



Promoting Equitable Partnerships: How Should We Manage Unintended Consequences of Local Capacity Strengthening?

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

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INTRODUCTION

In the seventh and final blog of LINC's Localization series, we share our experiences and reflections on how we are "learning while doing" vis-à-vis the seven principles in USAID's [Local Capacity Strengthening \(LCS\) Policy](#). In this post, we examine LCS Principle No. 6, which focuses on being mindful of and mitigating the unintended consequences of our support for local capacity strengthening.

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.

WHAT DOES THE LCS PRINCIPLE OF "BE MINDFUL OF AND MITIGATE THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF OUR SUPPORT FOR LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING" MEAN?

LCS principle No. 6 - "Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our support for local capacity strengthening" - reminds us to identify and acknowledge that partnerships and local systems

are often shaped by systemic power imbalances that can create and result in unintended harm. As in all facets of development programming, implementation, and evaluation factors such as exclusion, competition, and structural power imbalances manifest in local systems and require our awareness and care when building partnerships and interacting with local partners to avoid exacerbating inequities and inflicting unintentional harm.

USAID, through the advent and implementation of the LCS Policy, has underscored the need to adapt capacity-strengthening approaches to the local system and strengthen local partners' capability to implement their development goals more effectively. This principle acknowledges that certain processes and approaches might unintentionally propagate power imbalances, inequalities, competition, exclusion, or conflict within local systems, causing harm and affecting the outcomes and sustainability of foreign assistance programming. This includes approaches that privilege donor priorities over local priorities. LCS policy principle No. 6 is an explicit recognition that humanitarian and development endeavors can result in negative consequences and that such outcomes should be anticipated and mitigated.

WHAT DOES THIS PRINCIPLE OF "BE MINDFUL OF AND MITIGATE THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF OUR SUPPORT FOR LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING" LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

In line with its mission, LINC works alongside local actors to create sustained change. We do this by understanding how local systems work, elevating local voices, learning and adapting from our experiences, and facilitating local leadership in ways that help local communities define their own development. Our systems-based and politically aware approaches, such as social network analysis and political economy analysis, allow us to better anticipate and mitigate the unintended consequences of our capacity-strengthening efforts.

Under the [USAID Local Evaluation and Evidence Support \(LEES\) Effort](#), LINC is providing capacity-strengthening support to local evaluation, research, and evidence-generating organizations with the goal of reinforcing local ownership in evidence generation. From the outset, the LEES team sought to make sure that training content responded to the priorities of local organizations rather than donor priorities. LINC and our partner, The Cloudburst Group, conducted in-country consultations with local research and evaluation organizations to better understand what kinds of training topics they wanted and incorporated this feedback into the design of the training modules. Additionally, the LEES team was concerned that a top-down participant selection process would reinforce existing power dynamics within the local evidence ecosystem, with only the "usual suspect" organizations – those who are already known to donors and implementing partners – being nominated for inclusion in the training cohort. To mitigate



The LEES Team at the LEES-hosted writing workshop for local organizations in Lusaka, Zambia

this risk, the LEES team conducted extensive outreach campaigns in each country to reach as broad a pool of candidate organizations as possible.

LEES also developed selection criteria that emphasized diversity in the training cohort, giving heavier weight to organizations that had marginalized individuals in leadership positions, presence in under-represented regions, and experience conducting research and evaluations in a range of technical sectors. The resulting training cohorts represented a diverse cross-section of firms and organizations with varying capacities and experiences.

In Ghana, where LINC implements the country's first USAID Mission-wide [MEL Platform](#), LINC works closely with its key partners, including a Ghanaian university research center, to collaboratively assess Mission requests and to determine technical requirements and available resources before responding with technical scopes of work. We also work closely with the research center's administrative staff to tailor task orders, adjust budgets, and ensure adequate LOE for its staff while remaining compliant. In short, our localization commitment is less a series of checkboxes, but a daily process of working closely with partners, sharing information, and assisting in regulatory or compliance capacity strengthening as issues arise. The result is open and flexible two-way communication that avoids the ambiguity of roles, encourages growth, and enables our partner to clearly pursue its own ambitions and objectives. This relationship and its outcomes will further allow our partner to pursue USAID work going forward, with or without LINC, and based on its strengths and assets.

