



To Start: Locally Led Development Efforts Need to Appreciate the System “As Is”

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

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INTRODUCTION

LINC’s blog series on localization and the [USAID Local Capacity Strengthening \(LCS\) Policy](#) continues with a brief reflection on Policy Principle #1: *Start with the Local System*.

In our previous blog, “[Localization Humbles Us to Follow the Lead of Local Priorities](#)”, we described how we at LINC see USAID’s vision on localization and the LCS policy as a layered set of principles that, while numbered, don’t necessarily require step-wise roll-out.

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 THIS PRINCIPLE OF “STARTING WITH THE LOCAL SYSTEM” MEAN?

The notion of a “system” can itself be a challenge for clients, even USAID, and even when we are explicitly utilizing a systems approach and delivering a systems analysis! So, like renowned systems scientist [Peter Senge](#), we at LINC suggest that you use the word “problem” before you start.

We all inherently understand that the development challenges or problems that our programming addresses are affected by a messy bunch of stuff, whether politics, inflation, or armed conflict. The relationship between the problems and their causes is not always direct or obvious, and even when we try to study and fix the problems, they often recur. Add to that the fact that most development programming may be just one of multiple separate initiatives underway to address the problem.

Thus, starting with the “local system” means that we need to try to understand the whole context affecting a problem and the dynamics of its parts—those actors involved in the system (or not), what resources they have (or do not), how they interact (or do not), and what rules or expectations influence the interactions. So, once we define the problem, we set a boundary of the system producing the development problem to determine how much of the challenge we are going to examine and include with respect to a desired outcome—like [reducing plastic pollution in a district of Vietnam](#), for example—or a key variable—like understanding how social and economic reforms in Ethiopia affect regional conflict dynamics.

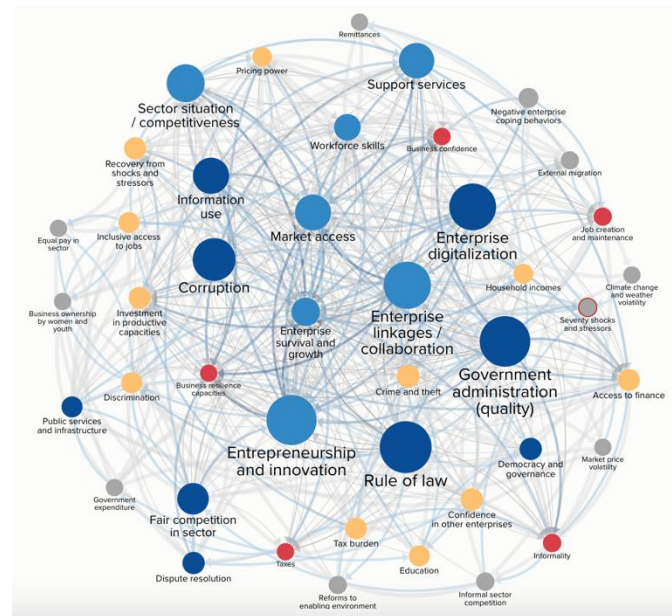
Without some structure, a system is indeed a jumble of messy stuff, and thus a small community-based organization might feel engulfed by all the other factors. Orienting a systems analysis with a boundary, and focus, however, permits analysis, findings, and recommendations, while accounting for how factors interact, and their relative strength.

WHAT DOES THIS PRINCIPLE OF “STARTING WITH THE LOCAL SYSTEM” LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

At LINC, we often train others on systems thinking and approaches. In our trainings, we cover systems thinking concepts like feedback loops, factors, causality, emergence, boundaries, leverage points, unintended consequences, perspectives, etc. We also cover tools like systems scans, causal loop diagrams, network analyses, ethnography, Political Economy Analyses, and other systems analyses. For example, we are currently offering technical guidance and support to 16 local organizations from across Asia and Latin America on the [Communities of Practice for Effective Partnerships \(COPE\) Activity](#). The expectation is that local organizations can apply this knowledge practically to their own areas of focus on development challenges and augment their understanding of the problems on which they are focused.

At LINC, we do not just teach, we also apply different systems thinking tools and approaches on our programs. (More information on our use of structural factor analysis, influence maps, and causal loop diagrams can be found on our [website](#)). These different systems tools can help us identify which factors are susceptible to influence and change from the outside—either by USAID or local organizations—and then what cascading effects might emerge. By starting with a systems analysis, we can provide clients with more actionable and meaningful recommendations than had we not grappled with the current system.

Determining factors and their relationships can be done remotely by harvesting data from articles, news sources, or even interviews. But for a recent structural factor analysis we conducted to understand how tourism in southern Mexico could benefit local stakeholders better, we conducted multiple workshops with



Factor map from the TMS Structural Factor Analysis. USAID/Honduras Transforming Market Systems Activity.

stakeholders from across the tourism value chain in the region. The workshops were preceded by two rounds of surveys that allowed us to identify a long list of factors, and subsequently consolidate that list, before the workshops brought stakeholders together to discuss each factor and how they related to others.

The results, in places, challenged conventional wisdom, and even baffled our local partner. But importantly, we developed a map of a system, and of which factors mattered most, and how, as based on the experience of those embedded within it, and with unambiguous takeaways with respect to investment and policy.

WHAT IS SO DIFFERENT ABOUT EMBRACING THIS PRINCIPLE?

All too often a donor or an implementer identifies a local development challenge and wants to fix it as fast as possible. This principle encourages and challenges us to do something different.



It challenges us to genuinely understand the dynamics of the system that result in the problem. It challenges us to determine the appetite for change (where there may be willingness or feasibility for actors to change), to take a step back intentionally and consider how deeply potential changes could affect the dynamics of the system (not just treating symptoms of problems, but the underlying root causes of the problems), to select leverage points that maximize our return on investment, and to consider multiple stakeholders' viewpoints of what change would be "valuable".

But, to understand the dynamics of the system, we do need time, often an "inception" period. We need less pressure from the funding agencies to get immediate short-term results. We need to ensure local stakeholders are not just consulted, but also have a meaningful leadership role in defining what change in development problems would be valuable to them and other stakeholders. We need to embrace the mess, make sense of it, and not keep treating symptoms with approaches that are not leading to meaningful disruption of the *status quo* that keeps the wicked development problems recurring. Finally, we need buy-in from local stakeholders to not work on development problems in isolation, but together.

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