LESSONS IN LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT:
USAID/DRG's SHIFTING APPROACH

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Civil Society

USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance's (USAID/DRG) long-term emphasis on locally led development has allowed staff from across its subsectors to learn a number of lessons on how to more effectively operationalize this practice over the years. Indeed, the nature of the work undertaken by the DRG Bureau makes locally led development inextricably linked to much of its programming. Using a "then versus now" format, this document profiles some of the changes implemented by USAID/DRG's Civil Society subsector in response to these lessons. It should be noted that neither the "then" nor the "now" categories highlighted in this document refer to a fixed time frame. Rather, these labels are intended to simply reflect staff perceptions of how things have changed over time. Moreover, the "now" category should not be viewed as being set in stone, keeping in mind that improving development programming is an ongoing process. Additional documents from this series profiling other USAID/DRG subsectors can be found here.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S SHIFTING APPROACH TO PROGRAM DESIGN

SHIFTING TOWARD LOCAL LEADERSHIP

VS

THEN

An approach to program design that **considers partners as instruments of change to achieve USAID development priorities through specific activities.**

NOW

An approach to program design that **considers a resilient and robust civil society as intrinsic to a just political system**, thus making this the overarching objective of programming.

Lesson learned: a program designed to focus on the resilience and robustness of civil society partners allows for more sustainable change than one focused on narrowly advancing specific USAID development priorities by supporting civil society as instruments of change. These programs are intrinsically representative of a well-functioning democracy.

Over the years, USAID/DRG's civil society subsector has shifted its program design approach from one where local partners are informed or consulted in the design process to one where they increasingly play a leadership role. This change has meant **completely reimagining the overall purpose of civil society programs**. Specifically, previous civil society subsector programming primarily sought to collaborate with civil society actors on specific initiatives determined based on feasibility within the respective context, such as supporting advocacy campaigns to change laws or enhancing the oversight capacity of public procurement watchdogs. Programs now are more likely to **focus on strengthening the resilience and robustness of civil society actors**. This shift recognizes that a thriving civil society is more indicative of a just political system and has the power to more sustainably advance change than a stand-alone policy amendment. It is also grounded on the premise that individuals and communities are best placed to know what their needs are.

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THEN	VS	NOW
USAID takes a **top-down approach to program design**, requiring partners to implement activities that have been developed by USAID, informed by local expertise and experience, but with decisions made by USAID alone.		**Program design is often guided by partner priorities,** recognizing that they are best placed to know the activities needed to operate sustainably in their unique context. This is facilitated by tools like **requests for information (RFIs), listening tours, co-creation and co-design,** used during program design and to support adaptation throughout implementation.

Lesson learned: in contrast to a top-down approach, leveraging participatory approaches to design ensures that programs are guided by partner priorities—enabled by the view that civil society is intrinsic to a just political system rather than civil society being instrumental to one—facilitating increased partner buy-in and enhancing the longevity of results.

Placing local civil society actors in the driver's seat of the program design process means recognizing the need for more flexibility to meet changing demands and requires the use of **participatory approaches such as listening tours and co-design**. These tools help ensure that local voices are central to the design of development solutions. However, the greatest shift in the use of these participatory approaches is that of going beyond simply consulting partners during the program design phase to truly emphasizing collaboration with and between local actors on an ongoing basis to identify issues and promising solutions that will allow them to be the drivers of change.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Listening tours are a way for development practitioners to gather information and feedback from stakeholders in the communities where they are working. This can be done by holding meetings, conducting interviews, and participating in focus groups. The goal of a listening tour is to understand the needs and priorities of stakeholders, and to build relationships with them.

Co-design is a collaborative approach to problem-solving and innovation that involves bringing together different stakeholders to work together to design solutions. This can be done through workshops, design sprints, and other participatory methods. The goal of co-design is to develop solutions that are more likely to be successful, as they will have been developed with the input of the people who will be using them.

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THEN

Programs rely on **trainings to strengthen the capacity of local organizations,** supporting them as instruments of change able to help achieve USAID results. Trainings are often focused on financial and technical skills to better enable management and implementation of USAID funding and activities.

VS

NOW

Programs use an **approach to capacity strengthening that emphasizes relationships, networks, and peer learning**, particularly grounded in a local or regional context, with a view to strengthen overall systems and support sustainability, in line with the understanding that a robust civil society is intrinsic to a just political system.

