



Capacity Strengthening: Engaging Local Actors in Meaningful Ways

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

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INTRODUCTION

In 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 article, we focus on LCS Principle No. 2, understanding the principle of strengthening capacities in ways that acknowledge the diversity and contributions of local actors, as well as the challenges we encounter in the process.

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 THE LCS PRINCIPLE OF "STRENGTHEN DIVERSE CAPACITIES THROUGH DIVERSE APPROACHES" MEAN?

LCS Principle No. 2, "Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches", focuses on collaborating with local actors, understanding their priorities, existing strengths, and performance improvement goals. The principle also challenges us to ensure that capacity strengthening engages local actors in meaningful ways.

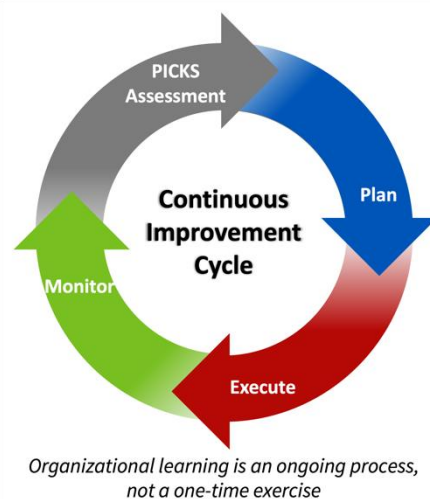
It focuses on customizing capacity-strengthening approaches to different actors at different levels, acknowledging that individuals, organizations, local networks, and systems have unique attributes, different levels of agency, influence, power, and access to resources. Across a host country, small, even non-traditional organizations will possess diverse networks that USAID and implementing partners (IPs) could likely never replicate, and which are based on hard-earned trust featuring a shared dialect, shared norms, or even more simply, the durability and persistence of an organization to its communities. This policy is an explicit recognition of the inherent diversity among local organizations and their diverse attributes.

USAID has, through the advent and implementation of the LCS Policy, underscored the need to adapt capacity-strengthening approaches to the local system and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches, particularly traditional training models, which typically privilege external expertise over local knowledge, minimize cultural nuances, assume all systems and actors are fundamentally similar, and diminish opportunities for advantageous co-creation.

WHAT DOES THIS PRINCIPLE OF "STRENGTHEN DIVERSE CAPACITIES THROUGH DIVERSE APPROACHES" LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

LINC's mission is to work alongside local actors to create sustained change. As an organization, LINC has always been committed to facilitating local solutions and strengthening diverse capacities through diverse approaches.

One example of how LINC operates that both honors local priorities and avoids patronizing approaches to capacity strengthening is how we provide organizational development services that are aligned with local demand, ensuring that local organizations identify their own capacity-strengthening needs. A tool that LINC has utilized to capture and relay to donors what host country organizations are prioritizing is our [Pre-Investment Capacity and Knowledge Scorecard \(PICKS\)](#) - an organizational development tool that is designed to assess organizational process effectiveness, measure internal social capital, and gauge the engagement of actors within their networks.



PICKS allows organizations to develop action plans that help them achieve their objectives, and which are reflective of their aspirations; the plan is created by and for local actors, ensuring that it is meaningful. In 2023, LINC began implementing the [Local Evaluation and Evidence Support \(LEES\) Activity](#) for USAID's Bureau of Planning, Learning, and Resource Management (USAID/PLR) in which LINC will identify networks of host country research and evaluation firms that USAID, other international organizations, and local government can engage for evaluation and learning activities. The PICKS tool will be central to this effort.

Additionally, we have years of experience building networks of local organizations and communities of practice on multiple USAID projects, including the new USAID-funded [Communities of Practice for Effective Partnerships \(COPE\) Activity](#). COPE is designed to foster South-South cooperation and leverage technology to facilitate collaboration. Creating peer-to-peer learning opportunities through

communities of practice is also central to our current USAID-funded work under the [Ethiopia Resilience Learning Activity](#), the [Ghana MEL Platform](#), and the [Mexico Monitoring and Evaluation Support for Adaptation Activity](#). These communities of practice are key to relationship brokering and network strengthening in each local ecosystem and facilitating local actors to drive their own development agendas.

In Kosovo, LINC uses a socially inclusive approach to engaging women, youth, and members of marginalized groups in the implementation of the USAID [Up to Youth program](#). Together with Global Communities, LINC works with marginalized youth, particularly those underserved by current and past youth-focused initiatives, grappling with unaddressed stress and trauma, or vulnerable to developing risky behaviors. The project also focuses on reaching youth with disabilities, a group that has historically been excluded from education and community-based programming. One of the diverse approaches that LINC has employed to strengthen local capacities is the establishment of Youth Support Networks. These networks enable youth to craft their own vision, build their own governance structures, develop their own action plans, and implement activities that respond to youth priorities.



WHAT CHALLENGES DO WE FACE IN EMBRACING THIS PRINCIPLE?

LINC’s mission is to facilitate local solutions and ensure that local actors define their own capacity-strengthening needs, but there are challenges involved in living out this mission. One of them is simply around how capacity is conceptualized. How is “capacity” defined, and who gets to define it? Is

“capacity” limited to certain tools or knowledge areas, or is it limited to sophisticated management systems? Can “capacity” be self-defined?

Another challenge is that managing programs where local actors possess varying levels of capacity can be particularly complex. LINC is currently supporting a donor-funded program that brings together a range of international organizations and local actors. Each partner has its own discrete scope, budget, and unique set of priorities. However, partners are not equally invested, incentivized, or resourced to strengthen capacities, and there are silos in the implementation of the program. While the program has been able to capitalize on the technical capacities that already exist among the local actors, the limited operational capacity of these partners to comply with the donor requirements has created obstacles in the achievement of program results. One on hand, the program is succeeding at engaging local actors in meaningful ways. On the other hand, the capacities that are perceived to be necessary for the success of the program are also creating risks as far as the achievement of program results.

Finally, the rapid pace of the typical USAID program sometimes creates challenges with fully reflecting on findings; implementing CLA with local partners, IPs, and stakeholders; and revising things like learning agendas and learning priorities with greater local input and perspective. Adopting intentional CLA practices like pause and reflect sessions, after-action reviews, and collaborative work planning all help though. As we continue to advance and promote localization and learning we will continue to cultivate local partnerships and gain greater local feedback to inform learning.

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 USAID and implementing partners need to make changes in how we work. At LINC, we believe that for capacity strengthening to be most meaningful, we need to use tools and approaches that engage local actors in developing action plans that help them achieve their own objectives and aspirations. Most of all, capacity-strengthening activities should be inclusive and focused on facilitating local actors to drive their own development agenda. In practice, the enactment of this principle requires the right enabling environment. Most importantly, the desire to purposefully involve local actors no matter the operational challenges or constraints that it may present. LINC continues to prioritize, customize, and refine its own capacity-strengthening approaches to ensure that they remain relevant and meaningful for local actors.

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