



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

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. 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 the lessons learned highlighted in this document should not be viewed as set in stone, keeping in mind that improving development programming is an ongoing process. A more in depth overview of USAID/DRG's Civil Society subsector's shifting approach to locally led development and 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

- 1. 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.
- 2. 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.
- 3. 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.



SHIFTING TOWARD SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

- 4. 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.
- 5. 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.



SHIFTING TOWARD A SYSTEMS APPROACH

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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 technical partners on issues of shared concern, such as freedoms of expression and privacy.

CIVIL SOCIETY’S SHIFTING APPROACH TO PROCUREMENT



SHIFTING TO FLEXIBLE, DEMAND-DRIVEN FUNDING MECHANISMS

9. 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, such as Requests for Information, Annual Program Statements (APSs), or Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs), better captures partner voices.

10. 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.

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

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



SHIFTING MINDSETS TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

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