CASE STUDY

Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting Amid the War in Ukraine

August 2023 | Crispin R. Mbamba, Jennifer Simpson, and Viktoriia Gultai

About

This case study focuses on changes in how the USAID/Ukraine Agriculture Growing Rural Opportunities (AGRO) Activity team manages their relationships with local partners, handles communications, and continues to learn and adjust to maintain progress in project activities in response to instability caused by Russia's war on Ukraine. Collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approaches have helped AGRO adjust to changing conditions while achieving their development goals. Lessons from this context are relevant for other programs that operate in conflict settings and rapidly changing environments.

Introduction

Ukraine has distinguished itself as a global agricultural power in the production and export of staple grains such as wheat, maize (corn), and barley. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ukraine's agricultural exports totaled over $27 billion in 2021 and accounted for 41% of the country's overall exports. David Beasley, the former executive director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP), estimated that 40% of WFP's wheat came from Ukraine.

AGRO is a USAID/Ukraine-funded activity (Chemonics-implemented) that launched in 2019 and will operate through 2026. The activity aims to enhance the economic progress of rural communities that are most in need by:

- Improving the management of the agricultural sector

- Promoting the growth of micro, small, and medium-sized agricultural enterprises (MSMEs) that are productive, modern, and profitable

- Facilitating integration of MSMEs into competitive domestic and international markets

AGRO aims to propel Ukranian agricultural economic growth and development, especially in rural communities. Unfortunately, the activity faced new challenges shortly after its implementation because of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Globally, the unfolding war and the blockade of traditional Ukrainian export routes through Black Sea ports has threatened the food security of hundreds of millions of people in many low-income, grain-importing countries. In Ukraine, agriculture has been a backbone of the economy, generating 20% of the country's gross domestic product (if accounting for upstream and downstream sectors) and more than 40% of total export revenues.

The war has caused major destruction of agricultural equipment, machinery, and storage facilities and disrupted the input supply chain. MSMEs face higher costs and lower availability of critical inputs, specifically fuel, plant protection products (pesticides), veterinary medicines, seeds, fertilizers, spare parts, and

agricultural machinery. Ongoing hostilities with the use of heavy weaponry have contaminated agricultural lands with munitions and unexploded ordnances, posing serious threats to those involved in field agricultural activities. The war has also severely affected rural labor markets, changing agricultural enterprises and rural communities in multiple ways.

Since the onset of the war, AGRO has expanded from an activity focusing on eight regions to a national project that strengthens local systems and keeps agricultural enterprises running.

To allow for greater flexibility in responding to changes in Ukraine's operating environment and to ensure successful activity implementation, AGRO has placed **collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA)** at the center of its planning, implementation, and evaluation practices. Although CLA was part of AGRO's original project design, the need to apply CLA principles expanded following Russia's invasion.

AGRO has a dedicated CLA team that coordinates across staff and partners. The team deals with crosscutting issues, such as adaptive management, monitoring and evaluation, gender equality and social inclusion, and communications. Within the CLA team, three communications specialists reinforce each of the three technical teams. The specialists serve as an information bridge between the technical teams and the CLA team, collecting and disseminating information to their respective teams. The CLA team ensures that staff and stakeholders stay informed and engaged, regardless of the circumstances, so that AGRO can effectively navigate the complexities of the war-affected operating environment. AGRO has implemented and learned from key CLA strategies, detailed below, that permit the activity to adjust and implement with their partners, the communities they work with, and their own staff.

Implementing CLA Amid War

Using a synthesis of project reports and one-on-one interviews with AGRO staff, we have identified three themes within AGRO's CLA approach: a **resilient partnership strategy; enhanced, multitiered communication for faster response; and taking action with the "best available" information**. We provide further details on the methods for this case study at the end of the report.

Theme 1: Resilient Partnership Strategy

With the Vikara Institute,[1] AGRO has adopted the Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis (EMMA) methodology. EMMA is a structured approach used in humanitarian and development contexts to assess local markets during emergency situations through analysis of how market systems are functioning, including the supply, demand, and distribution of essential goods and services.[2] By evaluating market dynamics, vulnerabilities, and potential interventions, EMMA helps organizations make informed decisions about helping affected populations while minimizing market distortions and negative impacts. AGRO has partnered with a local consulting company to provide quarterly assessment updates to keep the team informed about the main market system challenges and adaptations in which they work.

AGRO also relies on multiple feedback loops the team has developed with local actors. Constant communication is crucial in the fast-changing environment — active hostilities and shellings occur daily and the business environment remains unpredictable. As a result, AGRO better understands needs across different regions, considers market trends, and adapts quickly and appropriately.

