

Learning Brief

Collaborating, Learning and Adapting the PACE Process on the Sowing Futures Program



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Introduction

Global Communities' Sowing Futures program, funded by the John Deere Foundation (JDF), applies Global Communities' Participatory Action for Community Enhancement (PACE) methodology for community development, youth engagement and institutional strengthening in southern Brazil. The program's first phase, which began in late 2014, was implemented in 10 communities in and around Horizontina, Brazil (the location of one of John Deere's factories in the region). The second phase, which began in early 2018, expanded these activities to Indaiatuba and Campinas in Brazil, as well as across the border in Rosario, Argentina.

The PACE methodology is well aligned with USAID's Collaborating, Learning, Adapting (CLA) approach, which is a set of practices to help improve development outcomes through strategic collaboration, intentional learning, regular adaptation and supportive enabling conditions¹. PACE is, at its core, a partnership approach that helps communities identify and engage the **right collaborators**—including government, civil society and private sector actors—to make meaningful improvements while strengthening local capacity for broad-based participatory decision-making. PACE teams rely on **continuous learning** as they engage communities and deepen their understanding of local context. The importance of a context-appropriate approach makes **flexibility** a defining feature of PACE, which is designed to allow program teams in a wide range of community settings to effectively promote participatory development processes.

Sowing Futures provides a strong example of how PACE programs build CLA principles, such as continuous learning, activity adaptation and inclusive partnership into program implementation. This paper provides a brief discussion of how the Sowing Futures team has used CLA practices to ensure that key elements of the PACE methodology suit the specific needs and assets of target communities and incorporate and adapt to learning throughout the program cycle.

¹ USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit, *Understanding CLA*. <https://usaidlearninglab.org/node/14633>

Overview: CLA and the PACE Methodology

Global Communities defines PACE as “a dynamic process of building the capacity of local communities to mobilize resources and address self-determined priority needs through participatory democratic practices.” While PACE is intentionally designed to be adaptable to a variety of contexts, it is, at base, defined by eight key elements that promote five core values essential to participatory development:

Table 1: Elements and Core Values of PACE

Key Elements of PACE	Core Values of PACE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Development Committees• Community Meetings• Resource Mobilization• Sustainability• Confidence Building• Action Planning• Project Cycle• Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participation• Transparency• Empowerment• Accountability• Ownership

USAID’s CLA toolkit² includes a handful of basic questions practitioners should consider in order to integrate CLA into their programs. The table below discusses how Global Communities’ overall PACE methodology addresses these questions.



² USAID Learning Lab, CLA Toolkit, *Understanding CLA*. <https://usaidlearninglab.org/node/14633>

Table 2: How the PACE Methodology Supports CLA

USAID’s CLA Considerations for Practitioners	How PACE Methodology Supports CLA
<p>COLLABORATING Are we collaborating with the right partners at the right time to promote synergy over stove piping?</p>	<p>Context Analysis and Community Assessments are two critical elements of all PACE programs, which include in-depth efforts to understand both the broad context of each program and the specific assets and priorities of each community.</p> <p>Stakeholder Analyses are undertaken in all programs (and often for every specific project proposed in target communities), and are a critical step for identifying the right collaborators for each community to allow Global Communities to make visible progress addressing communities’ priorities.</p>
<p>LEARNING Are we asking the most important questions and finding answers that are relevant to decision making?</p>	<p>Successful PACE programs must incorporate continuous learning regarding local context, needs and capacities into the process of facilitating the participatory development process to ensure that sustainable capacities and processes are developed that will benefit communities beyond the program period. In addition, lessons and tools are continuously shared across PACE programs.</p>
<p>ADAPTING Are we using the information that we gather through collaboration and learning activities to make better decisions and make adjustments as necessary?</p>	<p>PACE programs generally implement multiple rounds of project cycles, creating natural inflection points for staff and communities to review and adapt the process. All PACE programs have made adjustments to elements such as structure and management of community development committees, project selection, resource mobilization and activity oversight to reflect learning in each subsequent cycle. Program teams also adjust their engagement and capacity building efforts as they learn what works in each context.</p>
<p>ENABLING CONDITIONS Are we working in an organizational environment that supports our collaborating, learning and adapting efforts?</p>	<p>At the organizational level, Global Communities’ PACE methodology supports CLA by emphasizing the importance of continuous learning and adapting, tailoring PACE to the unique context of each program, encouraging program teams to adapt PACE processes and tools to their needs and supporting cross-program learning through formal and informal information exchanges and Communities of Practice.</p> <p>A recently revised and expanded PACE Toolkit provides overall guidance, training modules, and implementation tools for PACE teams as well as an online archive of program-specific tools and manuals that can be utilized as a valuable resource for current and future programs.</p> <p>At the program level, PACE program designs and budgets support for building local capacity, building learning cycles into program plans and developing strong networks and processes for ongoing participation while PACE program leaders work to build cultures of learning within each program.</p>

Sowing Futures and the CLA Framework

USAID's CLA framework defines six components and 16 subcomponents, of a "holistic approach to CLA", across two key dimensions: CLA in the Program Cycle and Enabling Conditions. The section below discusses how Sowing Futures incorporates each of these elements.