Lesson learned: while traditional training formats such as classroom-style trainings are appropriate for certain capacity strengthening exercises, the use of on-the-job trainings with networks and peer-based learning can help support the generation of more meaningful insights and have a greater impact.

The USAID/DRG Bureau has also increasingly sought to elevate local voices and use participatory approaches in the design and implementation of its capacity strengthening efforts. While the traditional training-based methods often employed by USAID/DRG-led programs from the past still hold value, the Bureau has been working to transition to **capacity strengthening methods that emphasize peer-to-peer learning, strengthen local and regional relationships, and rely on local expertise**. One innovative way this shift has taken form is through USAID taking on the role of a convener, bringing together a consolidated group of viable civil society organizations that serve as mentors through increased focus on strengthening the capacity of less experienced civil society organizations. Another innovation in this area is USAID's increasing use of global centrally-managed mechanism consortiums that include regional and local organizations.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: SHIFTING TOWARD LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The **USAID Balkan Media Assistance Program (BMAP)** exemplifies many of the changes adopted by the USAID/DRG Bureau to support civil society organizations in taking the lead in the design and implementation of development programming. The program, which ran from 2017 to 2022 worked with renowned and promising news media outlets to improve their digital content quality, business processes, and collaboration. To achieve these ends, the project engaged in a co-design process with participating media partners to determine the capacity strengthening solutions that would best meet their needs and priorities. Given the unpredictability of the news cycle, BMAP remained flexible and responsive to its partners' needs. For example, BMAP provided trainings to help its Kosovo based media partner Koha

strengthen its digital storytelling and data visualization—a need identified with Koha during the planning phase of the project. However, BMAP provided particularly intensive support to Koha during the 2021 Presidential Elections in Kosovo, assisting in the production of high-quality maps, timelines, and other data visualizations. Following the elections, at Koha's request, BMAP provided further training to its digital team, so that they would be able to create graphics on their own. To further strengthen the resilience of partners, BMAP also sought to foster partnerships between media outlets throughout the region, including through the establishment of an annual innovation lab and an annual media forum as well as through the promotion of regional collaboration through support for joint initiatives and collaborative content production. These partnerships have endured beyond the scope of the project with many of the media partners continuing to work jointly on media projects. Because of the success of BMAP, USAID is now funding a second iteration of the program under the name of Balkan Media Assistance Program to Foster Organization Readiness While Advancing Resilient Development (BMAP Forward), launched in 2022.

SHIFTING TOWARD SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

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USAID primarily funds civil society through **agreements that focus on discrete projects and project-related objectives**, with the intention that these will enhance their legitimacy and therefore funding over time.
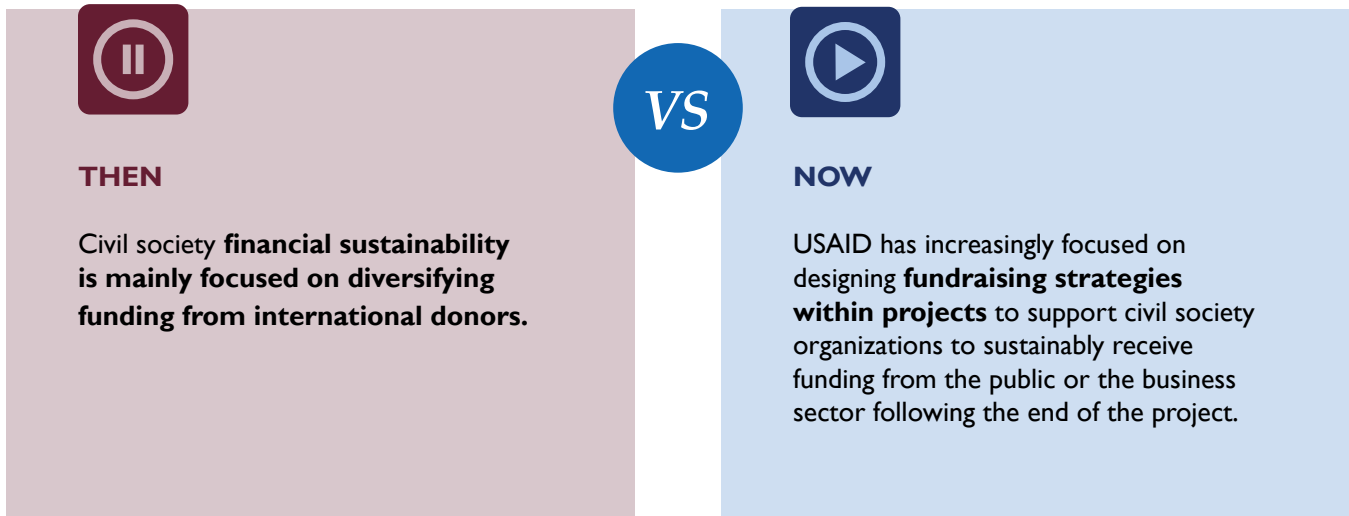
VS

