



Localization Humbles Us to Follow the Lead of Local Priorities.

LINC's reflections on localization, and implementing the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy

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INTRODUCTION

It has been two years since USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced ambitious localization targets for 2030,¹ but discussions on the “how” to make it happen have been limited to discussions within, rather than across, development focused organizations and with partners in operating countries. Moreover, the targets are largely output-oriented, and based on funding and contracts, and thus neither address the more fundamental power dynamics that inhibit a swifter transition in favor of local leadership nor underscore the greater objective of deepening collaboration with, and the leadership of, national colleagues and partners.

LINC enthusiastically supports USAID's localization goals (see the recent LINC report [“Localization Considerations: Lessons from a Novel Activity in Mexico”](#)). As a mission-driven U.S. small business committed to supporting local stakeholders to lead their own development, we believe localization increases development effectiveness and sustainability. Our commitment to localization is reflected in our mission: “working alongside local actors to create sustained change.”

This seven-part LINC blog series is intended to broaden the discussion of how best to not only achieve targets but foster meaningful locally led development that results in greater local control and influence over decision making and design, greater equity within and across partnerships, and greater human development. Throughout the series, we examine USAID's **Local Capacity Strengthening Policy** (the LCS Policy), and its seven principles. We believe that, if implemented robustly, the LCS Policy has the potential to move the international development sector closer to true locally led development. In this 1st blog, we examine the fourth principle of the Policy, which is titled “Aligning Capacity Strengthening with Local Priorities.”

SIDENOTE ON DEFINITIONS

Before diving into this blog, it is worth briefly acknowledging the similarities in terms frequently used in this discussion, and both their overlaps and distinctions. USAID has itself addressed some of these in various posts and trainings (see for example, [this page](#), for reference). While this 1st blog is focused on “local capacity strengthening,” or what USAID defines as “...the intentional investment in the process of

¹ The 2030 targets include:

- 25% of assistance going to local partners; and
- 50% of programming placing local communities in the lead (in co-design of projects, setting priorities, driving implementation, or evaluating the impact of programs).

partnering with local actors—individuals, organizations, and networks—to jointly improve the performance of a local system...”, it is just a facet of “local”, “localization,” “[locally led development](#),” and “systems” and “systems thinking.”

In brief, for the purposes of this blog, LINC understands “local” as encompassing the people, cultures, and the totality of socio-political history and context of the countries and communities where we operate, which is usually outside of the United States. Localization (a process) and locally-led development (a concept) are nearly synonymous and attempt to capture the intentionality—by the international development community—of augmenting the voice, leadership, and technical and strategic input of organizations and development leaders from these same communities. There is inherent tension in this process, we recognize, as it requires donors and mostly foreign-headquartered implementing partners and agencies to cede oversight and control to host-country partners. But evidence is robust that the collective international development community cannot obtain its many shared objectives (of sustainable health, climate resilience, and prosperity, for instance) without greater local influence over program design nor, as this blog discusses, local priorities being central to operations and objectives.



Finally, systems, and systems thinking, are not the domain of localization per se, but, appropriately, have been woven into the wider discussion. That is because localization inherently means understanding that any context or community in which we work is a milieu of competing interests, among diverse stakeholders, and amid historical backdrops and shifting demographics and global events. In short, these factors and actors *interact* in what constitutes a complex adaptive system, and any activity is likely to result in unintended consequences. By working with local counterparts to conceive of the system, its constituent parts, and linkages, we can maybe ‘do no harm’ while making incremental progress alongside our partners. Thus, while systems thinking is relevant anywhere, it is essential to fostering locally led development. See more on systems thinking in the [Systems Thinking Users Guide](#), which LINC developed under the USAID [Local Systems Practice Activity](#).