Collaborating

Like all PACE programs, Sowing Futures collaborates with local government entities to ensure PACE activities align with local planning processes and leverage public sector resources as much as possible. Public sector collaboration ranges from basic coordination with local authorities on project implementation to providing formal capacity building to municipal staff on community mobilization. Similarly, Sowing Futures engages local community-based organizations wherever it works, in some cases also providing targeted organizational strengthening activities, as well as helping build sustainable linkages between the nonprofit and public sector.

At the same time, Sowing Futures demonstrates how collaboration with the private sector can bring additional resources to communities. The program is funded by the John Deere Foundation, with target communities selected in part based on proximity to John Deere offices and plants. As part of this partnership, Global Communities was invited to engage John Deere employees through an existing volunteer program. This collaboration has yielded excellent results, with John Deere employees becoming strong advocates for the PACE process and engaging with community leaders directly. Sowing Futures has leveraged this experience to expand private sector engagement to other companies interested in supporting volunteerism among their employees.



Learning

Sowing Futures leadership has focused its recruitment and management of staff on building a team with a strong culture of learning. The program is built around a development hypothesis that links Global Communities' overall PACE methodology to the program context, and includes a learning agenda that identifies questions for analysis throughout program implementation (see box, next page). In addition to regular coordination meetings, Sowing Futures program staff participate in quarterly learning meetings, where they are encouraged to think beyond day-to-day implementation needs, share lessons across geographic and program areas and supplement M&E data with analysis of the factors contributing to successful indicators, as well as those needing improvement. Sowing Futures' focus on learning has also contributed to Global Communities' ongoing efforts to refine the PACE approach. The program's close partnership with its private sector donor, its engagement of corporate volunteerism and its connection to youth activism through school engagements have all created opportunities to refine the methodology and contribute learning to Global Communities' broader PACE community. (These elements are discussed further below.)

Adapting

As noted above, quarterly learning meetings allow Sowing Futures staff to "pause & reflect" on what's working well and what's not, providing regular feedback loops. The quarterly timing of these meetings allows staff to see patterns emerging, while being frequent enough that necessary adjustments can be made to support adaptive management. Following are several examples of adaptations made to the Sowing Futures approach and activities, as the program team reflected on each stage of the PACE program, and expanded the program into new communities.

Community Selection: Criteria for community selection in Sowing Futures include vulnerability/poverty; proximity to John Deere office or plant; presence of active community organizations; scalability of impact; and opportunities for volunteerism. Initial program phases directly selected communities based on assessments of these criteria, and engaged those communities directly. Staff reflection led to the recognition that clear interest and motivation to participate in the program on the part of the community was a factor in more successful communities. Thus, in later rounds of community selection, multiple communities who met basic eligibility criteria were invited to submit applications to participate in the program. This shift in the process helped the team identify communities where interest and motivation overlapped with the other selection criteria.

Sowing Futures Development Hypothesis

Communities that have leaders and local institutions equipped with the knowledge, attitude and practices to self-determine and self-direct local development are best positioned to withstand shocks and leverage opportunities to improve overall quality of life. John Deere, as an active and engaged corporate citizen, can positively contribute to improved livelihoods in home communities by partnering with and supporting local institutions.

Illustrative Learning Questions

- What is the most effective method to develop the characteristics necessary to overcome dependency?
- How do we identify and ensure the most vulnerable at-risk youth participate in Sowing Futures?
- What are common personal characteristics of high performers?



PACE Training Curricula: The Sowing Futures team made several adjustments to the Community Mobilization Training curriculum used as the basis for engaging communities. After first-round training participants found it difficult to complete the full 50-hour training, the team revised the curriculum, prioritizing activities to shorten the overall time commitment by 10 hours. Based on challenges faced in early rounds of project implementation, the team developed an additional module focused on project management, which was later expanded into an in-depth project management course used in CSO capacity building activities. After the addition of the community application process described above, the team developed a modified training program that could be offered to communities not selected for full PACE implementation, but who could benefit from being trained in the community mobilization process. Similarly, a “summary” PACE training curriculum was developed for local institutions (including municipal governments, CSOs/CBOs, and private sector entities) interested in applying community mobilization techniques and principles. These adaptations helped Sowing Futures broaden program impact beyond the communities targeted for full participation in the PACE process.

