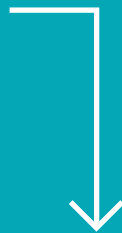# RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Designing & Facilitating Collaborative Learning Networks

A Toolkit

This toolkit is intended for anyone who manages, facilitates, supports, or seeks to implement a Collaborative Learning Network. It explains what Collaborative Learning is, why it's an effective approach to support locally-led development and systems strengthening, and provides the 10 essential ingredients for successful Collaborative Learning Networks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

⠿ Contents ⠿

What is Collaborative Learning?

Collaborative Learning is about creating a **vibrant community** of members deeply engaged in **peer-to-peer (or practitioner-to-practitioner)** learning to jointly problem-solve, generate global knowledge, and adapt that knowledge to their country-specific contexts. Collaborative Learning involves groups of learners **working together to solve problems, searching for understanding, and/or creating knowledge products**. Collaborative Learning relies on interaction and collaboration, mutual respect among peers for their abilities and contributions, and consensus building and cooperation.

SPARC, Collaborative Learning to Advance Knowledge and Implementation of Strategic Health Purchasing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Health Systems & Reform Journal (HSR), 2022

Collaborative Learning Networks (or "communities of practice") have been used in many fields and over the past decade, and now they are gaining traction in global development as an innovative and complementary model of technical assistance. Collaborative Learning uses **adult learning theory and social learning principle**s to support the development of more sustainable systems (Wenger-Trayner [video on "Social Learning"](#) and [Introduction to communities of practice](#)).

Effective Collaborative Learning Networks have 5 shared characteristics:

1. Collaborative Learning Networks are grounded in principles of **country-led development**, designed to provide **demand-driven** support to country change agents, where the members of the community set the learning agenda and shape and guide the future direction of the community.

2. Collaborative Learning Networks are **cohesive and supportive communities**, nurtured by a high level of social trust that creates a safe space for open exchange and dialogue. Collaborative Learning Networks are not only a place to share best or promising practices, but to surface challenges and discuss past failures.

3. Collaborative Learning Networks **enhance individual change agent knowledge and skills**, but do not stop there. They also work to **enhance the capacity of teams and institutions** represented by participating change agents, and, in the long-term, they strengthen systems and ecosystems to sustainably improve development outcomes.

4. Collaborative Learning Networks position participating **change agents as both learners and teachers**, enabling them to learn from another, collaboratively problem-solve, and co-create solutions to pressing development challenges.

5. Collaborative Learning Networks are **continuously evolving communities operating within complex political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts** that can significantly influence how they evolve and grow — or fail to thrive — over time. Collaborative Learning Networks expand and contract, revise their learning agendas, change membership, innovate on facilitation approaches, and adapt to changing contexts and funding environments.

How Collaborative Learning Supports Locally-Led Development

Power imbalances in global development have resulted in the provision of technical assistance (TA) that is often one-directional, positioning experts from higher income countries as advisors to, or implementers for, leaders in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This stymies the leadership and voice of change agents in LMICs, who have tremendous, but often under-recognized, expertise and experience.

In addition, systems change is not a purely technical exercise — it is often highly political, context-specific, and replete with implementation challenges. Country leaders may have access to global guidance and evidence about solutions to their challenges, but often lack access to practical "how-to" knowledge that can translate ideas into action. They also lack opportunities to share their experiences and tap into contextually relevant implementation knowledge from peers in other countries.

To improve on traditional TA models, there is growing recognition that development funders and implementers must focus more on facilitating the sharing of knowledge among LMIC change agents, rather than serving as the providers of knowledge. Changing modes of TA need to foster practical and action-oriented learning among change agents rather than more

passive modes of teaching and training. They also need to center the people familiar with the local context as the experts in the room (Ojiako, How not to become a global health expert – Speaking of Medicine and Health, plos.org, 2022)

Collaborative Learning's bi-directional approach offers an immediate improvement to traditional TA provision by dissolving power imbalances, centering the expertise of local change agents, and utilizing tacit knowledge to advance systems change.

An alternative to traditional technical assistance

Collaborative Learning Networks (CLNs) have demonstrated that they can serve as an alternative, and complementary, form of TA in global development, recognizing network members as the experts and supporting them to learn from one another through effective technical facilitation. Collaborative Learning Networks have the potential to **accelerate progress and systems strengthening** in LMICs by harnessing the tacit knowledge of practitioners. The Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (JLN) is one such example — see the box below.

Collaborative Learning is particularly well-suited to bring together participants, such as peer organizations across countries, or peer groups within a country, that are pursuing similar goals and face common challenges. Frequently, the participants may be in different places along the implementation pathway, or focused on different components of the implementation effort, and are almost always in differing local contexts. When well designed, there is, however, sufficient commonality of purpose and pathways to ensure learning among the participants is of value to all.

Demand for collaborative learning often starts when there is a recognized common challenge and knowledge of what needs to be done, but uncertainty about how to implement.