NOW

USAID recognizes the **importance of core support for the long-term success, sustainability, viability, and legitimacy of civil society**. USAID has found some ways to provide such support, primarily by integrating it as a component of project-focused activities.

Lesson learned: *ensuring the resilience and sustainability of civil society organizations requires not simply providing funding to one-off activities, but rather, also providing core support so that they can comfortably focus on their growth without worrying about day-to-day operations.*

USAID/DRG's centering of local voices in its approach to program design has given it space to recognize **the importance of core funding for the long-term success, sustainability, viability, and legitimacy of civil society**. Indeed, when civil society organizations have room to look beyond ensuring funding for their core operations, they are better able to plan for the future and to invest in their long-term growth. While more work is required to identify and mainstream existing and additional methods of providing core or "core-like" support to civil society, USAID/DRG has found ways to fund core activities for civil society organizations, primarily by integrating such support as a component of project-focused activities.

For example, in 2021, USAID began funding the **International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM)**, an independent, multilateral initiative. With press freedom under attack in many countries around the world, IFPIM aims to safeguard and nurture the media sector through the provision of core operational support to vital public interest media. Additionally, IFPIM seeks to support the development of new business models that enable these media to survive as traditional business models decline in their efficacy.

THEN	VS	NOW
Civil society **financial sustainability is mainly focused on diversifying funding from international donors.**		USAID has increasingly focused on designing **fundraising strategies within projects** to support civil society organizations to sustainably receive funding from the public or the business sector following the end of the project.

Lesson learned: to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of civil society organizations, these actors require support in diversifying their funding sources beyond foreign assistance. This can be achieved by designing domestically-focused fundraising-related activities, including developing a philanthropic ecosystem, and integrating these into programming.