For example, Russia occupied extensive areas in regions where AGRO operated within the first two weeks of the invasion. Russia also shelled other unoccupied areas with existing project activities. The invasion dramatically changed the operational environment and the security situation for the AGRO team. After the team moved employees to safer locations and ensured their personal safety, the entire team engaged in a week-long exercise. The main objective was to ground truth information and communicate with AGRO's stakeholders, beneficiaries, and one another. The team used a simple Excel chart to collect feedback and circulated a daily situational report within the team and with their USAID agreement officer representative. Based on the information obtained through rapid feedback loops with partners and others on the ground, AGRO's next step was to adapt its work plan to the new realities.

To build reliable partnerships, AGRO has put their partners at the center of their project activities and decision-making. Feedback from the market informs decisions to pause, eliminate, or

---

[1] https://www.vikarainstitute.org/
[2] https://www.emma-toolkit.org/about-emma About EMMA | EMMA Toolkit

continue engaging in any activity. AGRO believes that local market players know their needs and their environments best, and the activity relies on lessons learned from their partners to make critical decisions. This reliance has built a strong bond with partners.

AGRO began labeling partner-reported challenges to project activities as unique cases. With this designation, they recognized the importance of documenting lessons learned and representing challenges as high-priority tasks that could help the team learn and adapt.

Theme 1 Takeaways: A Resilient Partnership Strategy

- Building local partnerships helps AGRO understand market trends and adapt effectively.
- Continuous improvement in market research enhances project effectiveness and responsiveness.
- Establishing rapid feedback loops allows AGRO to collect daily information from partners and stakeholders on the ground and to verify assumptions.
- Including partners in critical decisions establishes trust and enables more effective programming.

"When a colleague in the field is unable to establish a mobile phone connection or is occupied with tasks, we have a process to ensure interconnectivity and avoid reliance on a single individual … Our technical teams work in the field, and they can meet farmers or partners in person. We also have social media platforms, media partners, and email inquiries for our activity."

– Natalia Skurativska, AGRO Communications Manager

Theme 2: Enhanced Multitiered Communication for Faster Response

The AGRO team uses a range of strategies to optimize communication and engagement within the team and with stakeholders: **face-to-face exchanges, digital platforms for sharing data, and near real-time information sharing**. Given the volatile situation in Ukraine, the AGRO team must maintain strong connections with their stakeholders and share timely information as the situation on the ground changes.

Continued face-to-face exchanges

Maintaining face-to-face interactions through the presence of technical teams working in the field allows the team to forge direct and personal connections with farmers and partners, leading to a deeper understanding of their needs and challenges.

By May 2023, the full-scale Russian invasion had displaced one-third of the people living in Ukraine,[3] and the AGRO team had also spread across the country. Despite the challenges, the team

---

[3] https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/

used the circumstances to improve the team's interaction with its target audiences. They met farmers and visited processing enterprises, organized local gatherings with agricultural producers and authorities, and made local field visits to monitor project activities and ensure accountability for the provided assistance. According to AGRO's chief of party, the activity also worked with partner farmers and MSMEs to identify safer areas; move their businesses; and establish new market relations with suppliers, peer businesses, and sales channels in their new locations. Since the war started, AGRO has facilitated relocation of 10 agricultural and food processing MSMEs to safer areas and advised 165 MSMEs wishing to relocate.

This approach also has its challenges. AGRO staff recognize the safety and transportation concerns that arise in Ukraine's volatile environment. Despite these obstacles, the project remains committed to maintaining a physical presence in the field, recognizing the value of in-person interactions in building trust, gathering firsthand insights, and fostering stronger relationships.

Digital platforms for sharing information

AGRO leverages various digital platforms to expand its reach and facilitate communication. Facebook, Telegram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Viber are powerful social media and messaging platforms for disseminating information, engaging with stakeholders, and sharing updates. For example, AGRO's Facebook account[4] has 17,155 followers, and the activity has 3,210 YouTube subscribers.[5] Media partnerships also provide broader visibility and outreach opportunities, allowing the project to amplify its messages and reach wider audiences, especially in locations where a physical presence is not safe or possible.

Email has also been a useful tool for communicating and coordinating with partners and communities. AGRO shares a customized email with partners, stakeholders, and other interested parties so they can contact the project for support and to share information.

Near real-time information sharing

Daily meetings provide a means of real-time information sharing to overcome the challenges of a dynamic and volatile

"We use Facebook and messenger channels like Viber and Telegram to communicate with our target audience and gather feedback. This helps us understand their needs and address any concerns or questions they may have. We can also share success stories and updates. Overall, these communication channels help us stay connected with our target audience and respond to their needs effectively.

