



Equitable Partnerships Require an Appreciation of Diverse Capacities.

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 No. 5: *Appreciate and Build on Existing Capacities*. Through this series, we're sharing our experiences and reflections on how we are "learning while doing" vis-à-vis the seven principles in the LCS Policy.

Principle No. 5 challenges us to use strengths or asset-based approaches to appreciate and build the existing capacities of partners. In the true spirit of the word, this means there should be reflection from all parties in a partnership, including host country organizations, the foreign actors, and any other group or individual affected by the development problem.

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.

As stressed in our previous blogs, we hope to elicit feedback and sharing from others with this series. We encourage you to provide your comments, or contribute to the conversation, by replying to others, on [LinkedIn](#), and/or on our [website](#).

WHAT DOES THIS PRINCIPLE OF "APPRECIATE AND BUILD EXISTING CAPACITIES" MEAN?

As cited in our [first blog post](#), USAID has defined the "capacity" to respond to a development challenge 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.”

LINC believes that who possesses this capacity should not be determined in a boardroom or remote office. Identifying and ranking local actors by arbitrary criteria of what is “good to have,” and “building the capacity” of organizations or local actors based on outputs and more trainings, does not a sustainable, locally led ecosystem make.

Principle No. 5, in contrast, challenges us to engage appreciatively with local actors to have greater contextual awareness of the diverse actors in the local systems and to reflect on who plays what role(s) in a dynamic system, how actors relate to one another and the context, and what they have in terms of strengths, assets, and capabilities to act vis-à-vis a local development challenge.

Combining this deliberate approach with tools like [USAID’s 5Rs](#), [FSG’s Actor Mapping](#), [USAID’s Practical Guides for Collective Action in Programming](#), or [Participatory Systems Analysis from the Local Systems Practice User’s Guide](#), enables a focus on what multiple local actors have, rather than what they lack, when determining how to set priorities and act on solutions.

What Kind of capacities could be useful in addressing a local development challenge?

*These “useful” capacities likely depend on the dynamics of the context of the local system, the development challenge, other actors’ resources and skills, and the perceptions of those who will be most affected by the prioritized changes. **There is not one checklist.***

Principle No. 5 challenges us to consider the potential for collective action by multiple local actors to address local development challenges in ways that fit with the strengths and resources they have and the results they collectively desire and are willing to prioritize.

WHAT DOES THIS PRINCIPLE OF “APPRECIATING AND BUILDING EXISTING CAPACITIES” LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening Policy presents a few ways that this principle could be put into practice, and recently held, in October 2023, an Annual Learning Feedback Virtual Forum to discuss additional cases and ways the principles can be put into practice.

One way is by using a **strengths or asset-based approach** to support local communities in seeing ways they can use their strengths and assets to meet their prioritized challenges. Two frameworks highlighted by USAID include the Strengths, Opportunities, Aspiration, and Results (SOAR) tool which, in contrast to a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT), focuses on the experiences not only of managers or one team but of all actors in an organization, group, business, or system and on what they are already doing well (not on weaknesses and threats).



The other framework mentioned is the [Positive Youth Development \(PYD\) Framework](#) which explicitly considers the diverse protective factors in a young person’s environment that can help them overcome

adversity—like family support, caring adults, positive peer groups, self-esteem, future aspiration, engagement in school, and community activities.

At LINC, we put this principle into practice on the [USAID Kosovo Up to Youth Activity](#), on which we facilitate the engagement of formal and informal actors to address youth challenges through Youth Support Networks (YSNs). To facilitate engagement, we helped youth identify youth development stakeholders through a social network analysis (SNA), utilizing a series of interviews youth conducted (with questions they wanted to ask) and then analyzed. We held additional workshops with youth and regional service providers to discuss the SNA findings and to map real-life youth concern scenarios, as well as which local actors might be best poised with “assets” and “strengths” to address them. Since then, the YSNs that were formed have been led by ever-changing youth prioritized concerns and by an appreciation of the ways multiple local actors can address them together.

Another way this principle can be put into practice is by using appreciative/participatory approaches of strengths. USAID has highlighted the importance of including indigenous and local knowledge, practices, and beliefs into programming. Recently, LINC, on the [USAID Mexico MESA Activity](#), has worked with USAID Mexico to intentionally incorporate how to effectively listen to and engage with indigenous communities in program and Activity design, implementation, and monitoring, through consultation steps in a process workflow for the Mission.

On the [USAID Communities of Practice for Effective Partnerships \(COPE\) Activity](#), LINC worked with 15 member organizations from across Asia and Latin America to conduct a self-assessment of their capacity to use systems thinking to achieve more sustainable local development change objectives. Rather than provide a checklist of approaches and tools and asking which they had used or used well, we asked participants to describe how they understood system dynamics, determined appetite for change, and identified leverage points in addressing a challenge. We were excited to see that a few of the examples provided were unfamiliar to us at LINC. For example, one member mentioned using “[Diálogo de Saberes](#)”, a method whereby people, groups, or communities from different origins and cultures share how they think development challenges could be tackled with participation from the diverse actors present. A similar method, [Whole System in the Room](#), can be used for similar purposes, looking for “common ground”, rather than “conflict resolution”.



USAID Ethiopia RLA team building blocks at a team exercise.

USAID stresses that principle No. 5 challenges us to take a facilitative approach rather than a directive one. On the COPE Activity, as well as others like USAID Mexico MESA and [USAID Ethiopia Resilience Learning Activity \(RLA\)](#), LINC has worked to support capacity building on the learning priorities articulated by others (like COPE members or staff within USAID/Mexico and USAID/Ethiopia). This means that we need to be more consultative and to listen truly and humbly.

WHAT IS SO DIFFERENT ABOUT EMBRACING THIS PRINCIPLE?

To [shift power to local actors](#) in development efforts means that we have to build in more time for identification and engagement with local actors on local development challenges. Donors and international implementing partners need to stop picking the couple “good” or “strong” partners and find ways to encourage collective action by including multiple local actors (formal and informal) in prioritizing change objectives, when appropriate. This also means that donors and implementing partner leadership need to stop incentivizing “picking winners” and early overly ambitious results in programming. Such expectations are counterproductive to this principle of appreciation and cultivation of capacity.

Furthermore, not all actors are going to “receive” resources or capacity strengthening support, nor should they, but that does not mean they should not be involved as “partners” in co-creation, implementation, evaluation, or adaptation. We do not have to limit that term to subcontractors, grantees, and government stakeholders. A partnership with youth (not in a formal organization) can be very valuable to hear and engage with them on their priorities with multiple actors. The same can be said for partnerships with indigenous people, women, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable individuals and groups. We need to appreciate more diverse actors in local systems, and the roles, strengths, and capabilities they have, so that we stop hearing, “concerns” about how international donors and organizations “understand and support” them and hear instead examples of what has worked. To that end, please share your experiences on what you are doing differently to appreciate and build capacities.

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