In order to ensure that partners continue to receive sustainable funding beyond the end of their partnership with USAID, the DRG Bureau has increasingly turned to the inclusion of **developing domestic fundraising activities** as an objective of projects. This may take the form of strengthening community philanthropy, which is defined as "both a form of and a force for building local assets, capacities, and trust—ultimately, as a way to shift power closer to the ground so that local people have greater control over their own destiny." This approach considers that all communities have their own assets (money, skills, knowledge, networks, etc.) and that by investing said assets, they start to feel like co-investors with a stake in their own development.[1]
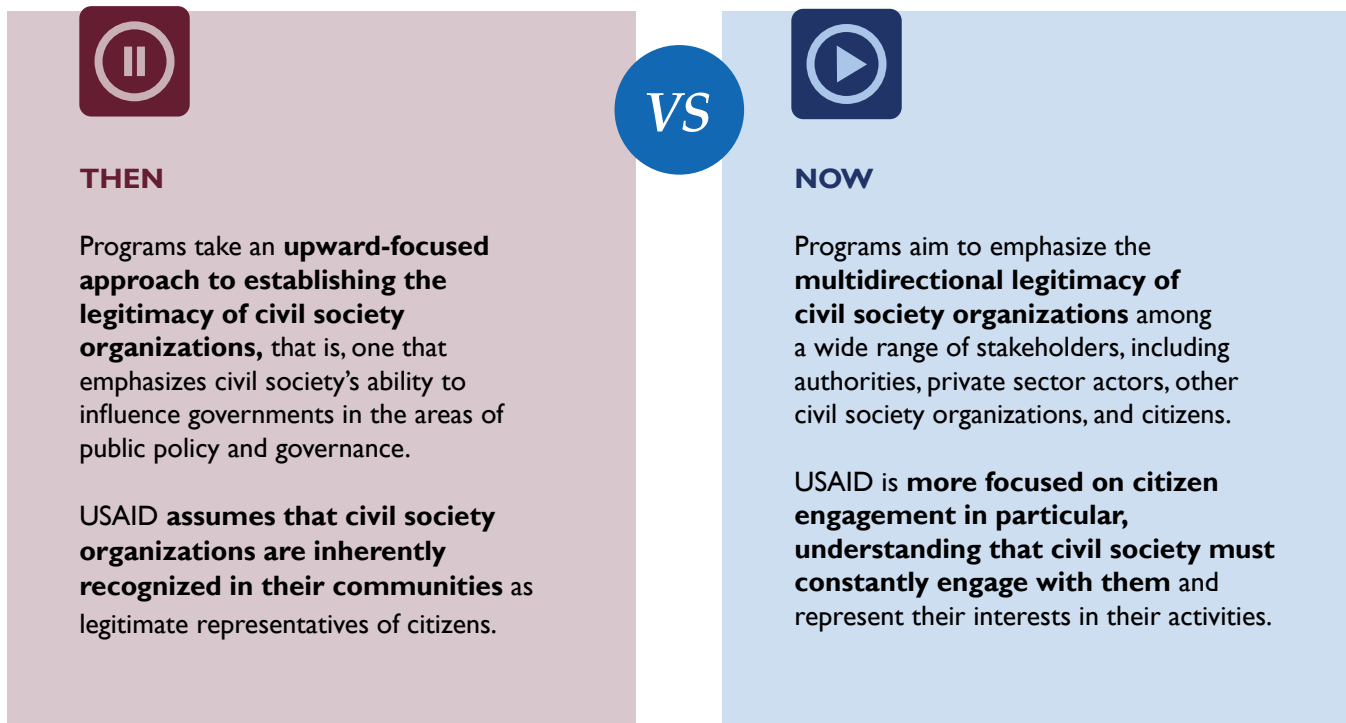
The **USAID Civil Society Resilience Strengthening** project in Serbia exemplifies this shift. The five-year project, which seeks to help civil society respond to closing civic space challenges and improve the legal enabling environment, includes the following core activities:

• Organize dialogue with domestic and international funders, private sector representatives, civil society organizations, informal civic actors, and activists on new funding streams for civil society.

1. Hodgson, Jenny, and Anna Pond. "How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power." GrantCraft, 2018. Web. 10 Aug. 2023.

- Launch comprehensive capacity-building and resiliency-building programs focused on legal awareness, business and financial acumen, constituent engagement, and sectoral cooperation and accountability for civil society organizations.

SHIFTING TOWARD A SYSTEMS APPROACH

THEN

Programs take an **upward-focused approach to establishing the legitimacy of civil society organizations,** that is, one that emphasizes civil society's ability to influence governments in the areas of public policy and governance.

USAID **assumes that civil society organizations are inherently recognized in their communities** as legitimate representatives of citizens.

VS

NOW

Programs aim to emphasize the **multidirectional legitimacy of civil society organizations** among a wide range of stakeholders, including authorities, private sector actors, other civil society organizations, and citizens.

USAID is **more focused on citizen engagement in particular, understanding that civil society must constantly engage with them** and represent their interests in their activities.

Lesson learned: program design should consider the wider system that civil society partners are part of given that stakeholders at the upper-level (e.g., government) and lower-level (e.g., citizens) can influence the resilience and sustainability of civil society actors.

USAID/DRG's local partner-centric approach to development in the civil society space is part of a wider **shift toward the adoption of a systems approach**, which emphasizes solutions that take into account the interconnectedness of all the elements in a system. This has resulted in three key changes in the Bureau's approach to designing civil society programs.

First, rather than simply focusing on civil society's ability to influence government, civil society programming aims to emphasize the **multidirectional legitimacy of civil society organizations** among a wide range of stakeholders, including authorities, private sector actors, other civil society organizations, and citizens. For example, the **Greater Internet Freedom (GIF)** activity has strengthened civil society organizations capacity to establish locally led and internationally supported private sector constructive engagement mechanisms. The objective of the project is applying a research and evidence-based approach to increase transparency and hold private companies accountable for tech-enabled human rights violations. The model has increased civil society legitimacy as small- and

medium-sized enterprises and valid interlocutors, particularly in Africa and Asia where, as a result of the engagement, companies like Vodafone, Vodacom, and Dialog Axiata PLC have advanced the adaptation of their policies and procedures to protect customer data and rights.