The common challenge is almost always pursued in components, with the network establishing sub-groups or technical working groups around these components so that specialized personnel can meaningfully exchange questions and pursue targeted solutions related to their specific implementation stage.

Accelerating Progress toward Universal Health Coverage through the JLN

Since 2009, countries in the Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (JLN) have been working together to achieve and sustain universal health coverage (UHC) for nearly 3 billion people across the globe. JLN countries are expanding coverage to the poor and informal sector populations, reducing out-of-pocket health spending, increasing use of high-quality, essential health services such as primary care, and more sustainably financing health care.

- JLN membership has grown from teams of policymakers and practitioners from 6 countries in 2010 to more than 30 countries.

- The JLN platform currently houses 6 long-term technical initiatives under which more than 30 focused learning collaboratives and exchanges have brought together country change agents to learn from one another and jointly problem-solve.

- The JLN has produced over 60 knowledge products — of which over 30 were co-produced by JLN members themselves.

While remarkable progress toward UHC in the past decade is the result of many local and global efforts, the JLN has been a powerful resource for its members in helping them overcome technical and political roadblocks.

For example, after a parliamentarian from Ghana attended a joint learning workshop focused on how to ensure health services are reaching people living in poverty, he introduced an amendment, which quickly passed into law, requiring the Ghanaian National Health Insurance Authority to annually report on coverage of low-income populations.

To learn more visit [The Joint Learning Network](#)

An approach that strengthens the local and regional ecosystem of institutions and experts

Collaborative Learning can also be an effective and sustainable approach to **integrating local, community, sub-national, and regional voices and developing strong ecosystems of actors to continuously drive systems change and strengthening**. It can foster a community of local experts and institutions that can become trusted, "go-to" advisors to their government counterparts, ultimately becoming important agents in driving systems change. One recent example of how a CLN can facilitate local and regional ecosystem-strengthening is the **Asia Health Policy and Systems Research Community** that R4D began facilitating in 2021— see the box on the next page.

Health Policy and Systems Research Ecosystem-Strengthening Community across Asia

- A **community of domestic health policy and systems research institutions (HPSRIs) across Asia** emerged in response to growing demand for country and regional learning on health systems strengthening as countries progress toward universal health coverage.

- The HPSRIs collaborated in 2021 to **co-create a shared vision and action areas** for a more robust health policy and systems research ecosystem across Asia by 2026.

- To move toward this vision, the community launched **pilot activities** in 2022 led by HPSRIs based in India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, South Korea, and Sri Lanka, alongside regional learning platforms and training partners.

- R4D, in partnership with the WHO Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, facilitated **continuous experience-sharing and collaborative learning among eco-system actors** to improve pilot activities and capture the lessons as global public goods.

This work was supported by the Health Systems Strengthening (HSS) Accelerator with funding from the USAID/Asia Bureau

A powerful tool for partnership-building

CLNs can also be a powerful tool for **partnership-building**. Platforms like the Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (JLN) and the Accelerator's Asia Health Policy and Systems Research Community bring change agents and funding partners together around a common, country-driven learning agenda. The JLN's country-led global Steering Group provides a formal mechanism for country government officials and development partners to align around a shared learning agenda and funding priorities. These types of partnerships, when nurtured, last beyond a single project cycle, creating a sense of common purpose and shared commitment that can evolve into new, long-term models of global collaboration and co-funding.
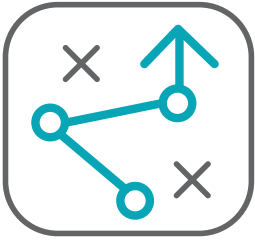
The Collaborative Learning Theory of Change

Ultimately, Collaborative Learning Networks (CLNs) seek to contribute to long-term systems strengthening and improvements in development practice. The theory of change for CLNs is that effective CLN performance **leads** to (1) strengthened leadership and capacity of its members; (2) strengthened communities and ecosystems of continuous support for change agents; (3) new knowledge and global public good products that are adapted and implemented at the country-level (while also increasing global knowledge and awareness), ultimately **contributing to** longer-term systems improvements for healthier, better educated people.

These outcomes are achieved **if** the CLN functions effectively. Effective functioning requires successful strategy implementation for member engagement; knowledge creation, sharing and uptake of knowledge; CLN measurement and learning; developing strong partnerships; and resource mobilization. Network performance must be driven by active member engagement based on **shared interest** that evolves into **shared experience**, and ultimately, frequent and spontaneous member interactions based on **shared intent and identity**.

CLNs can also deliver short-term outcomes like individual knowledge gains, knowledge products, and community-building. These early results of CLNs are important stepping-stones to longer-term systems-level and field-building impacts that can take 3–5 years or more to engender.