Youth Leadership: Sowing Futures responded to an opportunity to leverage the John Deere Foundation’s “JD in Schools” initiative, by adapting the PACE training curriculum to be more engaging for youth. Initially called ‘PACE for Youth’, this curriculum evolved into a “Youth Leadership” program, which incorporated PACE tools and elements, and engaged John Deere volunteers as mentors to form and train student leaders to identify, prioritize, and address needs of their school. In many cases, members of student councils also serve on PACE Community Development Committees (called “*Grupos colaborativos*” in *Sowing Futures*), ensuring youth voices and leadership are reflected in the community mobilization process.

Neighborhood Associations: As some communities have completed multiple project cycles under Sowing Futures, staff recognized the potential for community leadership structures to be formalized and made sustainable. Now, in communities with strong *Grupos colaborativos*, formal neighborhood associations are being formed or revitalized to link PACE experience to existing, sustainable community development structures.

Enabling Conditions: Culture, Processes & Resources

Sowing Futures senior management has consistently supported a **culture** of continuous learning as well as a focus on understanding the value of local networks and relationships. This focus starts with staff recruitment: while experience in community mobilization is critical, staff have also been recruited with an emphasis on strong local context knowledge, and the ability to identify and leverage key partners in the local community, whether within the public, private, or nonprofit sectors. Through both formal feedback mechanisms (discussed above), and informal methods, staff are consistently encouraged to share information, acknowledge where improvements are needed and, and iterate program approach. At each new round of community mobilization, and each expansion to new geographic areas, staff share experiences and learning across functional and geographic teams. Staff members are consistently able to articulate decisions and improvements they have made based on the experience of colleagues, and the management of the team constantly reinforces the value of honest reflection and learning from both successes and failures.

Sowing Futures implementation and management structures incorporate key **processes** to support CLA. As discussed above, pause-and-reflect opportunities are built into formal and informal interactions to ensure strong internal collaboration and dissemination of learning across functions and geographies. Strong MEL systems, supplemented by regular reflection points, support the development and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data on the program, and inform the continuous learning and adaptation of the program.

Knowledge Management and Institutional Memory are also encouraged both formally and informally, with each new project round and new geography, building on previous methodologies and tools, and relying on a strong culture of knowledge sharing across teams. **Resources** to support CLA include the financial donor resources, as well as the benefits of a strong partnership with the donor that has led to the ability to leverage additional public private sector opportunities to benefit the communities with which Sowing Futures works.



Conclusion: Opportunities for Learning

The alignment of Global Communities' PACE methodology and USAID's CLA approach is evident. The Sowing Futures program provides a current example of how collaborating, learning, and adapting are woven into PACE programming. The program offers several opportunities to contribute to Global Communities' overall learning about and adaptation of the PACE methodology. Following are several critical learning opportunities to explore:



“Light-touch” PACE training options: As the team continues to pilot “summary” PACE training approaches, they can gather data on the impact of less intensive engagements, as compared to that of communities involved in a fully facilitated PACE methodology. If lighter-touch options are consistently shown to have meaningful impact, this could offer a clear path to greater scale, with the ability to reach more communities using the same resources.

Youth-focused PACE methods: Global demographic shifts have led to a clear focus in the development community on youth development³. The Sowing Futures experience of adapting the PACE methodology for use in high schools, with youth leaders is a vital learning opportunity. A clear understanding of what specific approaches and methods were most effective in engaging youth, and developing their positive attitudes and skills around participatory community development, would be immensely valuable not only to future PACE programming, but for youth programming in general.

Private Sector Engagement: Addressing the complex development needs of communities requires effective leveraging of resources from across the public, nonprofit and private sectors, and successful engagement of the private sector is increasingly prioritized by donors⁴. Sowing Futures' experience demonstrates the strong potential for integrating private sector resources and support into community development initiatives. As the program continues to develop and pilot adaptations of PACE designed to more effectively leverage the potential contributions of private sector actors, it will be able to articulate concrete methods for private sector engagement that contribute to better resource mobilization across future PACE programs.

Global Communities' CLA focus, and support for cross-program learning, will be critical to ensuring that the *Sowing Futures* team is able to intentionally reflect on and document their learning around these promising areas for continued improvement of the PACE methodology.

³ See, for example Commonwealth Secretariat, “[State of the World's Youth Population](http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/state-worlds-youth-population-new-index-underscores-urgent-need-invest-young),” October 2016. <http://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/state-worlds-youth-population-new-index-underscores-urgent-need-invest-young>

⁴ See, for example, [USAID's Private Sector Engagement \(PSE\) Policy](https://www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/partnership-opportunities/corporate/commercial-engagement). <https://www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/partnership-opportunities/corporate/commercial-engagement>