



Strengthening Country Systems:
An Experience Summit
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COUNTRY SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING: BEYOND HUMAN AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

JOHN GILLIES, FHI 360 AND FELIX ALVARADO, VITRUVIAN CONSULTING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

This background paper explores USAID's experience in human and organizational capacity in the context of systems strengthening, exploring the following issues:

- ✓ How has human and institutional capacity building contributed to country system strengthening?
- ✓ What are the primary factors that contribute to successful country systems strengthening?
- ✓ What implementation modalities have proven effective for developing national capacity?
- ✓ How do we know that interventions are actually improving systems?
- ✓ What are the implications for donors, and USAID in particular, in the context of changing international assistance?

This paper focuses on one program (The Guatemala Dialogue for Social Investment Project) in detail to illustrate the challenges and practice of addressing systems issues: 1) the underlying thinking about a theory of change, 2) learning about the process as the programs develop, and 3) the operational issue of what it takes to be successful in the USAID structure. From this review emerge certain elements that are needed to support country systems strengthening:

Define success and failure, and attribute them correctly. Defining success is the first problem in improving systems. Whether the modality is through training individuals, supporting organizations with performance consulting, or addressing system constraints, one needs to be able to recognize success. Equally important is recognizing failure as part of systems strengthening initiatives.

Bet on the system every time. All capacity building, whether of individuals, organizations, or systems, will involve people with multiple links to their environment. A systems approach acknowledges and seeks to leverage these links. Even localized interventions need to be considered in the context of system-level dynamics and how the intervention might contribute to robust, coherent, integrated, self-driven, and resilient systems.

¹ This summary is taken from a background paper prepared for the USAID Strengthening Country Systems Experience Summit. To access the full paper, please visit <http://kdid.org/library/country-systems-strengthening-beyond-human-and-organizational-capacity-development>.



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Locate the donor within the system. The international consensus documented in the Paris Declaration, the Accra Agenda, and the Busan Forum clearly acknowledges the critical importance of local leadership for aid effectiveness. This supports a central tenet in systems theory—that change must be driven from within. A radical implication is that donors also acknowledge that they are part of the system and not just talking from the outside. This also implies that the donor accepts the need to be part of the change and to relinquish control.

Develop programs for partners, not partners for programs. When the donor is part of the system, developing genuine partnerships requires a different programmatic relationship. From a systems perspective, this represents the endless resilience of systems to externally imposed change, and the limits of linear thinking. From a practical standpoint, it also represents the view from an external player who defined the objectives, strategy, and benchmarks, administered the funds, and measured results—only to find them wanting.

Acknowledge emergent processes. Institutional systems are large and complex, with multiple interactions within and between organizations. This implies a large proportion of uncertainty in outcomes, and a non-linear relationship between interventions and results.

Address democracy in national systems strengthening. The efforts described are focused on improving the operation of the system, in terms of performance, how it guarantees its survival, and procures its self-reproduction. However, this is not enough for systems strengthening for development and public institutions. A fundamental aspect of these systems is providing, sustaining, and renewing the substantive functions of a democratic state. It is not enough to procure improvement in organizational and sector functions if this does not guarantee conditions such as justice, representation, and openness.

Measure systems strengthening. An important aspect of improvement in systems strengthening will be developing a better conceptual and operational approach to measurement that allows donors to measure both concrete activities and less tangible trends. This will require moving beyond the linear impact assumptions that inform of the current evidence-based approaches.

The history of USAID engagement in human and institutional capacity building indicates that interventions at each level—individual, organizational, and system—have had some success and some failure as measured against the established project indicators. It is likely—even probable—that some of these interventions have had profound effects on country systems, but for the most part USAID has not been looking for such effects. Effective engagement with systems must work at all levels—individual skills, organizational performance, and system dynamics. The challenge of systems strengthening is to understand how to define success—and failure—in such complex endeavors, and most importantly how to incorporate these issues in the institutional and political structure of USAID.