Lina Guennouni participated in the Young Women Advocates for Women's Rights program organized by Forum Ezzahra for Moroccan Women, one of five Intermediary Support Organizations supported by the Civil Society Strengthening Program.

EVIDENCE
TO ACTION
BRIEF

Strengthening Civil Society Organizations in Morocco

Using evaluation findings from a successful program, USAID/Morocco strengthened the technical capacity of local civil society organizations, bolstering local ownership, independence, and effectiveness. The Mission also increased the flexibility of subgrant timelines and budgets to better align with local priorities.

CONTEXT

A flagship civil society program of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the USAID/ Morocco Civil Society Strengthening Program (CSSP), ran from 2015–2019. It aimed to strengthen the capacity of local civil society organizations (CSOs) to participate in policy formulation and decision making as well as to improve the legal environment for CSOs and the government's availability to work with CSOs. In the wake of the Arab Spring, the Constitution of Morocco openly highlights the role of civil society in decision making, but CSOs in the country often have capacity challenges that prevent them from engaging effectively. By facilitating self-assessment processes[1] with partner CSOs, CSSP delivered tailored technical and financial

Former President of Forum Ezzahra for Moroccan Women in Rabat Mme. Aziza Bakkali Kassimi, former USAID/Morocco Mission Director Dana Mansouri, and then CSSP Chief of Party Hervé de Baillenx during a program event in 2015.

assistance to strengthen their ability to partner with the government. USAID used the "cascade" model, providing training to medium- and large-scale CSOs, enabling these intermediary support organizations (ISOs) to become "go-to" centers for smaller organizations. The Mission awarded $3 million to five local ISOs, which in turn engaged over 500 CSOs to strengthen organizational and technical capacity, distribute subgrants to

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1 Assessments included use of tools such as organizational capacity assessments and organizational development and organizational performance indexes, or tailored versions thereof.

pursue advocacy projects and improve operations, and network with other CSOs. CSSP also worked with the Government of Morocco to develop legislation to support the full participation of CSOs, including new laws on petitions, motions, and volunteerism and revised laws on decentralization and regionalization.
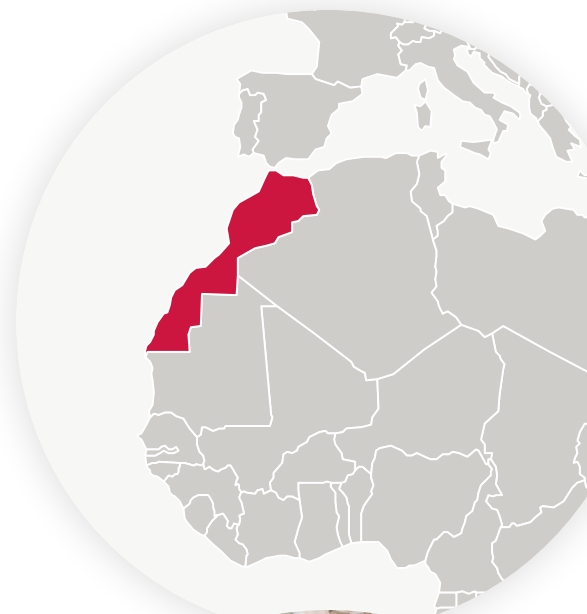
USAID/Morocco commissioned a final performance evaluation that sought to measure the CSSP's overall effectiveness in reaching its CSO advocacy goals, ability to address legal frameworks, inclusion of key population segments, lessons learned, and implementation gaps. The evaluation also measured the validity of the program's theory of change and related assumptions, and the performance of the cascade model for capacity strengthening.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This final evaluation used a mix of qualitative and quantitative strategies. The evaluation team, half of whom were local to Morocco, began with a comprehensive desk review of program documentation to assess CSSP's progress. To facilitate qualitative data collection, the team conducted ten focus groups drawn from a random sampling of CSSP participants, CSOs, and CSO grantees. Due to restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation team conducted the focus groups virtually. The team also held a total of 37 remote in-depth interviews with various CSSP stakeholders, including government officials, ISO and CSO staff, association and coalition representatives, as well as CSSP program staff and USAID/Morocco personnel. Following the focus groups and in-depth interviews, the team implemented an online and telephone survey of CSO participants and unaffiliated stakeholders to quantitatively capture the range of stakeholder views of, and experiences with, the program. The fieldwork took place from July–September 2020. The team triangulated results to ensure consistency in findings across data collection methods. For a detailed description of the methodology, see the evaluation report.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation found that CSSP was very effective in reaching and supporting a large number of organizations through grants, training, and technical assistance to build the capacity of local CSOs to advocate and participate in the public policy process. This includes eight national coalitions, over 500 CSOs, and 32 sub-grantees that received direct grants from CSSP. In addition, the program's use of the cascade model "proved instrumental in reaching, stimulating, and supporting local CSOs and initiatives," especially when bolstered by personal relationships. The evaluation found that CSSP had a positive effect on Morocco's legal framework around civil society participation, including promoting the right to petition and CSO petition initiatives. The number of local petitions increased in the project's target regions (Rabat-Salé-Kénitra, Casablanca-Settat, Marrakech-Safi, Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceima, and Fès-Meknès), with city councils discussing a small but encouraging number of these petitions. The evaluation found that CSSP successfully influenced national laws and regulations by supporting law review technical assistance for the International Center for Not-for-Profit