UNPACKING PRINCIPLE FOUR OF THE LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING POLICY

LINC believes that to meaningfully operationalize locally led development, it is critical to understand the aspirations and perspectives of our host-country partners at the very beginning of its engagement. This notion aligns most closely with Principle 4 of the LCS Policy, which is why we have chosen this for the first topic. The “jumbling” of the order of the seven principles also underscores how we conceive of the principles, as mutually-reinforcing components of a holistic approach, rather than a rigid sequence, even if some of the components are more critical at certain junctures of an activity or engagement.

Understanding how Principle 4 moves USAID and its partners closer to locally led development, however, requires a better understanding of what capacities we are talking about and how they connect to local priorities. USAID has already defined capacity as:

“...the knowledge, skills, and motivations, as well as the relationships that enable an actor—an individual, an organization, or a network—to take action to design and implement solutions to local development challenges, to learn and adapt from that action, and to innovate and transform over time.”

This is a broad but inclusive definition that honors local actors’ existing knowledge and experiences. It suggests that, to align capacity strengthening with local priorities, USAID will be deferential to local priorities, first, and design capacity strengthening *in response and in support of* these priorities—versus [defining capacity as only a function of administrative and accounting skills, FAR sophistication, or procurement specialization](#). Compliance is crucial but does not capture the spectrum of capacities that USAID’s own definition suggests it should. Some other key considerations in support of implementing Principle 4 include:

- **Capacity should not be used as an exclusionary tool.**
 - If capacity is defined narrowly and as an administrative or technocratic bar (and specifically an organization’s capacity to navigate US regulations) USAID and development actors might unintentionally exclude organizations that are potentially crucial to their communities, and to advancing development goals at the community level.
- **Capacity is not the domain of the Global North and donors.**
 - Local organizations in developing countries do not automatically lack capacity, as the indicators and narratives around Localization sometimes suggest. In fact, they very likely possess other capacities that are critical, untapped, and unique to them.
 - Foreign actors, in contrast, will always lack some critical capacity compared to partners in the country of operation—whether a nuanced understanding of cultural norms, local legitimacy and credibility, or even just their long-term presence and unambiguous commitment.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What does this mean for those of us who work in international development based in the Global North and who are committed to strengthening the capacity of our host country partners? Some basic operational considerations for any organization committed to locally led development from this perspective might be the following:



Picture 1. Members of the Plastic and Health Alliance (PHA) of Vietnam participated in a Systems Mapping workshop.

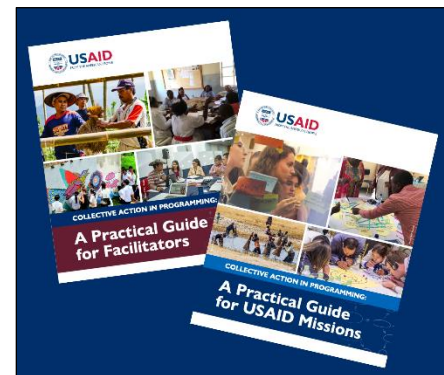
- **Solicit input from the actors who constitute the local system to understand what local priorities are.** To align with local priorities, USAID and implementing partners (IPs) need to understand the interests and influence of (and risks to) different stakeholders relevant to a development issue. There are many techniques and tools that can be used to solicit stakeholder input and gauge their

capacities (including USAID’s [Stakeholder Analysis](#) and [Stakeholder Mapping](#) tools, USAID’s [Collective Action Toolkit](#), Needs Assessment surveys, SWOT Analysis, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), community scorecards, focus groups, etc.)

- **Integrate local priorities into design and implementation.** LINC has recently shared its systems thinking tools and offered training to [local organizations in Vietnam](#), for example, so that they themselves can add an additional approach to their own field work and program design.
- **Broaden the suite of potential actors.** A host of actors play daily, crucial roles in their communities and their development—as peace brokers, organizers, traditional leaders, business owners, or as elders. They have clout and legitimacy in their local systems, stemming from the respect and esteem of their neighbors. But despite local influence and authority, they are less frequently engaged because of their lack of “capacity”—to receive funding, because of a lack of formal registration, English language, or operating funds. Localization, we posit in this blog series, means recognizing these and other underrepresented groups (like youth, women, Persons with Disabilities, etc.) with pivotal roles, and both learning from and partnering with them.

