Fostering Reflective Practice in Complex Development Programming: Zambia's Mawa Project

Guy Sharrock, Tom Archibald, Jane Buckley, Emily Burrows, and Jenny Haddle, Catholic Relief Services

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

This case study is concerned with the Feed the Future Zambia Mawa Project in the Eastern Province. Mawa is led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in partnership with Caritas Chipata, Golden Valley Agricultural Research Trust, University Research Company, and Women for Change. It aims to deliver "solutions" to resource-poor smallholder households that will achieve significant impact at scale in a cost-effective manner. Mawa's package of interventions is designed to ease very vulnerable farmers, particularly women, into experimenting with, and later adopting, new improved technologies and practices for diversified and intensified production.

The project creates a safe space for them to develop the skills to trial new technologies that will prepare them for engagement with markets and support their progression out of poverty. Mawa also offers nutritional assessment, counseling, and support to targeted households, focusing on the critical "window of opportunity" from pregnancy through the age of 2.

From the outset, the project's Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) system has advocated an ethos and approach that encourages individual and organizational learning to support reflective practice and decision-making.[1] This case will describe how evaluative thinking (ET) can be a foundational competency in support of CLA (e.g., USAID, 2014). ET is critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation (or MEAL), motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence. It involves "identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and making informed decisions in preparation for action." (Buckley et al., 2015: 4)

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

---

[1] The MEAL system was developed using the SMILER approach that, for example, espouses "learning to action discussions" (Hahn and Sharrock, 2010).

The view that challenges to development are complex, unpredictable, and ultimately uncontrollable is now gaining ground (e.g., Snowden and Boone, 2007; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008; Ramalingam, 2013). Effective programming by governments, nongovernmental organizations, and international agencies requires a reconfiguration of development thinking; there appears to be a paradigm shift taking place in the aid sector away from a predominantly linear-based model of change to one that is more dynamic, reflective, and responsive.

Since 2012, USAID has been adapting its policies, making clear its desire to become a more effective learning organization whose interventions adapt and respond to new learning and changing circumstances (USAID, 2012a). In conjunction with its work at the policy level, the agency has posted a Program Cycle Learning Guide (USAID, 2012b) in which the vision of CLA is proposed and explained.

CRS is continually striving to become a "high performing, dynamic learning organization." (Bothwell, 2008: 3) As part of MEAL, learning is now a "core competency" (Catholic Relief Services, 2013: 15) under CRS' current agency strategy (Sharrock et al., 2015). The agency recognizes that its development (and humanitarian) projects—at least important elements of them—more often than not operate in a "complicated" or "complex" domain,[2] and that the "direction of travel" appears to be away from a heavy reliance on planning and ex-ante analysis and more toward monitoring, learning, and adaptation (Jones, 2011; Befani, Ramalingam and Stern, 2015).

CRS' approach to monitoring is typically referred to as performance monitoring, "a continuous process of collecting and analyzing data to compare how well a project is being implemented against expected results" (Kusek and Rist, 2004: 227). A challenge with this approach arises when there are unexpected outcomes (e.g., the recent Mawa monitoring and evaluation finding that the conservation agriculture program is not meeting its relevant progress targets). It is important for project staff to employ ET skills to understand what may have caused such a "surprise" (Guijt, 2008) to prompt discussions about adaptive response options. Brookfield writes, "action may be the point of critical thinking, but it will only be informed if it springs from a good understanding of a situation." (2012: 89) The purpose of ET is to reduce the risks associated with decision-making in conditions of imperfect information. Managers may encourage further inquiry or decide that the information is already "good enough" to adapt planned interventions.