The full theory of change for CLNs is depicted below.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING NETWORK PERFORMANCE			CONTRIBUTION TO IMPACT	
Strategies	**Outputs**	**Outcomes**	**System-Level Outcomes**	**Impact**

Figure: Theory of change diagram

Strategies
- CLN funding, governance, coordination and facilitation
- Resource mobilization
  - human
  - technical
  - financial
- Member engagement
  - member selection
  - joint scoping & agenda setting
  - identification of learning topics
- Knowledge creation, sharing & uptake
  - facilitation of peer learning
  - country action planning
  - tailored TA
  - country pairing
  - establishment of technical workstreams
  - technical facilitation skill building

Growing ownership feeding back into CLN strategies

Active and collaborative member engagement based on shared interest

Outputs
- Technical facilitation partners facilitate and support cross-country co-creation and in-country uptake of knowledge and tools
- Members co-produce and disseminate knowledge and tools for addressing critical barriers to change in their countries
- Members share and synthesize knowledge and experiences using the tools
- Members effectively promote the use of knowledge and tools in their countries

Members & partners benefit from building shared experiences

Outcomes
- Policymakers, funders and other development actors gain knowledge and awareness of emerging network outcomes
- In-country institutions adaptively implement knowledge and tools generated by the network to address critical barriers to policy and practice change
- Members effectively mobilize in-country actors and resources to support the uptake of knowledge and tools by in-country institutions

TIME LAG (with many other influences)

Frequent & spontaneous member interactions based on shared intent & identity

System-Level Outcomes
- Increased support for CLN from funders, policymakers, and other development actors
- Shared commitment to long-term system reform goals, leading to changes in policies and practices
- Enhanced ownership, coordination, collaboration and commitment among ecosystem actors on supporting long-term system reforms

Impact
- Global framing and funding for development supports locally-led approaches/practices that are more demand-driven, contextually relevant, and sustainable
- Sustainable health and/or education system reforms contributing to healthier and/or better educated populations in the CLN countries

Legend:
- Global-level impact
- In-country policy and system reform
- Ecosystem strengthening

The theory of change for CLNs was first inspired by R4D's work to co-develop a JLN theory of change with JLN members and partners. R4D later updated and refined the theory of change with feedback from the Linked Immunisation Action Network and Strategic Purchasing Africa Resource Center. Through an Organizational Effectiveness Grant by the Hewlett Foundation, R4D partnered with Collaborative Impact to refine the CLN theory of change and develop a MEL toolkit.
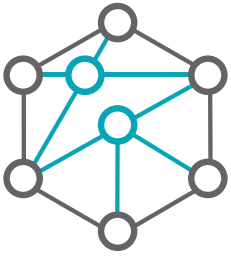
How to Design and Facilitate a Collaborative Learning Network

The Collaborative Learning approach is a systematic cycle of learning among peers that is iterative and adaptive. Collaborative Learning starts with identifying and building a learning community among a group of peers, identifying common areas of challenge, and jointly setting a learning agenda. Through a systematic process of technical framing that brings together the relevant evidence and country experience, drawn from global examples and community members' tacit knowledge, the learning community sets off on a structured process of experience-sharing, accompaniment, collaborative problem-solving, and co-creation of solutions and new knowledge.

Technical facilitators support the community to capture the learning in practical and accessible formats as global public goods that others can also use. Members of the community are encouraged and motivated to adapt and apply the learning in their unique contexts, share their implementation progress and challenges, and seek support through regular feedback loops within the learning community. This virtuous cycle of sharing-learning-adapting can be facilitated through rapid-cycle virtual learning exchanges of six months, or through more in-depth learning collaboratives that might span 2–3 years.