– Natalia Skurativska, AGRO Communications Manager

---

[4] https://www.facebook.com/usaid.agro
[5] https://youtube.com/@usaid4662

> "We have a daily meeting where we share information about changes in the country or sector and partner-related changes and this allows us to prepare differently everyday ... Some of our colleagues are not working from Ukraine, so these meetings not only help us to plan for the day, but also puts the whole team at the same level."
>
> *– Oleksandr Prykhodko, AGRO Agricultural Markets Development Manager*

environment and reinforce feedback loops with local actors (discussed above) as well as to ensure coordination across AGRO staff, regardless of their location, on-site or out of country. Using these tools, the team shares updates on partner-related developments and changes in the country and sector. The daily 15-minute morning meetings provide a structured mechanism for maintaining a strong connection with stakeholders, facilitating effective decision-making, risk mitigation, and stakeholder engagement throughout the project.

Information sharing is critical, but the team also "needs to spend the little time they have on program activities ... because that's what the priority is," cautioned Vladyslav Karpenko, the AGRO productivity and market access team lead. AGRO staff acknowledge that organizing formal training sessions for newly recruited team members is often time-constrained. To facilitate learning and decision-making while also carrying out project activities, the activity established peer-to-peer learning, paring new recruits with experienced CLA specialists, accelerating immediate on-the-job learning. Instead of new recruits spending several weeks in training, they receive a holistic blend of learning opportunities while working on the job.

Theme 2 Takeaways: Enhanced Multitiered Communication for Faster Response

- Maintaining face-to-face exchanges fosters connection and engagement with stakeholders.
- Using digital platforms and diversified communication processes ensures broader reach, effective collaboration, and information dissemination.
- Holding daily 15-minute morning meetings provides fast information sharing and prompt adaptation and helps all team members stay equally informed regardless of location.

Theme 3: Taking Action with the "Best Available" Information

The volatile environment in Ukraine demands programmatic adaptations to navigate the challenges and uncertainties. With limited access to information and the ever-changing situation, the activity must overcome the problem of information access while meeting activity goals in the field. Departing from traditional research and study methods when information is scarce, the AGRO team has relied on their on-the-ground partners and other feedback loops to make important decisions.

"You depend on your on-the-ground partners for bits of information. At times, you might even proceed despite lacking information and experiment along the way, which is a crucial aspect of adaptation. We have experienced this quite a bit."

– Kseniya Sydorkina, AGRO Chief of Party

This **rapid, iterative approach** involves implementing interventions or efforts based on signals from AGRO's partners, rather than waiting for the results of a pilot intervention. Then, when feasible, the team follows up with more comprehensive evidence gathering and analysis.

In most cases, the subsequent in-depth analysis has confirmed what the team had already learned through their on-the-ground observations and notes. In other cases, actions were not as successful. The AGRO team embraced this as a part of learning. Rather than focusing solely on success stories, they also document their challenges, recognizing that they generate new ideas through the proper handling of failures.

Takeaways for Theme 3: Taking Action with the "Best Available" Information

- Fast-changing environments may require a rapid, iterative approach based on the "best available" information for decision-making.
- Documenting challenges and lessons learned as cases that need special attention drives continual improvement and informs future project implementation for better outcomes.

Action-Oriented Recommendations

Lessons from AGRO's experience offer valuable insights for international development organizations navigating complex and uncertain environments. For development programs, whether they are building resilient partnerships, fostering a culture of continuous learning, improving communication channels, or providing holistic support, the following recommendations offer practical strategies to maximize their impact.

- **Strengthen pre-existing partnerships**. The team attributes AGRO's success in navigating challenging market conditions during the war to a reliance on strong partnerships formed prior to the invasion. Project teams that prioritize and invest in building robust partnerships early on and before crises occur can lean on these relationships for invaluable insights and support during uncertain times.

- **Embrace organizational peer-to-peer learning**. In situations where comprehensive formal training sessions are not feasible due to time constraints, adopting a peer-to-peer learning culture can be highly effective. Pairing new recruits

"Clearly documenting challenges as unique cases allows the team to prioritize them, mitigate the risks that caused the challenges, and to prepare for unforeseen challenges in the future,"

– Natalia Skurativska, AGRO Communications Manager

"It's essential to acknowledge not only the successes but also the areas that need improvement. Sharing what doesn't work and what could be done better is equally significant. Don't shy away from discussing challenges and failures, as learning from them is vital for growth and progress."