Although Mawa project managers are implementing a MEAL system that is seeking to respond to the CLA agenda, this demands greater attention be given to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to support adaptive management and, in support, "complexity-aware monitoring." (USAID, 2013) In short, what is required is to strengthen project staff capacity to engage in more reflective practice involving *inter alia* the application of evaluative thinking to data, findings, conclusions, lessons, and analyses, and with sharing experiences and observations.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

Patton writes, "embedded evaluative thinking creates lasting impact" (2013: 1); our hunch is to agree. Through working with project staff, the Mawa trial initiative seeks to strengthen their capacities in ET and embed ET into their everyday work routines.

Mawa's approach to ET includes three key components:

1. **Capacity-strengthening training and ongoing technical assistance**, including:
   a. Level 1 training aimed at community-based project staff
   b. Level 2 training to deepen understandings and practice for those who attended an ET workshop in 2014
   c. Level 3 training to raise ET awareness and support among CRS senior managers

---

[2] See the YouTube description of the "Cynefin framework" (Snowden, 2010) for an introduction to "complicated" and "complex" domains.

d.   Ongoing assistance to project staff

2.   **Information dissemination, advocacy, and influence** via conference and other presentations to the wider MEAL community.

3.   **Evaluation of the ET initiative**, including the collection of baseline data on indicators of ET and other elements of evaluation capacity. Process-oriented data are also collected.

Guided by adult education theories and by established principles for promoting ET (Buckley et al., 2015) and in collaboration with Virginia Tech and Cornell University,[3] Mawa has hosted two rounds of three- or five-day training events. Workshop participants included managers, administrators, frontline personnel, MEAL staff, and representatives of partner organizations. The goal of the workshops was to foster continuous reflection and learning to increase the relevance and sustainability of CRS programs. The specific objectives of the workshops varied but were generally aimed to help project staff learn about ET, practice ET skills and behaviors, connect ET to their daily professional MEAL practices, and prepare to apply ET in their context. To meet these aims, a series of activities focused on identifying and addressing assumptions formed the centerpiece of the workshops.

An important workshop design consideration was ensuring a safe environment for potentially contentious conversations—not simply "chatting comfortably and letting the conversation flow whichever way chance takes it" (Brookfield, 2012: 59)—in the process of uncovering assumptions. Participants learned about and then brainstormed various types of assumptions, focusing on those categorized as "paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal" (Nkwake, 2013: 84). They analyzed fictitious scenarios to practice identifying assumptions, identified a simple inquiry to check those assumptions, and then thought of plausible alternative explanations lurking behind those assumptions (Brookfield, 2012). They practiced using "conversational role" activities to uncover colleagues' assumptions during staff meetings (e.g., de Bono, 2010). They engaged in stakeholder analysis and role-playing to practice taking multiple perspectives on assumptions.

A significant portion of the time—once participants gained familiarity and comfort with working with assumptions—was dedicated to helping each group expose assumptions about their own programs through the creation of schematic diagrams of program logic, in the form of Theory of Change (ToC) models (Trochim et al., 2012). These models help to unveil previously tacit and unspoken assumptions in a manner that is transparent, participatory, and geared to more informed decision-making.
A structured peer review activity, whereby colleagues identified and deliberated over the assumptions that the ToC models had uncovered, provided a revelatory moment in the workshop. Through this activity, participants demonstrated not only their mastery in identifying buried assumptions in program logic, but also their deftness in offering (and receiving without defensiveness) respectful critical feedback on their peers' models and assumptions.

The bullet points below illustrate the kinds of questions project staff surfaced from current M&E data regarding CA:[4]

- *Causal assumption:* To what extent are our interventions causing the changes in CA we observe?
- *Prescriptive assumption:* Should we be expecting families to apply CA to a significant portion of their landholding?
- *Paradigmatic assumption:* Is CA really the best agronomic option for families in the Eastern Province?