The Collaborative Learning Cycle
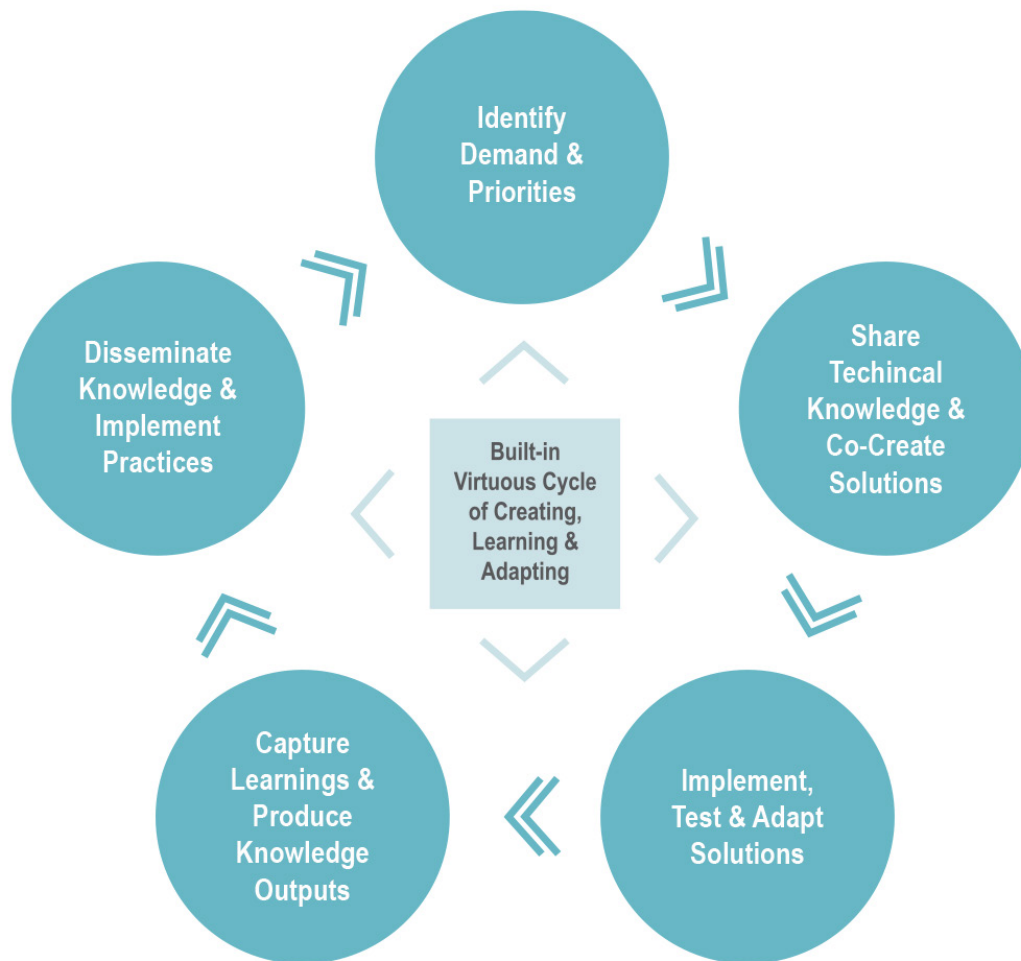
The 10 Essential Ingredients for a Successful Collaborative Learning Network

As highlighted in the Collaborative Learning Network (CLN) theory of change (see Learning Topic 3), the achievement of systems-level and field-building outcomes is driven by a strong learning community. Over the past decade of designing, facilitating, and managing a variety of Collaborative Learning Networks, R4D has identified **10 essential ingredients to optimize their effectiveness and potential for impact**.

1. **Strong, shared interest and purpose among Collaborative Learning Network members**
   Having a sharp vision, clear call to action, and value proposition is essential to getting a CLN started and nurturing it through its evolution.

2. **Grounded in mutual trust, respect and accountability**
   CLNs are founded on the importance of social interaction, recognizing that relationships,

trust, connectedness, collaboration, cooperation, and collective action are critical elements of adult learning (Provan et al., Interorganizational Networks at the Network Level: [A Review of the Empirical Literature on Whole Networks](#), J. of Management, 2007). CLNs need to **create inclusive, safe spaces that provide both formal and informal opportunities for people to network and build ties**, network members and all stakeholders in between. In a CLN, **every participant is recognized as both a learner and a sharer**, who possesses a learning mind-set and valued experience and expertise to share. Fostering informal connections is important for building the friendships and relationships of trust that enable sharing, learning and collaboration with one another. A sense of healthy competition can even form through community, when participants motivate one another to advance their goals.

3. Driven by participant demand and engagement

A clear principle of all effective CLNs is that members must be at the center of the network's design. **CLNs are most successful when members have enthusiastically opted into the network and feel a sense of shared purpose** and ownership over the network's health and effectiveness. When members play a role in establishing the network from the beginning, as well as set their own agendas for ongoing Collaborative Learning, the network's priority issues and activities are relevant to them, and they can be certain the time they devote to network activities will be well-spent and support their day-to-day work. Engaged collaborative learners also feel a responsibility for one another's learning as well as their own. Thus, the success of one learner supports the success of other learners. (Laal and Ghodsi 2011, [Benefits of Collaborative Learning](#)).

In all CLNs, participants exhibit varying levels of engagement. Some are highly engaged, some may have less time to give or care only about a focused set of priorities, and other participants may have minimal engagement. [The Fito Network](#), a network of social impact networks, uses the analogy of a network as a ship, where some participants that are passengers (who are along for the ride, to touch the surface and mingle with others), some that are deep-divers (who want to go deep, engage in focused ways) and some that are crew members (who help steer the ship and have a bit more time to give). CLN managers and facilitators must **understand the priorities of different participants and their preference for engagement** and to identify meaningful and 'right-sized' ways for them to participate

4. Continuous demand identification

CLNs also need methods for [iteratively engaging and continuously assessing evolving member needs and demand for support](#) to ensure the CLN is timely and responsive to member priorities. For network managers and facilitators, this requires 1) **developing strong, trusting relationships** with members, 2) establishing **systems for capturing areas of shared interest** and facilitating a process to prioritize topics that multiple stakeholders want to address, and 3) **building "country/member intelligence"** to inform the design and implementation of network activities.