THEN

USAID assumes **civil society organizations have primary responsibility for considering threats and vulnerabilities** and improving their enabling environment accordingly.

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Programs are designed in such a way that **threats and vulnerabilities faced by civil society organizations are fully acknowledged** and measured.

Lesson learned: a shift toward a systems approach to program design means recognizing that some partners may be at risk of persecution, particularly because of their connection to a U.S. Government Agency. This type of risk needs to be planned for when designing programs.

Second, this has also meant that projects adopt a **"do no harm approach" that gives greater consideration to the threats and vulnerabilities** faced by civil society organizations during the program design process. This consideration was in fact central to the design of the **Human Rights Support Mechanism's (HRSM) Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM)**. When human rights crises occur, it is important to act quickly to protect the rights of those affected. In certain non-permissive environments, it is equally important to hide the identity of the actor or actors receiving assistance from the U.S. Government, as this relationship may put them at greater risk of persecution. HRSM sought to achieve both these ends by establishing a Rapid Response Mechanism that could quickly provide grant money to civil society actors in need via international partners, thus obfuscating the U.S. Government's involvement.

THEN

Civil society organizations engage the private sector rarely and primarily as potential donors.

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Project engagement with the private sector includes technical partnerships on issues of shared concern, such as freedoms of expression and privacy.

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Lesson learned: *private sector entities are a key part of the greater system that encircles civil society and thus can play an important role, not only as potential donors, but also as experts able to provide technical support.*

Third, USAID's understanding of the role private sector actors can play in strengthening the resilience of civil society has shifted from simply viewing them as potential donors, to recognizing them as possible allies with shared concerns as well as the ability to impart technical expertise. This recognition fueled the establishment of the **Media Viability Accelerator**, under which USAID, Internews, and Microsoft are partnering to support local independent media in becoming more financially sustainable.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S SHIFTING APPROACH TO PROCUREMENT

SHIFTING TO FLEXIBLE, DEMAND-DRIVEN FUNDING MECHANISMS

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The scope of USAID's **program purposes as outlined in solicitations is based more on supply-led technical ideals of civil society organizations,** which at times leads to either a limited pool of viable candidates that are in fierce competition for funding and/or civil society organization mission creep.
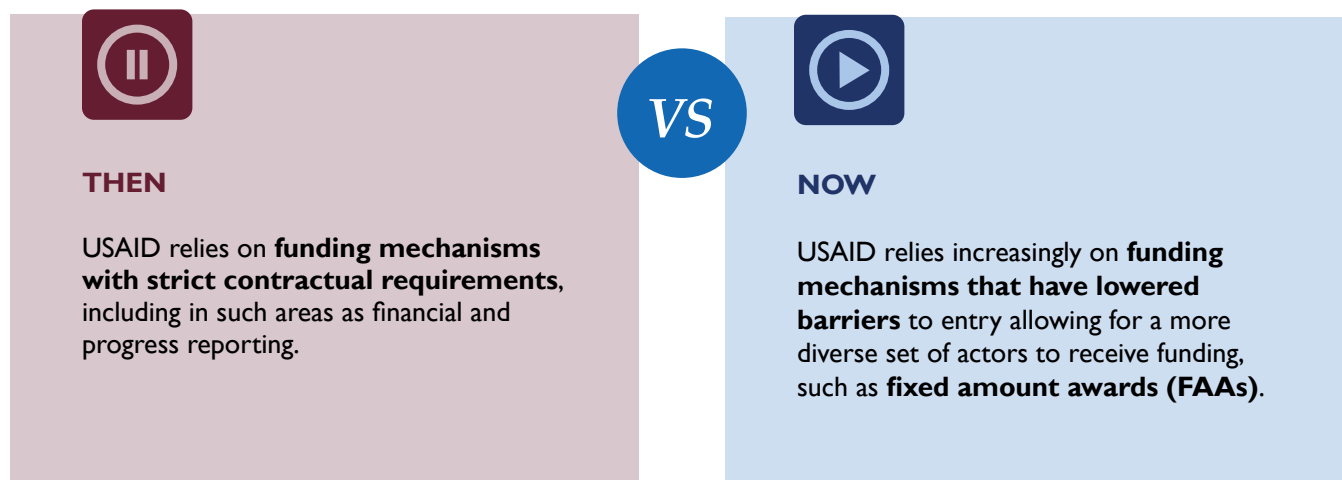
VS