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

[3] Specifically at the Cornell Office for Research in Evaluation (CORE).
[4] The first two assumption categories are analogous to the concept of "single-loop" and "double-loop" learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978), and the third to the later concept of "triple-loop" learning. (See http://infed.org/mobi/chris-argyris-theories-of-action-double-loop-learning-and-organizational-learning/)

It is difficult to envisage that a concept such as ET would have gained as much traction it has with Mawa, albeit on a pilot basis, had CRS not elevated learning to the status of an agency core competency. The greater profile for learning has been accompanied by a recognition among agency senior managers of the need to "push the envelope" regarding existing practices,[5] and an encouragement of "safe-fail probes" (Cognitive Edge, 2015) supported by "innovation funding." These are small, bounded experiments (e.g., ET capacity building or trialing cover cropping in response to low CA uptake) that operationalize a new idea in small and thereby risk-minimizing ways, "the intent of which is to approach issues in small, contained ways to allow emergent possibilities to become more visible" (Cognitive Edge, 2015).

Supportive leadership on the ground has been essential.[6] This is manifested through Mawa senior managers' willingness to trial the ET concept, a readiness not only to "give it a go" but also to actively participate and then later model the kind of ET "culture" and learning values that are espoused (e.g., through communiqués and practices that reinforce the importance and utility of ET). Another aspect of supportive leadership, the benefits of which have emerged over time, has been the ability of Mawa leaders to nurture positive relationships with key stakeholders. From the outset these mutually trusting relationships have enabled an overarching approach to the MEAL system that has accommodated space and resources to pilot ET and learning approaches.[7] This is no small achievement in an environment that is often so results- and target-driven that initiatives to introduce a culture of reflective practice can all too easily be crowded out.

Project staff at all levels in the hierarchy express pride in their work, and their hard work and enthusiasm to ET workshop tasks provided ample confirmation. In comments voiced during different ET events, it seems clear that most, if not all, field-based development practitioners are keen to find ways to incorporate ET into their "everyday activities." This desire is reflected in their aspiration to be entrusted with more challenging work, and to have opportunities to be more involved in programming decisions pertaining to their area of project operation in which their perspectives and experiences are valued.

The work on ET that CRS has introduced has benefited greatly from the collaboration with individuals at Virginia Tech and CORE. Design and planning discussions with these colleagues have brought academic insights to the ET topic itself (e.g., Buckley et al., 2015), oversight of the learning/research plan so that a future decision can be made concerning the relative merits of scaling up the initial ET safe-fail pilot, and the benefit of many years of facilitation experience gained through introducing ET to U.S. National Science Foundation employees. Moreover, the ET work with Mawa has benefitted from access to CORE's Systems Evaluation Protocol publication (Trochim et al., 2012) and to its accompanying Netway software which is now freely available.[8]

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

Our objectives for collecting data are: (1) to assess the efficacy of our ET facilitation approach, (2) to generate new knowledge about how ET intersects with existing CRS MEAL frameworks, and (3) to elucidate recommendations for how ET can contribute to CRS and USAID CLA initiatives.

We have collected quantitative and qualitative data via a number of instruments, such as (1) an ET scale which is undergoing validity and reliability testing[9] and a workshop feedback survey; (2) an ET learning-to-action plan template; (3) post workshop interviews; (4) documentary evidence (including ToC diagrams); (5) mid-year follow-up focus groups; and (6) document review.

Although analysis of these data is ongoing, initial results suggest that participants (1) perceived value in the ET workshops, (2) made substantive positive changes in their level of knowledge about ET during the workshops, (3)

---

[5] For example, work in support of CRS' new MEAL policies and procedures to establish and sustain a "CRS way of doing MEAL."

[6] This aligns well with Patton's views on leadership (2013: 2).

[7] See Jagosh et al. (2015: 1) on "the central importance of developing and strengthening partnership synergy through trust."

[8] Retrieved from http://www.evaluationnetway.com.

[9] J. McIntosh, personal communication, June 1, 2015.

demonstrated increasingly complex ET skills and behaviors, and (4) articulated intentions to instill ET into their daily practice as educators. Important additional M&E findings include:

1. **Assumptions work resonates with practitioners**. From across all of our data sources, and from workshop participants representing all levels of the project hierarchy, people demonstrated keen interest in identifying and critically reflecting on the assumptions in their program logic.