Four examples of continuous demand identification:

1. The African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions (ACS) used a**n approach to listening** that focused on regular inquiry and stakeholder prioritization and validation processes that built consensus and commitment amongst in-country stakeholders (*"Decolonizing global assistance through listening (and the "art of asking"), Part 1 and Part 2).*

2. The Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (the JLN) network manager engages with **country core groups** (CCGs) of stakeholders on an annual basis to capture their priorities. After technical collaboratives are launched with a group of participants identified by CCGs, facilitators play an important role of conducting more focused **demand scoping at the start of a new learning process**. Demand scoping combines a problem-driven approach to understanding both the common and unique challenges of participants. The demand scoping process culminates in a learning agenda articulating the priority topic and sub-topics, learning questions, and the scope and modalities of engagement.

3. The Primary Health Care Performance Initiative (PHCPI) facilitated monthly/ bi-monthly **'learning checks'** with implementation learning teams and maintained a log of learning needs as work progressed.

4. The Linked Immunisation Action Network (previously Learning Network for Countries in Transition) uses a network-wide **member survey** to identify demand and support the prioritization of topics to shape the next phase of the learning network. Linked's network facilitation team also keeps detailed records of member demands and periodically co-develops **country intelligence reports** with Gavi country managers to document emerging priorities, challenges and areas for Linked support.

5. **Members have the authority and ability to drive local change**
Strategic identification of the "right" change agents and their active engagement in the CLN are crucial to the CLN theory of change. CLN members need to be well-positioned and **capable of integrating local experience and priorities into the agenda-setting process** for the network, they need to be able to **actively participate** in CLN offerings both as learners and sharers, and they need to be able to **share, adapt and apply learnings in their "home" context**. One of the most challenging aspects of a CLN is to balance an open and inclusive membership model while ensuring that members have the influence and responsibility to adapt and implement the learning. Barriers to involving the "right" stakeholders can sometimes be political (where participation is based more on political motives than an objective determination of fit) or based on bandwidth and availability (already-busy key change agents may have limited ability to actively engage).

One key method used to identify CLN members is an expression of interest (EOI) process to match member demand with available learning opportunities. Members are invited to submit short written EOIs to articulate their interest in the learning opportunity, their objectives for participating, and who are the "right" participants to involve. The EOI process is designed to ensure a learning team with the optimal stakeholder composition is assembled, the learning opportunity is timely and relevant for the country, and the country demand is genuine.

Members opting in through a written EOI or other mechanisms for expressing demand is a necessary, but not sufficient step to ensure that engagement moves beyond learning to action. To drive local change, it is equally important that network members have the authority to make decisions, commit resources, and advance real progress within their contexts. As new members join, strong communication about the network's purposes can support an adequate vetting and onboarding process to ensure that participants will not only attend meetings, but also transfer what they learn back to their peers in the network. In many cases, getting to desired outcomes may require that teams from a particular country or institution participate in the network, rather than just a single individual. A team approach fosters a greater sense of accountability, shared purpose, and motivation among participants.

6. **Experienced and skilled technical facilitation of the network**
    Collaborative Learning relies on experienced and skilled facilitators to effectively [respond to participant demand and frame the learning agenda](#) within relevant evidence and experience across countries. Effective technical facilitation requires not only in-depth technical knowledge, but the ability to listen to and learn from practitioners' experiences, elicit and synthesize lessons, and "co-create" useful knowledge products. Ideally, a Collaborative Learning facilitator should have knowledge of and experience across multiple countries/members and be focused on supporting participants to solve an actual problem in a defined period of time.

    Effective Collaborative Learning facilitation must support all stages of the Collaborative Learning lifecycle. This requires identifying the "right" participants, conducting technical scoping and demand identification at the start of a learning initiative, offering engaging, demand-driven learning opportunities throughout the learning cycle with a consistent cadence of activities to maintain momentum, and documenting the learning in accessible products that facilitate the adaptation and uptake of learning in the participants' local contexts and can be disseminated as global public goods for the benefit of others.

    Learning activities should be structured as interactive peer learning and problem-solving sessions (workshops, webinars, country pairings, collaborative problem-solving sessions). These sessions require intense preparation by the facilitation team beforehand and active follow-up and continuous engagement after.

    In addition to the structured learning engagements, Collaborative Learning facilitators often play an important role in providing on-demand support to participants, as feasible.

This is an important part of the value proposition of a CLN.