NOW

USAID's approach to procurement is increasingly demand driven, using tools that incorporate the agendas, missions, and strengths of civil society organizations, such as **RFIs, annual program statements (APSs), or notice of funding opportunities (NOFOs).**

Lesson learned: *in line with USAID's local-centered approach to program design, using tools that incorporate the agendas, missions, and strengths of civil society organizations, better captures partner voices.*

USAID/DRG's efforts to better strengthen the robustness and resilience of civil society in partner countries have required a shift in its approach to procurement. Specifically, the Bureau has increasingly

used **procurement mechanisms that are more flexible, creating space for partner priorities to be met and for a more diverse set of actors to receive funding.** This has meant using procurement mechanisms like **RFIs, APSs, or NOFOs**, coupled with participatory tools like co-creation, which allow partners to communicate what their needs are and how they believe those needs can be met.

THEN	VS	NOW
USAID relies on **funding mechanisms with strict contractual requirements**, including in such areas as financial and progress reporting.		USAID relies increasingly on **funding mechanisms that have lowered barriers** to entry allowing for a more diverse set of actors to receive funding, such as **fixed amount awards (FAAs)**.

Lesson learned: a more diverse set of partners helps strengthen the overall resilience and robustness of civil society programming. By using more flexible funding mechanisms, USAID can achieve greater levels of diversity in its partner pool. Mechanisms with stringent requirements keep smaller and non-traditional civil society actors from partnering with USAID.

APSs and NOFOs—both fixed amount awards—have also both been beneficial for increasing the diversity of USAID/DRG's civil society partner pool. Indeed, these **funding mechanisms have less stringent requirements** for such activities as financial and progress reporting, opening the door for smaller and non-traditional civil society actors to receive U.S. Government funding. These funding mechanisms are particularly beneficial for facilitating funding to groups that are not registered via the SAM system that can now receive funding thanks to recent changes to the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (FFATA); often times, these actors are unable to register with SAM as publication of identifying information may bring them unnecessary attention from government authorities, placing them at risk of harassment and endangering their safety. **Increasing the diversity of its pool of partners** is key to the success of USAID/DRG's civil society programming. Indeed, studies have shown that non-violent collective action campaigns are more likely to be successful when they have a high level of participation from people of diverse backgrounds.[1]

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1. Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. Why Civil Resistance Works The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

The soon to be awarded **Powered by the People (PxP)** project is a prime example of the Bureau's shifting approach to procurement. The PxP project aims to support social movements, namely the activists, grassroots actors, and organizers who are advancing nonviolent action. The award started with the publication of a NOFO before moving to a co-creation phase that saw participation from over 65 local activists from 13 countries, many of whom had never partnered with or accepted support from USAID. The activists have helped shape PxP so that it meets the needs of—and is driven by—the frontline activists and civic actors it is meant to serve.

OTHER SHIFTS IN USAID/DRG'S APPROACH TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT IN THE CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE

SHIFTING TOWARD A MORE LOCAL-CENTRIC APPROACH TO PROJECT MONITORING

THEN

Indicators are developed by donors and/or external influences, indicative of the understanding that civil society actors are instrumental for advancing the change necessary for a well-functioning democracy.