2. **ET shows promise for working with assumptions for adaptive management**. Involving all levels of staff, from frontline field staff through senior management, seems to be one specific way to operationalize the potential benefits of ET for working with assumptions.

3. **Barriers to fostering a culture of ET must be addressed**. We solicited participant perspectives on what barriers might exist that could prevent a culture of ET from taking hold within their project or organization. Some barriers were particular to only one category of participant, while others were universal across all categories.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Lesson 1: Staff Already Possess the Ability to Practice ET.
When presented with a scenario concerning community members' uptake of hand washing advice, Mawa frontline staff found it easy to generate a list of more than 10 reasons that might explain the varied response. While all staff can already "do" ET, the potential benefits of encouraging greater intentionality in individual and organizational learning suggests there remains considerable scope for "sharpening capacities that are too often left unattended." (Lederach at al., 2007: 4)

Lesson 2: ET Requires a Mindset that Embraces Unpredictability and Uncertainty.[10]
Practical ToC modeling (see picture, right) helped Mawa staff "demystify" the underlying importance of "theory"; the subsequent learning questions (to understand the low uptake of CA) then helped to "remystify"[11] current practice in the search for solution options (e.g., cover cropping to bolster CA uptake).

Lesson 3: ET Can Inspire the Emergence of Demand-Led Adaptive Practices.
Mawa staff engagement in evidence-based learning processes helped surface possible adaptations to existing project messaging, including (1) revising statements of expected results (e.g., targets for CA) and (2) modifying approaches to achieve strategic objectives (e.g., cover cropping).

Our work hints strongly at the prospect of ET serving as a conduit for frontline staff and beneficiary involvement in development processes.

Lesson 4: A Whole-System Response Is Required to Ensure "Complexity-Aware Development."
Development work presents practitioners with a Sisyphean challenge: to foster in short order positive social transformation in a context of endemic unpredictability. ET involves a series of "brain-teasing"[12] puzzles, the antithesis of unthinking activity.

---

[10] This brings to mind the old quip, "I used to be uncertain, but now I'm not so sure." ET is in no way an excuse for inaction. In fact, quite the opposite is true: We are suggesting that an ET mindset reflecting more modesty and openness to learning and, thus, less dogmatism will liberate opportunities for adapted solutions to emerge.
[11]That is, reinvigorate. The concepts of "demystifying theory" and "remystifying practice" come from Lederach et al. (2007: 3-4), an excellent and largely underrated publication.
[12] The adjective used by a number of participants at the recent ET workshop, Chipata, Zambia. August 10-12, 2015.

Mawa staff appreciated but also felt challenged by this new mindset. Staff need to find ways to integrate ET into existing tasks; it will take time and practice to embed it into the "fabric of the organization" (King, 2009); however, this must not detract from recognizing its foundational importance.

Is there any other critical information you would like to share?

A summary of completed and future ET activities are summarized in Table 1 on the next page.

We believe that enabling field practitioners to discover the assumptions that guide their thinking and actions, and to check their accuracy by exploring other perspectives and information sources, will help to facilitate the emergence of more informed and inclusive project management decisions and practices.

Mawa Health Promoter, Naomi Tembo, explains the health and nutrition ToC.

The challenge is agreeing a vision for how the organization should look and sound when ET is properly installed in agency systems, and then managing the necessary transition. Mawa staff are keen to contribute to project decisions; they are unequivocal about it being "time to listen" (Anderson et al., 2012), not only to community members but, crucially, the voices of field-based staff. It is hard to overstate the potential value of strengthening their ET capacity. CRS must nurture and support "reflective practitioners who are able and willing to challenge continuously their own assumptions and the assumptions of their colleagues in a constructive way" (Britton, 1998).