7. Strong network management and coordination

Effective CLNs invest in a strong central team that operates in service to its members. Running an effective CLN takes significant effort and skill. Very rarely can members themselves simultaneously meet the demands of their role as policymakers or implementers, and also run a sustainable network. The strongest international CLNs have **central teams whose primary professional focus is the success and health of the network** to accelerate member impact. Effective central teams perform a number of functions to ensure the network runs smoothly:

- Identifying member demand

- Co-designing the learning experiences of network members

- Paying attention to group dynamics and culture building

- Maintaining a bird's-eye view of what is working and not working in various contexts

- Ensuring effective technical facilitation and knowledge management across the network

- Managing accountability systems

- Providing on-demand technical support when appropriate and feasible

- Identifying strategic learning questions and how to answer them

- Facilitating impactful connections among sub-groups in the network

- Supporting smooth transitions during member turnover and the commencement or conclusion of learning activities

- Disseminating network knowledge products as global public goods, and much more

The network manager may also provide financial management on behalf of the network (e.g., grants management to technical partners or on-demand learning funds) and may be responsible for fundraising.

Network management can be a good role for globally connected INGOs (international NGOs). These organizations often have institutional capacity to manage country engagements, fundraising, communications, knowledge management, and monitoring and evaluation — while also bringing deep technical expertise, which contributes to more skilled and effective facilitation.

8. Support to adapt and implement the learning

CLNs can use a variety of supportive approaches to help participants adapt and implement the learning in their local contexts. The first core approach is ensuring the learning topics and activities engage the right change agents and are demand-driven and problem-solv-

ing focused to foster a strong sense of ownership and commitment by those that can act upon the learning. Country teams within some CLNs may have established processes for briefing colleagues and senior leaders at home through policy memos after learning engagements or organizing briefing sessions, learning forums, or policy dialogues with relevant implementers and policymakers. For example, the Strategic Purchasing Africa Resource Center (SPARC) has organized **validation workshops and policy dialogues** in Burkina Faso and Rwanda to present and discuss analyses generated by the network, and generate policy and implementer engagement and commitment to address the findings.

A CLN with members from around the globe can **cascade learnings regionally via hubs for learning**, and to subnational levels such as in Colombia and India where the World Bank has supported subnational exchanges connected to global platforms such as the Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (the JLN) and the Primary Health Care Performance Initiative (PHCPI), respectively.

Other approaches include developing strong knowledge management and communications strategies to effectively package and disseminate learnings both within the network and as global public goods. CLN products can take various forms, such as toolkits, process guides, checklists, diagnostic and assessment tools, country case studies, synthesis briefs, videos or podcasts, blogs, and e-learning modules — but the key is packaging content in practical, concise formats accessible for busy implementers and policymakers.

The CLN can also build and broker partnerships with other global development initiatives that can support network members. The World Bank has played a key role in connecting JLN members and learning initiatives with ongoing World Bank-supported projects. US-AID projects and mission-support can be another potential source of technical assistance for CLNs. For example, policymakers and practitioners in Ghana and Vietnam received in-country support from the World Bank and USAID to apply JLN knowledge products such as the Costing for Provider Payment Manual.

9. **Measurement of results and impact of Collaborative Learning**
   Often the impact of a CLN comes from what its members do outside of the network; the connections from the network they collaborate with, the initiatives they are inspired to lead as a result of the network, and how participants adapt and implement the learning in their ongoing systems improvement efforts. Thus, it is important to find ways to "see the invisible" and identify how the CLN has contributed to systems strengthening and field-building impact. Effective CLNs are committed to measurement and learning — both of members' progress, and of the network itself. Agreeing upon what to measure can be politically and technically challenging. Doing so across multiple contexts and then measuring a CLN's impact on those contexts is even more difficult.

   Thus, **it is important that each CLN has its own unique and well-developed theory of change**, where inputs and outcomes are clear at the outset. However, a CLN's direction may evolve over time, thus milestones need to be set to give indication of early successes (e.g., measuring level and value of connections, qualitative stories), and the theory of

change should be revisited on a regular basis so it can be updated to reflect CLN evolution. Further, a CLN's impact is often non-linear, thus measurement and evaluation methods need to deal with this complexity.

CLN monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) methods need to focus on three levels:

- Monitoring network functioning and outputs

- Assessing network outcomes (knowledge uptake and implementation, contribution to policy and programs, enhancements in leadership and strengthening institutions and ecosystems)

- Evaluating network impact (of more mature CLNs) on country systems, ecosystems, and global development

MEL methods include administrative data (e.g., membership database, communications, and website analytics), participant feedback, member-surveys, organizational network analysis (ONA), outcome harvesting, and contribution analysis. More mature networks may prioritize impact evaluations.

10. Sustainability planning to ensure long−term impact

CLNs have the potential to help their members significantly accelerate progress on difficult problems. However, system-level change takes time and, therefore, any action network intended to drive large-scale lasting results must be designed with the vision, staffing and financial resources to thrive for extended periods of time, often years. This is particularly challenging with CLNs in global development, that are often dependent on time-bound donor funding. To ensure adequate and long-term funding, **CLNs need to develop and implement plans for sustainability after donor funding runs out**. Sustaining networks requires a shift to more open-ended funding that is adaptive to changing circumstances. Sources of funding can include not only development partners and foundations, but governments, social enterprise initiatives, and members themselves (Social Change Networks Playbook for Practitioners and Funders (inHive)).