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USAID/DRG has increasingly turned toward co-creating indicators and outcome expectations, a shift made possible by the view that a resilient and robust civil society is intrinsic to a well-functioning democracy.
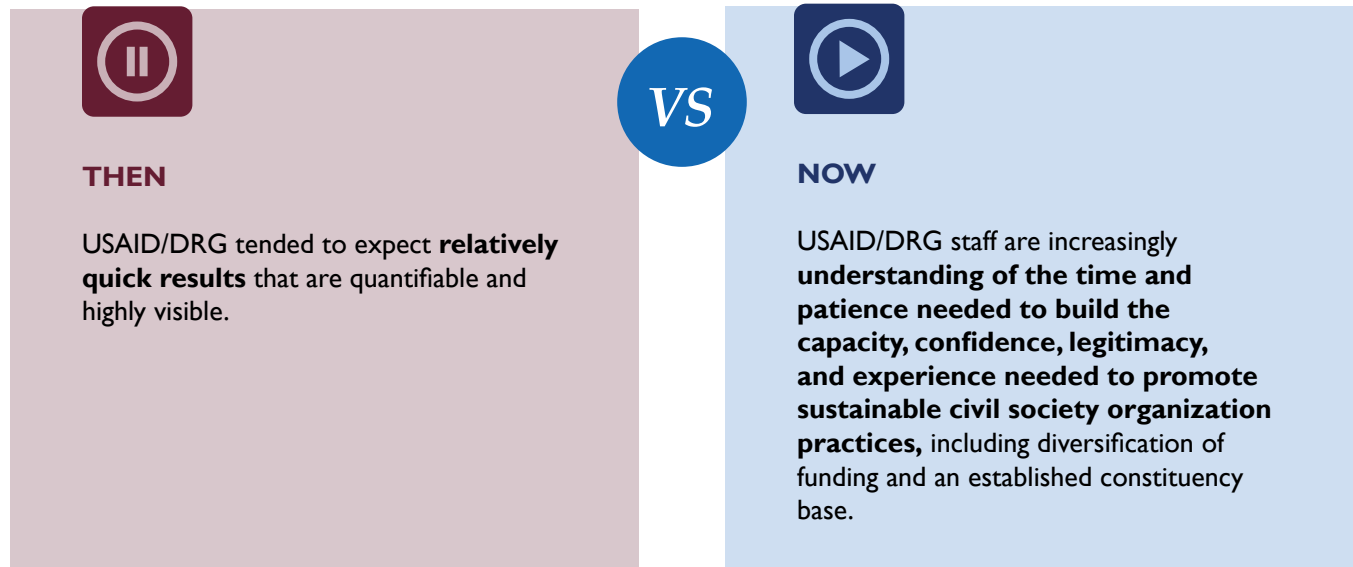
Lesson learned: co-creating indicators with partners is an important step in the process of better emphasizing partner priorities and supports partner buy-in.

USAID/DRG's approach to monitoring has shifted to mirror the Bureau's efforts to emphasize partner priorities in the project design and implementation processes. **Indicators are increasingly co-designed** with partners, supporting partner buy-in and project sustainability given that project

milestones reflect partner priorities. This shift was adopted by **USAID Paraguay's Local Works** project, which used indicators co-created with applicants during the design process. The project, which is designed to strengthen the capacity of committees of low-income women entrepreneurs, also measured improvements through committee self-assessments. These self-assessments found that 48 percent of participating committees had made significant progress across the range of selected project indicators (e.g. formalization via official government bodies), while the remaining committees had made some progress.

SHIFTING MINDSETS TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

THEN

USAID/DRG tended to expect **relatively quick results** that are quantifiable and highly visible.

VS

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USAID/DRG staff are increasingly **understanding of the time and patience needed to build the capacity, confidence, legitimacy, and experience needed to promote sustainable civil society organization practices,** including diversification of funding and an established constituency base.

Lesson learned: quick results should not be the objective of a program. Programs with sustainable outcomes do not happen overnight. They require time and patience.

The aforementioned shifts in practices adopted by USAID/DRG staff to better enable locally led development in the civil society space are the result of years of learning and efforts to fine tune development practices to ensure project success and sustainability. A greater understanding by USAID/DRG staff of the **time and patience needed to build the capacity, confidence, legitimacy, and experience needed to promote sustainable CSO practices** has also been made possible by an emphasis on continued learning. This shift in mindset is made clear by the importance placed on building reciprocal trust-based relationships over short-term transactional ones—something that has helped further engender impactful project results. This evolution is captured in the following quote from a local first time USAID partner implementing the **Citizen Engagement Activity** in Kosovo: "We took our time; we would engage in constant discussions with USAID. Sometimes they were quite difficult ones. […] at a certain point we had to actually reconsider the entire cooperation and approach because we weren't confident that things were going in the direction we originally agreed on. We had some long and difficult discussions with USAID, which ended very positively. We ended up revising the project's activities to ensure that USAID's and our expectations and approach were more in sync." Ultimately, this partner observed that while the development of trust with USAID was an ongoing process, "through engaging in a constructive dialogue, the USAID team demonstrated the needed adaptability and flexibility to work with local partners and allow for local agency."

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