We hope that in time all project staff—from frontline to head office—will be defined not merely as "aid deliverers" but more valuably as "reflective practitioners" or "knowledge workers" who are encouraged to contribute to project decisions. This will present them with a felicitous capacity building opportunity. Not only that, if investment in ET is sustained, this will ultimately deliver benefits to the quality of CRS programming and in due course it should be propitious for those communities and individuals the agency seeks to serve.

Table 1: Strengthening Evaluative Thinking Capacity in CRS, FY2014-16

Date	CRS Engagement in Evaluative Thinking Activities
Dec 2013	InterAction/CLEAR Practitioner Workshop on Evaluative Thinking and Evaluation Use attended by three CRS staff. A case study from CRS Ethiopia was presented (Griñó *et al.*, 2014.
Jun 2014	ET workshop for staff and partners in CRS Ethiopia
Aug 2014	ET workshop for staff and partners in Mawa project, CRS Zambia
Sep 2014	ET approaches and techniques used in mid-term evaluation of CRS Tanzania's *Soya ni Pesa* project
Oct 2014	ET introduced to CRS MEAL Summit participants
Nov 2014	ET approaches and techniques used to review mid-term evaluation results and feedback on the Food for Education design, CRS Honduras Published note for American Evaluation Association's *aea365* weblog retrievable here.
Dec 2014	ET taught and used in the Mawa project's Quarterly Learning Meeting, CRS Zambia to develop project learning agenda
Feb 2015	Host CRS-wide webinar to raise awareness of nascent ET initiative
Mar 2015	Presentation at the 'M&E for Responsible Innovation' conference, Wageningen, The Netherlands
Apr 2015	Presentation to Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education conference, Wageningen, The Netherlands
May 2015	ET incorporated in process to design a learning agenda for CRS Philippines
Jun 2015	ET incorporated in process to design core metrics and a learning agenda for CRS Agricultural Livelihoods Program ET presentation at Regional MEAL Meeting, Southern Africa Regional Office
Jul 2015	Round 2 workshop for Round 1 participants, and leadership awareness training, CRS Ethiopia

Aug 2015	Round 2 workshop for Round 1 participants, field staff workshop, and leadership awareness training, CRS Zambia ET incorporated in process to design a learning agenda for CRS Honduras
Future Commitments	
Nov 2015	Presentation at American Evaluation Association Conference, Chicago.
Jan 2016	Round 1 workshop for CRS Malawi's UBALE staff funded by USAID/FFP, plus staff from two other DFAPs (Burundi and Madagascar) that have recently commenced operations
Mar 2016	Quoted in CRS Mali's current DFAP proposal, "ET workshops will introduce (Year 1) and reinforce (Year 2) critical thinking practices and capacity in reading results, drawing conclusions, planning for action and thoughtful reporting." CRS Mali,
Jul 2016	Round 3 workshop for Round 1 participants, and leadership awareness training, CRS Ethiopia
Aug 2016	Round 3 workshop for Round 1 participants, field staff workshop, and leadership awareness training, CRS Zambia

References

Anderson, M. B., Brown, D. and Jean, I. (2012). *Time to listen: Hearing people on the receiving end of international aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. Retrieved from http://www.cdacollaborative.org/media/60478/Time-to-Listen-Book.pdf.

Argyris, C., and Schön, D. (1978). *Organization learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Befani, B., Ramalingam, B. and Stern, E. (2015). 'Introduction – Towards Systemic Approaches to Evaluation and Impact'. *IDS Bulletin*, Volume 46 Number 1. Brighton, Sussex.

Bothwell, C. (2008). *CRS as a High Performing, Dynamic Learning Organization*. Discussion paper, version 1.4. Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore.

Britton, B. (1998). 'The Learning NGO'. *INTRAC Occasional Paper Series*, No. 17. INTRAC, Oxford.