Network members and managers need to engage in donor relationship-building early on and garner the support of a range of partners, to ensure there is broad support and the CLN is not tied to one funder (THS-Joint-Learning-Network-Case-Study.pdf (rockefeller-foundation.org). As the JLN has matured, it has managed to attract funding from diverse sources — including Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, World Bank, GIZ, USAID, among other development partners. In addition, the JLN has also worked to track and quantify members' in-kind contributions such as hosting network meetings, member time spent on network functions, and travel expenses for learning events, among others.

The Limitations of Collaborative Learning

Despite the strong value proposition and positive results of many Collaborative Learning Networks (CLNs), we know that Collaborative Learning does not always realize its full potential. This is often the case when one or more of the "10 essential ingredients" is de-prioritized or absent. We have also learned that CLNs do not work well in certain situations, including:

- When the CLN is primarily development partner- or funder-driven. A core principle of Collaborative Learning is that the learning agenda and activities of the network are demand-driven by the community of learners. CLNs need clear and transparent decision-making processes for setting the learning agenda and network priorities.

- When participant nomination for CLN opportunities is not strategic, inclusive, and objective. Another core principle of Collaborative Learning is that participants should have the authority, motivation, and ability to translate learning into action and drive local change.

- When learners do not have the requisite foundational knowledge or are not ready or willing to actively participate in learning, in which case instructional learning may be more appropriate. (SPARC, Collaborative Learning to Advance Knowledge and Implementation

[of Strategic Health Purchasing in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), Health Systems & Reform Journal (HSR), 2022)

- When political or resource constraints outside the control of the CLN or its in-country stakeholders impede the opportunity for participants to engage in network activities and adapt and apply the learning.

- When time and resources are not adequate to fully deliver. Collaborative Learning can be labor and resource intensive, requiring funds for management, facilitation, workshops, and knowledge and communications platforms.

- When measuring network performance, CLN evaluation efforts can be limited by short evaluative periods requested by funders, difficulty measuring the degree of 'exposure' among participants and the level of contribution of the network to systems-level change, and the field's reliance on broad population-level indicators. (Woulfe J, Oliver TR, Zahner SJ, Siemering KQ. [Multisector partnerships in population health improvement](#). Prev Chronic Dis 2010)

Recommendations for Global Development Donors

Collaborative Learning has increasingly become an important and effective approach in global development. As the development community works to shift to more locally-led development, support sustainable systems strengthening, and advance toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, Collaborative Learning provides a demand-driven, action-oriented learning approach that can support change agents in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) to accelerate progress toward their development goals. **To increasingly integrate Collaborative Learning in development practice, we offer four recommendations for global development funders**:

1. **Connect Collaborative Learning with other forms of support.**
   CLNs can be the focus of a development effort or integrated as one of several approaches to technical assistance (TA). When integrated, there is increased potential to generate a coordinated, compounding effect that can lead to accelerated impact on the issues that country leaders are prioritizing.

   CLNs can be especially effective at increasing the use of evidence in policy and implementation of solutions, while also strengthening local and regional ecosystems of ex-

pertise. With an increased appreciation of this value proposition, funders may be more likely to support CLNs alongside other TA approaches. For example, an "implementation learning approach" can pair country leaders with experts from other countries to provide coaching and tailored problem-solving support alongside collaborative learning on a cross-country learning agenda. Where possible, the implementation learning approach seeks to link to or integrate with in-country technical support and resources of development partners.

In addition, CLNs are uniquely well-positioned to support multi-funder initiatives designed to respond to country-driven investments. CLN approaches can align with TA funding, government investment, and membership contributions to advance development and country priorities. This bundling can work particularly well during 'windows of opportunity' when political commitment, government resources, and development funding are all aligned around a common purpose. Collaborative Learning opportunities have often been missed when the political economy for systems change is most opportune.

2. **Invest in evaluating and demonstrating the long-term impact of Collaborative Learning**
Systems- and population-level impacts of CLNs can take years to come to fruition. We have seen the power of CLNs in motivating country change agents; developing supportive action learning communities and ecosystems; building global knowledge; and contributing to policy and systems-level impacts in some countries. However, to demonstrate the sustainable development impact of CLNs, there must be long-term investments in Collaborative Learning that include greater support in developing and implementing robust measurement and learning strategies.

3. **Build the bench of skilled collaborative learning facilitators, especially from LMICs**
Facilitation is a critical skillset for Collaborative Learning, requiring a blend of technical knowledge and expertise and the art and skills of facilitation. Investing in developing skills for facilitation is not only important for implementing effective CLNs, but strong facilitation skills are critical, transferable skills for all development practitioners.

Moreover, LMIC change agents in government, policy research organizations, civil society, and private sector can be well-positioned to use facilitation skills to facilitate change processes in their countries, convene subnational CLNs, and increasingly, facilitate regional and global Collaborative Learning initiatives, bringing a much-needed blend of technical knowledge and contextual familiarity to support country progress.

