

# STRENGTHENING LOCAL CAPACITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

Case Study: LINC and Fondo Unido - United Way Mexico

## INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

BY DIANA HARPER

Building local capacity is one of the most commonly identified objectives of international development projects across diverse settings and technical areas. Donors, international partners, and local stakeholders alike recognize that without investing in local organizations, development will be neither effective nor sustainable.

Yet, despite this agreement on the goal and an abundance of good intentions, many projects end without real and lasting local capacity growth. In some cases, local capacity has even been diminished.

A better approach exists. Our experience has shown the power and potential of meaningful partnerships with local organizations for sustainable capacity development. Key principles to this approach exist and can be applied in any setting. However, in order to achieve success, strategies must be grounded in the local context, as well as implemented with a culture of feedback, learning, and adaptation.

### KEY TERMS AND ACRONYMS

#### **Local Capacity Development Activity (LCDA)**

Project implemented by LINC from 2016 to 2019, funded by USAID

#### **Fondo Unido - United Way Mexico (FUM)**

LINC's local partner, who is a local United Way Worldwide affiliate

#### **Diplomado**

A structured curriculum for CSO capacity development developed in the project

### ABOUT THIS BRIEF

From 2016 to 2019, LINC implemented the Local Capacity Development Activity (LCDA) in Mexico with the generous support of USAID. The project sought to strengthen the capacity of a network of civil society organizations (CSOs) throughout Mexico as well as strengthen the capacity of local partner Fondo Unido - United Way Mexico (FUM, a local United Way Worldwide affiliate).

As the project came to an end, both LINC and FUM reflected that a real transformation in local capacity had been achieved. Based on the experience of LCDA as well as other projects around the world, this brief offers reflections and advice for other practitioners seeking to learn from this experience.

## KEY RESULTS

Through LCDA, LINC partnered with Fondo Unido Mexico (FUM) to develop and deliver a comprehensive national training course for CSO capacity development, called the Diplomado. Before the end of the project, FUM took full ownership of the Diplomado and demonstrated its financial and technical sustainability. They led 6 new cohorts of CSOs through the program and established 4 new partnerships with funders to continue offering the program in the future.

Additionally, FUM achieved a 23 percent improvement in its overall capacity, with important improvements measured in strategic vision and planning, financial administration, and external relations. Staff reflected that the organization had shifted its approach from opportunistic to strategic, enabling them to carry out their mission more confidently and effectively.

A variety of factors contributed to this success—most notably, the hard work and dedication of the FUM team. In addition, LINC's intentional approach to program design and implementation created an environment for FUM to thrive.



*FUM led 6 new CSO cohorts to complete the Diplomado.*

*"Having the support of a mentor during these four years of work was beneficial to change from a reaction model to one of preparation and strategic planning. [It] allowed a systemic development of the organization by working on specific points that served as a pivot of organizational change."*

*Feedback from FUM*

## LESSONS LEARNED

### BUILD ON THE FOUNDATION OF EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

LINC and FUM had a working relationship prior to the announcement and competition of the LCDA award. It is true that productive partnerships can and do emerge in response to a funding announcement or donor directive. However, when organizations have established a mutually-beneficial way of working prior to the potentially disruptive force of outside funding, they are better able to navigate toward their shared goals together. This applies to partnerships between international and local partners, as well as among local organizations themselves.

LINC has an extensive network of local organizations from previous capacity development, research, and consulting activities. This offers an optimal foundation for starting new projects. In other cases, stakeholder assessments and social network analysis can be used to identify partners who are ideally suited to initiate and sustain development efforts.

Relationships are a key part of the success of any social change initiative, and in any development setting, a network of relationships already exists in the local context. Taking this fact into account seriously during the design process offers excellent opportunities for aid efforts to reinforce and strengthen local capacity.