Brookfield, S. D. (2012). *Teaching for Critical Thinking. Tools and techniques to help students question their assumptions*. Jossey-Bass, CA.

Buckley, J., Archibald, T., Hargraves, M. and Trochim, W. (2015). 'Defining and Teaching Evaluative Thinking: Insights from Research on Critical Thinking'. *American Journal of Evaluation*. December.

Catholic Relief Services. (2013). *From Hope to Harvest. Agency Strategy 2014-2018*. Baltimore. Retrieved from: http://www.crs.org/agency-strategy/pdf/CRS-Agency-Strategy-download.pdf

Cognitive Edge. (2015). 'Safe-to-Fail Probes'. Retrieved from: http://cognitive-edge.com/basic-methods/safe-to-fail-probes/

de Bono, E. (2010). *Six Thinking Hats*. London: Penguin.

Guijt, I. (2008). 'Seeking Surprise. Rethinking monitoring for collective learning in rural resource management'. Published PhD Thesis. Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

Hahn, S. and Sharrock, G. (2010). *ProPack III. The CRS Project Package. A Guide to Creating a SMILER M&E System*. Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore. Retrieved from: www.crsprogramquality.org.

Jagosh, J., Bush, P.L., Salsberg, J., Macaulay, A.C., Greenhalgh, T., Wong, G., Cargo, M. Green, L.W., Herbert, C.P. and Pluye, P. (2015). 'A realist evaluation of community-based participatory research: partnership synergy, trust building and related ripple effects'. *BMC[13] Public Health*, Vol. 15, pp. 1-11.

Jones, H. (2011). 'Taking responsibility for complexity'. ODI Working Paper, No. 330. Overseas Development Institute, London.

King, W.R. (ed.) (2009). 'Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning'. *Annals of Information Systems*, 4. Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh.

Kusek, J.Z. and Rist, R.C. (2004). *Ten Steps to a Results-Based Monitoring and Evaluation System*. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

Lederach, J.P., Neufeldt, R. and Culbertson, H. (2007). *Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring and Learning Tool Kit*. Joan B. Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame and Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore.

Nkwake, A. M. (2013). *Working with assumptions in international development program evaluation*. New York: Springer.

Patton, M.Q. (2013). Commentary: Making Evaluation Meaningful and Useful. Minnesota Council on Foundations. Retrieved from: http://www.mcf.org/news/giving-forum/making-evaluation-meaningful

Ramalingam, B. (2013). *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

---

[13] BioMedCentral

Ramalingam, B. and Jones, H. with Reba, T. and Young, J. (2008). 'Exploring the science of complexity. Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts'. *ODI Working Paper*, No. 285. Overseas Development Institute, London.

Schwandt, T. A. (2008). 'Educating for intelligent belief in evaluation'. *American Journal of Evaluation*, No. 29 (2), 139-150.

Sharrock, G. O'G., Gottret, V. and Andretta, A. (2015). *Learning with Purpose: Adding Value to Program Impact and Influence at Scale*. Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore.

Snowden, D. J. (2010). *The Cynefin Framework*. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oz366X0-8

Snowden, D. J. and Boone, M. E. (2007). 'A Leaders' Framework for Decision Making'. *Harvard Business Review*. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Trochim, W., Urban, J.B., Hargraves, M., Hebbard, C., Buckley, J., Archibald, T., Johnson M., and Burgermaster, M. (2012). *The Guide to the Systems Evaluation Protocol (v.2.2)*. Ithaca, New York.

USAID. (2014). *Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting in Uganda*. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWm8att7XdM.

USAID. (2013). *Complexity Aware Monitoring*. Discussion Note. Version 2.0. Washington DC.

USAID. (2012a). *ADS Chapter 200: Introduction to Programming Policy*. Washington DC.

USAID. (2012b). *Program Cycle Learning Guide: DRAFT for comment*. Washington DC. Retrieved from: https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/usaid-program-cycle-learning-guide-0