are being used to support our program participants.

The CLA approach requires one to be open-minded and understand that adaptation is driven by results and learning rather than a static plan. We need to be observant enough to identify the country's agricultural trends and issues that might also inform changes that we need to make. In addition, collaborative efforts are needed to engage all key stakeholders in the analysis of program progress, to evaluate results, and to share the evidence that will lead to improvement of our work.

7. Did your CLA approach contribute to self-reliance? If so, how?

The following examples are other activities that, through CLA, have been able to improve our program's ability to deliver interventions that will have sustainable impacts.

a. Last Mile Retailers: Through our CLA approach we have managed and adapted our approach to working with our network of rural-based extension service providers (i.e., last-mile input suppliers and government extension staff) and producer organizations to enhance access to improved agricultural inputs. The capacity strengthening of these stakeholders is an effort to enable them to plan, finance, and implement solutions to solve their challenges and prepare them to expand their service delivery to "last-mile" farmers.

b. Nutrition: NAFKA collaborates with local government authorities to enable millers to produce fortified maize flour and to combat micronutrient deficiencies and chronic malnutrition in Tanzania. NAFKA has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with four regional administrations to engage in fortification and nutrition trainings and sensitization campaigns to community members to change their behavior towards the consumption of fortified food. The support from government to collaborate with millers to produce fortified flour is contributing to addressing malnutrition. Furthermore, NAFKA continues to support the country's progress to reduce malnutrition through using SMS to increase awareness about consumption, through establishing contracts for school feeding programs, and by linking to community health workers to sell fortified maize flour.

c. Finance: NAFKA has enhanced access to finance opportunities for agricultural loans to farmers, agro-dealers, producer associations and millers through financial institutions. Collaborating with various local organizations, NAFKA has facilitated several farmers and community groups to access loans and establish direct relationships with local financial institutions which has strengthened local entrepreneurship and business growth, which support progress towards self-reliance of the receiving organizations.