[USAID’s Collective Action Toolkit highlights](#) additional tools and techniques that can improve our understanding of the dynamics and capacity of local actors to engage with one another and constructively and collectively articulate priorities and tradeoffs.

These include but are not limited to tools to identify and understand relationships between actors and networks, like Social Network Analysis (SNA) and Political Economy Analysis (PEA). Another approach may be as simple as issuing an Annual Program Statement on the development issue and asking local actors to identify their priorities for strengthening their own or shared capacity with other actors to act.



Picture 2. Practical Guides for Collective Action in USAID Programming.

RECENT LINC EXPERIENCES

For our part, LINC has been intentionally advancing the Localization Agenda and collaborating with partners in capacity strengthening and prioritization through our own activities. Some examples include the following:

- In Honduras, LINC supported the [USAID/Honduras Transforming Market Systems Activity](#) in listening and systematically collating the perspectives and priorities of more than 200 different stakeholders to determine the key factors that, if leveraged, could drive job creation and competitiveness in select market sectors. See [Structural Factor Analysis - LINC \(linclocal.org\)](#)
 - LINC recently conducted a similar exercise in support of the Southern-Mexico Generating Employment and Sustainability (SURGES) activity, collating in-person feedback from stakeholders from across the tourism and coffee value chains in Oaxaca to determine those factors that are most relevant and impactful.
- Another example comes from Kosovo, where LINC supported the [USAID Up to Youth Activity](#) to engage with youth in the identification of 267 stakeholders currently involved in addressing youth

concerns in a [SNA](#). Youth then identified and prioritized their concerns and mapped how youth service providers might respond to prioritized issues in the scenario. Youth service providers, meanwhile, conducted a similar mapping exercise. This example, in particular, reflects the principle of “*nothing about us without us*,” as youth were either directly involved or leading all prioritization of issues and actors to engage.

CONCLUSION

LINC believes in the importance of the localization agenda that seeks to shift power to local actors in development efforts. However, this shift means that implementing partners and USAID need to make changes in how they work. At LINC, we believe that to engage and strengthen local actors in addressing their priorities, we need to share our experiences across organizations on what we are doing differently.

In this article, we have shared some of our experiences from Honduras, Mexico, Vietnam, and Kosovo in recognizing power dynamics and partnering with local actors (businesses, organizations, youth, local governments) to understand local priorities. Throughout the remainder of this year, we plan to share our experiences and reflections on how we are “learning while doing” vis-à-vis the remaining six principles in the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy.

USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening Policy	
Principles for Effective Programming	Principles for Equitable Partnerships
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Start with the Local System. 2. Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches. 3. Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Align capacity strengthening with local priorities. 5. Appreciate and build on existing capacities. 6. Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our support for local capacity strengthening. 7. Practice mutuality with local partners.

We hope to elicit feedback and sharing from other implementing partners, USAID, and local actors going forward. We believe that this learning and sharing as a community of development practitioners is what will drive the pivots needed to truly propel the Localization Agenda forward.

About LINC: LINC is a mission-driven U.S. small business committed to supporting national stakeholders to lead their own development, which we believe increases development effectiveness and sustainability. Our commitment to localization is reflected in our mission: “working alongside local actors to create sustained change.” Our research, learning, and thought leadership have influenced USAID and other donor’s policies, and the projects we have implemented and the tools we have developed help the international development community better understand, engage, and empower national actors worldwide. The recipient of USAID’s “Small Business of the Year” award in 2017, our country experience spans more than 30 countries in practice areas including monitoring evaluation, research, and learning (MERL); localization; collective action; capacity strengthening; and systems thinking. Learn more at linclocal.org