The [USAID Communities of Practice for Effective Partnerships \(COPE\) Activity](#) is a Global South partnership between sixteen local organizations in Asia and Latin America that intentionally tries to address the assumption that international development experts, especially in the Global North, know better how to design, implement, evaluate, and adapt programming while putting systems thinking into practice.

The community of practice invited LINC to provide them with monitoring, evaluation, and learning services to help understand 1) where they are already using systems thinking in practice and 2) if their systems practice improves as the member organizations take steps to intentionally use systems thinking more in their programming to achieve their goals. Instead of using a tool to capture improved performance that asks several questions about whether the structure and processes of these local organizations emulates international organizations in structure, governance, and operations (like the OCA and OPI), LINC worked with the members to create a more narrative-based tool that describes how they appreciate the systems they work in, select and implement actions, learn from action and interventions, and modify actions—SCAMPI (A Systems Change Approach For Measuring Performance Improvement). The rating system asked for the frequency of systems practice and a description of what it looks like (rather than a checklist of tools or approaches). This meant that some approaches that LINC, for example, was not familiar with, were described as ways that some members, like those in Colombia that use *Diálogo de Saberes* (Dialogue of Knowledge) to review other perspectives on complex problems.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO WE FACE IN EMBRACING THIS PRINCIPLE?

LINC's core values of accountability, humility, diversity, respect, practicality, and curiosity allow us to approach our work in a way that enables us to identify potential negative consequences of our work. That said, our projects often include ambitious targets and aggressive deadlines. These requirements can sometimes limit the time available to conduct a thorough analysis before starting implementation.

Under the LEES effort, the application and selection process relied primarily on self-reported data, some of which contained incomplete or inconsistent information. Because LEES had emphasized that organizations with marginalized individuals in leadership positions would be prioritized for inclusion, this created an incentive for applicants to inflate the roles of marginalized individuals in their leadership structures. To ensure that LEES-based selection decisions are based on accurate information, we engaged country coordinators, USAID MEL platforms, and other local stakeholders to vet and verify application data before beginning the selection process.

On the COPE Activity, the Gerry Roxas Foundation in the Philippines and ECOSS in Colombia recognized that many of the local organizations that participated in systems thinking training provided by the LINC-led USAID Local Systems Practice activity from 2017 to 2020 did not currently have funders that encouraged them to experiment with systems thinking approaches in their programming. The members needed not only an organizational willingness to try this in practice but also funding resources to enable them to discover whether systems practice will lead them to more achievements of their objectives in local systems. Most of the organizations had not received USAID funding in the past either. While LINC is involved as a learning partner for the COPE Activity, LINC is not overseeing the grant award process and administering the grants; we are one of three technical reviewers, including GRF and ECOSS. Sometimes there is an unconscious bias, even amongst the COPE Activity members and LINC, to think that LINC has the answer or knows what to do technically with all concepts, but we try to remind ourselves and the community that we are striving to coach and shift power for the local organizations to determine locally led solutions to their challenges. All three member organizations of the project management team are trying to not let our own biases and assumptions slow down the grant award process, but it has not been easy to work more intentionally aware of unintended consequences and be less directive in the process.

CONCLUSION

In our own work, LINC strives to support the localization agenda while also minimizing unintended consequences to local actors and promoting equitable, sustainable, and inclusive partnerships. Local power dynamics are often invisible to outsiders, so USAID and its implementing partners must take the time to work with local actors to develop an understanding of how those dynamics can affect programming, and in turn, how programming can reinforce existing imbalances or exacerbate competition or conflict. Adaptive management is also critical for ensuring that USAID programs can proactively identify and respond to potential negative consequences in shifting local contexts. LINC remains committed to thoughtful analysis, careful planning, and iterative adaptation to ensure that our activities do not result in negative outcomes for local partners and systems.

About LINC: LINC is a mission-driven U.S. small business committed to supporting local 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 “2017 Small Business of the Year” and Inc. 5000 “Fastest Growing Companies” awards, our 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