Several resources exist to improve CLN facilitation skills, including a toolkit for JLN facilitators, and the [Collaborative Learning e-Course](#) — a free, open-access orientation program on Collaborative Learning.

These orientation programs are an essential foundation, but are insufficient. CLN facilitation requires practice, coaching, peer learning with other facilitators, adaptation, and

continuous improvement and innovation. Many CLNs are investing in communities of practice (COPs) for facilitators to share experience, lessons, tips, and peer problem-solving support.

4. **Increase investment in Collaborative Learning to accelerate progress on the SDGs**
    Funding a CLN is relatively inexpensive, but donors tend to favor short-term, country-specific technical assistance. However, as global development shifts toward more locally-led development, funders are increasingly recognizing the critical role of CLNs — that support many countries at once, leverage local and regional expertise and ecosystems, and can ultimately be enduring, impactful learning platforms that outlive short-term donor funding cycles.

    CLNs require initial start-up funding, flexible funding to evolve and adapt, and sustainable core funding to mature and realize their full potential. Most CLNs start relatively small with seed funding, a theory of change, a small community of champions, a network coordinator or facilitator, a demand-driven learning agenda that also aligns with the donor's priorities, and a proof of concept. As the network grows and matures, it gains some efficiency but also usually requires additional resources and longer-term, sustainable funding to serve a larger community. The network may need to invest in expanding its membership, offering more activities and learning opportunities, and building core management and facilitation functions like continuous demand-assessment, internal and external communications, and monitoring and evaluation.

    While adequate, sustainable core funding is essential to a CLN, funding investments do not always have to take the form of large, multi-year grants. Funders can make meaningful smaller or shorter-term contributions by co-funding a specific CLN learning engagement, supporting a network-wide event, sponsoring a country or set of countries to engage in the network, or including CLN engagement within a technical assistance program or country investment.

    Over time, a maturing CLN usually diversifies its funding mix and seeks to generate more member ownership and co-investment through direct and indirect member support for core network activities. While most CLNs still rely primarily on donor support, the global shift toward locally-led development may change this paradigm over time.

Additional Resources to Learn More about Collaborative Learning Networks

Below are a few relevant resources for better understanding Collaborative Learning, including adult learning methods, learning in complex systems, example networks in action, and practical tools for facilitating and measuring the impact of Collaborative Learning Networks.

- Fito Network, "The Collaborative Impact Networks Kit (a community-created library of >500 techniques and tools." https://www.fito.network/tools

- Gatome-Munyua A et al. "Collaborative Learning to Advance Knowledge and Implementation of Strategic Health Purchasing in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Health Systems & Reform*, 8(2): 2022. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23288604.2022.2051793

- inHive. (2022). *Social Change Networks Playbook for Practitioners and Funders*. https://www.inhiveglobal.org/2022/04/25/social-chage-networks-playbook/

- Results for Development, "Facilitating Collaborative Learning: An open-access, e-learning orientation series," 2023. https://coaching-approach.learnworlds.com/course/facilitating-collaborative-learning

- Small Foundation. (2021). *Small Foundation Network Partner Evaluation Toolkit Network Evaluation for Network Coordinators Frequently Asked Questions*. Small Foundation. https://smallfoundation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SF-Eval-Toolkit-FAQ_June-2021.pdf

- Sridharan, Sweta and Kimberly Smith. "Case Study: Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage. A practitioner-to-practitioner learning network supported by the Rockefeller Foundation's Transforming Health Systems Initiative, 2016. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23288604.2022.2051793

- Wenger-Trayner. (2015). "Communities of practice: A brief introduction of the concept and its uses." https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/

- Witter et al. "What, why, and how do health systems learn from one another? Insights from eight low- and middle-income country case studies." *Health Research Policy and Systems* (2019) 17:9 https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-018-0410-1

- World Bank Group. (2015). *The Art of Knowledge Exchange: A Results-Focused Planning Guide for Development Practitioners*. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/5f336ebd-0d3a-52f8-a570-be81ca0fd144

- World Health Organization, Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research. (2021). *Learning Health Systems: Pathways to Progress*. https://ahpsr.who.int/publications/i/item/learning-health-systems-pathways-to-progress

Results for Development

Results for Development (R4D) is a leading non-profit global development partner. We collaborate with change agents — government officials, civil society leaders and social innovators — supporting them as they navigate complex change processes to achieve large-scale, equitable outcomes in health, education and nutrition. We work with country leaders to diagnose challenges, co-create, innovate and implement solutions built on evidence and diverse stakeholder input, and engage in learning to adapt, iterate and improve. We also strengthen global, regional and country ecosystems to support country leaders with expertise, evidence, and innovations. R4D helps country leaders solve their immediate challenges today, while also strengthening systems and institutions to address tomorrow's challenges. And we share what we learn so others around the world can achieve results for development too.

Learn more at www.R4D.org