



Strengthening Country Systems:
An Experience Summit
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AID RECIPIENT PERSPECTIVES ON STRENGTHENING COUNTRY SYSTEMS

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As USAID looks to strengthen country systems, it must move from its current approach that strengthens the aid delivery system to a collaborative approach that identifies and strengthens existing systems—including institutions, processes, and people in the government, civil society, private sector, media, academia, and other sectors working to develop their countries. Following are some recommendations gathered by The Listening Project, which listened to the experiences and ideas of over 6,000 people in aid recipient countries about how to make aid efforts more effective:

- **Understand the context and the way local systems are interconnected.** This requires time, a local presence, and local relationships, and is not something that can easily be outsourced. As a city official in Mindanao, Philippines noted, “Those donors who have been on the ground longer understand the local dynamics and political context better. But people get moved around like ambassadors and that knowledge often goes with them. For example, people rarely ask, ‘Where is the source of authority and credibility within this community?’ before they enter one. In some places, it does not reside with the local government, but rather perhaps in the local rebel group or community leader. Knowing local context is important in order to bring even more change through a development process. But this takes time.”
- **Don’t provide pre-packaged assistance to fill pre-determined “gaps.”** People resent “pre-packaged” approaches and projects, and complain that aid agencies do not consider the local context, resources, and capacities when making decisions. Supporting country systems cannot be done without listening to the people in those systems, enabling them to identify the weaknesses they have and working with them to determine the best ways to strengthen them. A government official in Kenya described the change that is needed: “Policy-makers and donors sometimes push projects from the top-down through agreements made at the national level with no local input. But donors should fund a ‘basket’ of options and let them propose locally from their priorities so that communities can solve their problems on their own.”
- **Strengthen local capacity by focusing on respectful relationships and effective partnerships.** Language matters—if donors say they are “strengthening local capacity” then they must first have a good idea of what capacities exist and how these need to be strengthened. These capacities do not exist in isolation—they are interlinked parts of a complex system. An observer in Kosovo noted that with so much project aid channeled through NGOs, donors had only built a “project society, not a civil society” capable of playing a vital role in a democratic society. Instead, an NGO leader in Thailand suggested that, “The role of the ‘donor’ does not have to be a detached funding role. It can be a partnership. Even when they work through local partners, the local NGO simply becomes a delivery mechanism, not a full partner. Partnership requires building relationships. That takes time. But most international NGOs have donors who demand fast and visible results. There is a disconnect in the way most agencies envision their mission and goals and the way they implement their project seeking rapid outcomes.”



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- **Avoid “proceduralization” which can undermine principles of ownership and participation.** Both aid recipients and providers talk about how processes and methods which are meant to improve participation and ensure local ownership have become so “proceduralized” that they are counterproductive. Rigid pre-determined templates for programming and tight timelines too often stifle creativity and innovation, as well as adaptation to local contexts and capabilities. As a consultant in Lebanon said, “Working in templates is easy. They are available. But to do it right, you need more time and money and effort. Template projects get more visibility. Some donors come with ‘results-based frameworks’ with all their definitions. This is meant to be a tool for better projects, but they spend half the year explaining what it is.” Since a good process is intrinsic to good results, USAID must simplify its procedures and pay attention to how they are being used to ensure that the original intent in strengthening local systems is being met.
- **Share control and responsibility.** Too often, donors have focused on strengthening the aid delivery system, rather than systems that engage and support people to play a greater role in their own development—something which they are actually eager to do. People in aid recipient societies talk about several issues that donors and aid agencies must address in order to ensure broad-based ownership of development efforts. One of these is control—of processes, projects, and information. As a radio announcer in Ecuador said, “If people don’t feel proprietorship for the project, there will be no development. They must take ownership of the process, but only if the methodology is developed together.” Similarly, an agricultural officer in Kenya described how “the schemes which have been successful have big ownership which makes them value them more. Projects that are funded 100 percent from the top down are not successful. Donors should not look at communities as poor—they have ideas and resources.” Supporting local ownership of development efforts requires a willingness to listen and respond to feedback, as well as a commitment to truly share power and control.
- **Make long-term commitments to strengthen local capacities and systems.** Too often, rapidly shifting political agendas and funding priorities can result in fragmented and incomplete development efforts. When donors change their priorities too quickly, ending funding for one type of programming and starting another or switching from one set of local institutions to another, it produces diffuse action, promotes competition between local actors, and undermines effectiveness. Such rapid swings reveal a strategic failure as donors react to new fashions in aid or assume that changes in one sector will lead to systemic changes. As a coordinator of a Lebanese NGO said, “We need strategic, long-term partnerships with donors. The impact doesn’t come overnight. If they want to make a change that lasts, they need to start taking longer breaths.”