## ALLOW LOCAL PARTNERS TO DRIVE THE PROCESS

Too often, local partners serve as instruments for international agents to implement aid projects, rather than taking a real leadership role. Many forces contribute to these dynamics, including a tendency to value technical content expertise over local knowledge, as well as the high demands for accountability and administrative processes attached to donor funds.

However, experience and research demonstrate that local actors are best suited to identify and solve local problems, and our role is to empower and support them in these efforts. In working with FUM, LINC took an open and collaborative approach to project design and implementation throughout the process, allowing FUM to set the objectives and reflect on their institutional needs. This approach can present challenges to projects seeking to prove fast results after startup.

The design of LCDA built in time for establishing these processes, as well as used a strategy of mentorship (described further in the next section). Another benefit was that the USAID funder was also committed to local leadership. In some cases, the path to progress was not linear or predictable, and the donor was willing to be patient without losing sight of the project's ultimate goals.

*"Local actors are best suited to identify and solve local problems, and our role is to empower and support them in these efforts."*

## ADOPT A MENTORING AND COACHING APPROACH

To support the continuous and sustainable development of FUM, a LINC team member serviced as their coach and mentor. He built strong relationships not only with FUM leadership, but throughout the organization. He was a consistent presence in their major activities and events, and worked at a desk in their office on a regular basis. Having a four-year project was useful for this type of mentorship and coaching for institutional development.

In support of long-term institutional capacity development, the embedded team member provided just-in-time assistance and application of learning. He did not assume ownership and delivery of core tasks nor focus exclusively on providing quality control for short-term deliverables, which is a risk of embedding technical assistance providers.



*During the project, 285 individuals from 179 CSOs completed the Diplomado. Follow up with graduates showed that 89% increased their institutional capacities, with average improvement in organization capacity of 26%.*

## DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABLE PLAN FOR THE DIPLOMADO

The Diplomado is a structured curriculum for CSO capacity building. It was designed jointly by LINC and FUM, providing an early engagement point that increased applicability and local ownership of the material. FUM's role in the creation and familiarity with the materials also allows them to update and adapt the materials based on the local context and future needs.

From the beginning, FUM established partnerships to provide the necessary physical space for the Diplomado sessions. This served as a useful platform for forging investment and support for the Diplomado as a whole from the private sector, government, academic, and community partners. LINC developed a transfer plan jointly with FUM to track progress toward specific indicators and competencies necessary to take full ownership of the Diplomado.

Now that the LCDA project has come to close, FUM continues to offer the Diplomado and build the capacity of CSOs throughout the country, reflecting a lasting legacy of the project.

### USE MILESTONES TO TRACK AND MEASURE CHANGE

In partnership with FUM, LINC developed a set of milestones to track and measure change that would show interim progress in institutional capacity. Typically FUM articulated the substance and direction of the milestone, and LINC provided assistance to make the idea measurable and practical. Monitoring emphasized measuring progress not only through knowledge but also through behaviors and actions.

In this process, milestone timelines must be reasonable, though both implementors and donors are eager to see progress. It was also important that milestone achievement was not simply for the sake of demonstrating progress to the funder and external groups. Rather, honest monitoring helped to understand whether the activity was on track and if adjustments were needed.

### FOSTER EXPERIMENTATION AND SELF-REALIZATION

Finally, despite the fast pace of the project, LINC attempted to create space for experimentation, learning, and adaptation as driven by FUM. Every partner in every context is unique, and it is important to avoid rigidity.

Through collaborative project planning and implementation, it was necessary to be willing to try new things and be open to new ideas. Innovation requires risk, which can be daunting in the aid landscape. Further, to support an environment of continuous improvement, LINC was not too directive. At times, international partners take too much leadership in identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement, which detracts from a local organization's sustainable growth.

The project sought to consciously create an environment through which FUM was able to analyze progress, reflect on deficiencies, and chart their own course forward. This process of self-realization is a key part of the sustainability of any local organization, serving them well beyond the implementation of any one project.