– Oleksandr Prykhodko, AGRO Agricultural Markets Development Manager

with experienced specialists allows for on-the-job learning and knowledge transfer, ensuring that work continues while fostering continuous learning and progress in international development projects.

- **Document lessons as actionable cases.** Rather than simply documenting lessons learned, projects should designate challenging situations as cases that require special attention. This approach ensures that the team treats valuable insights seriously and applies them to future projects, leading to more effective implementation and the achievement of outcomes. This practice also accommodates the unpredictable nature of the war's impact on daily operations. For example, when AGRO realized that Ukrainian grain would be more exportable if processing added enrichment with folic acid and iron, the activity developed a sub-award program to co-invest with Ukrainian processors to produce fortified flour. If successful, this program would involve additional processing of up to 230,000 tons of wheat and producing up to 180,000 tons of flour. The 10-15 milling enterprises that the activity will select for installation of the processing equipment will collaborate with the WFP to circumvent Black Sea route blockages and independently enter the markets of over 80 country participants of the Food Fortification Initiative, which permits only fortified flour for import.

- **Establish timely and transparent communication channels.** AGRO's daily morning meetings served as a crucial mechanism for real-time information sharing, enabling prompt responses to emerging challenges. This lesson highlights the importance of establishing structured communication channels that facilitate timely updates, enhance transparency, and foster stakeholder engagement. Teams should maintain such meetings even in stable environments to ensure effective communication, decision-making, and risk mitigation.

Conclusions

AGRO's CLA adaptations have helped the project keep activities running despite the uncertainties of the war. By leveraging the resilience of existing partnerships before the war, the team stayed abreast of real-time developments in the field. The physical presence of technical team members in project regions increased the team's know-how in relocating farmers and SMEs

to safer regions to continue agricultural activities, and taking timely actions without pre-existing information prevented project activities from stalling. These efforts reinforce the findings of a USAID-funded literature review by Dexis Consulting Group,[6] which showed that an intentional, systematic, and resourced approach to CLA positively affects development projects. AGRO team member Vladyslav Karpenko cautions that although Ukraine's case offers lessons for international development organizations and professionals, the "socio-cultural uniqueness of every context may call for modified strategies." Hence, the results of this case should not be viewed as axiomatic for all cases. For more content on other CLA activities, check this collaborative learning piece.

Notes on Data Collection

The authors of this case study interviewed five project specialists on the USAID AGRO project in Ukraine to understand the adaptations the team made to their CLA practices since Russia's invasion in February 2022. The five participants included AGRO's chief of party, CLA advisor, communications manager, productivity and market access team lead, and the agricultural markets development manager. Prior to beginning interviews, the authors held a meeting with the project's CLA advisor to introduce the project team to the case study, determine the level of interest, and identify participants.

The authors conducted virtual interviews (via Microsoft Teams) in English using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. One key informant opted to provide written responses because of difficulty with English. The authors chose a virtual data collection instrument as most appropriate because: 1) the situation in Ukraine prevented travel for in-person interviews, and 2) time limitations. The open-ended nature of the interview questions provided room for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions — a technique that deepened the richness of the data.

Using USAID's CLA framework[7] and AGRO's contextualized CLA framework as a guide, the authors analyzed transcript notes from

---

[6] cla_literature_review_update_march_2020_final.pdf (usaidlearninglab.org)
[7] The Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) Framework | USAID | Basic Page | U.S. Agency for International Development

the interviews for patterns and to identify emerging themes. The focus was on identifying responses that highlighted changes in how the team manages their relationships with local partners, the nature of their relationships with partners amid the war, and how they continue to learn and adjust to keep project activities going. After analyzing interview transcripts, the authors grouped emerging patterns into the three key themes presented here.

We are grateful for the time and thoughtfulness of all the respondents, whose insights are valuable and without whom this case study could not be completed.

CONTACT

Founded in 1975, Chemonics is one of the world's leading sustainable development consulting firms for one reason: our people. We are 6,000 experts in more than a hundred countries around the globe, and 90% of us are working in a community we have long called home. We collaborate with communities across the globe to identify and apply innovative, sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges. Follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, and X or visit us at www.chemonics.com.

For questions on this case study, contact jsimpson@chemonics.com.

Cover photo: A beneficiary of USAID AGRO's fertilizer distribution campaign proudly displays his flourishing wheat field. In the background, an operating combine harvester can be seen busily at work. Letkivske village, Vinnytsia oblast, Ukraine. July 2023. *Photo credit:* Valentyn Karminskyi, USAID AGRO Activity