What is "Mutuality" in a Development Context?

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 #7: *Practice Mutuality with Local Partners*.

In our previous posts, "Localization Humbles Us to Follow the Lead of Local Priorities", and "To start: Locally Led Development Efforts Need to Appreciate the System "As Is", 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.

This blog post is dedicated to examining LCS Policy No. 7: Practice Mutuality with Local Partners.

USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy	
Principles for Effective Programming	**Principles for Equitable Partnerships**
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.	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.**

UNPACKING "MUTUALITY"

In its LCS policy, USAID defines mutuality as "a positive condition or shared mindset about a relationship whereby two (or multiple) partners aim to balance power differences by striving for reciprocal partnerships that accrue benefit to each partner through relationships built on trust and respect." Its inclusion as a stand-alone principle raises a few questions.

On the one hand, by teasing out "mutuality," USAID is highlighting an area for implementing partners and entities like LINC to examine all facets of their work with local partners, to maximize trust and define shared goal and interests. We may think we are doing this already, but making it a principle does

force a reckoning around the language we use (more on this below) or the actions we take and how they may either build trust or erode it, even if unintentionally.

Building trust and mutual respect might seem inherent in the localization policy, or perhaps it could be an assumed, positive outcome from the implementation of effective "localization," but again, making mutuality a principle on its own forces further reflection and communication with partners.

On the other hand, "mutuality" introduces a fraught concept, and it risks suggesting that there may be some sort of "necessary condition," or that there are certain terms required for the other elements of the LCS Policy to take effect, or for ongoing engagement or for localization to "work."

USAID itself acknowledges that partnerships in development programming are being built atop inherent power asymmetries while arguing that mutuality is a "shared mindset" and that "partners aim to balance power differences by striving for reciprocal partnerships that *accrue benefit to each partner through relationships built on trust and respect"* (emphasis added).

This last part seems potentially burdensome to building partnerships, and almost a caveat – that we need to "accrue benefits" from the very partners whom have been unable to access USAID resources previously, who have established relationships and local networks based on trust and shared experiences that we "exploit" (even if to accomplish what we hope are broadly beneficial aims), and who historically have had limited to no input over the greater development discourse and trajectory within their country and communities.

While all parties always desire effective, collaborative, and mutually beneficial partnerships, the burden is ultimately on implementing partners to create the space for local partners to flex their strengths and assets and provide the resources with which to engage with USAID more deeply, including in reflective discourse. When operating in areas of fragility, and limited or strained democracy, the onus is on us to ensure duty of care for our partners' safety. In this sense, "mutuality" should not convey equality of "accrued benefits."

MUTUALITY AT LINC

USAID, in its discussion around mutuality, proposes exercises such as "co-creating theories of change," "jointly selecting performance indicators," and "collaboratively analyzing and interpreting data." All of these are appropriate recommendations, though by now should be routine practice in working partnerships. But one could argue that they don't go far enough or capture the full potential of true "mutuality."

While we ourselves have more to learn, mutuality is perhaps best conveyed at LINC through small, consistent actions and interactions, though policy plays a part as well. Some examples include the following:

1. On a recent USAID seminar on implementing the LCS Policy in DRG programming, an invited guest mentioned the language we use with partners, including development jargon, and its potentially chilling effect on inclusivity. This is something we have been increasingly cognizant of as we endeavor to create platforms that are inclusive and congenial, in print and verbally.

required for reporting.

2.   LINC is assembling its chiefs of party and project leaders from projects spanning regions at our US headquarters in December. The goal is to share experiences, improve collaboration, and to ensure that LINC HQ is both listening to and supporting its project offices in the most meaningful way possible.

3.   LINC puts the well-being of its project office staff first and, while our work is at times challenging, we are always collaborating with our project offices over policies—from work-from-home to retirement savings—that foster stability and well-being to the extent possible.

4.   LINC practices a One Team approach on all our long-term projects, all of which feature local organizations as core members of the team, often providing long-term staff. These organizations participate in regular performance reviews and annual work planning, which reinforces our shared interests and commitments.

A team-building exercise, including staff from HQ, during a planning session. Resilience Learning Activity. Ethiopia.

EQUITY, NOT EQUALITY

Among the resources USAID drew from as it developed its LCS Policy was research on "systems change and deep equity," which is perhaps more aligned with how we should see mutuality when working with our partners—less a pursuit of equal gain, but more one built atop respect, empathy, and learning, and recognizing the historical and present imbalances that continue to affect development programming.

Some final thoughts are as follows:

- Mutuality should be a positive externality of the process of localization and honoring the partnerships that have developed rather than a pursuit all its own *per se.*
- Mutuality is itself being established atop power dynamics so take great care that "mutual accountability" is fair and consistent.
- Equity means a purposefully uneven distribution of resources to achieve equality. The burden is on prime contractors and/or North American firms to lay the groundwork for mutuality, by demonstrating respect and creating platforms for dialogue and receiving feedback.

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