ASSOCIATION ENNAKHIL

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Nadia, Ennakhil Association's GBV listening center manager, at a GBV awareness campaign sponsored by CSSP and Ennakhil in November 2019.

Law,[2] improved the legal environment for civil society by supporting national CSO coalitions and ISOs,[3] and helped create and implement a set of laws that established mechanisms for civil society to participate in shaping public policy. The evaluation noted weaknesses and missed opportunities stemming from material and logistical constraints, political interference and barriers, weak networking among CSOs, and elected officials and civil servants' lack of awareness about inclusion and equity. Additionally, the evaluation found that while CSSP included marginalized groups throughout the program, such as women, youth, and people with disabilities, the program did not support CSOs or advocacy campaigns led by marginalized groups.

CSSP coaches preselected coalition grantees in finalizing their proposals during a workshop in Marrakech, May 2016.

ACTION BASED ON EVIDENCE FROM THE FINDINGS

The USAID/Morocco team used the evaluation to adjust and improve follow-on programming. The evaluation found that, to enable participation and economic opportunities for women, youth, and people with disabilities, marginalized populations needed a stronger voice in the CSO sphere. As a result, USAID/Morocco's Inclusive Civic Education Program (ICEP), which began in 2022, intentionally includes marginalized groups as target populations.

The evaluation recommended using the cascade model, which delivered promising results, in future programming. ICEP partners with three regional associations that serve as grant managers for smaller organizations conducting local, small-scale advocacy. The evaluation also called for increased flexibility on subgrant timelines and budgets, according to the needs and abilities of the subgrantees. As a new practice, ICEP has implemented increased grant sizes and timelines than under CSSP, better aligning to local priorities and building on existing organizational capacities, rather than forcing small organizations to conform to restrictive external directives. When the European Union designed its ongoing CSO strengthening program, they incorporated approaches from CSSP, informed by discussions with USAID/Morocco and the CSSP evaluation.

Strengthening the organizational capacity of CSOs helped them achieve a high level of ownership. Participating organizations continue to use tools that CSSP introduced, such as organizational capacity assessments and organizational performance indexes. However, the evaluation found that strengthening organizational capacity did not result in improved ability to engage in policy making. As a result, USAID/Morocco now places more emphasis on strengthening CSOs' ability to do technical work, conduct advocacy, network, work with the government, and make policy, over internal skills such as financial management. In addition, the Mission prioritizes local systems strengthening by including partner CSOs (including some ISOs) in making and evaluating Open Government Partnership commitments, aligning with the initiative's commitment to actively including the voices and reflecting the priorities of disenfranchised segments of the population. To support this work, USAID is tapping into its strong civil society networks throughout Morocco to leverage existing mechanisms for citizen engagement.

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2 The law on petitions and motions, law on volunteerism, the 2015 law on decentralization, the law on access to information, as well as the law on public fundraising all include several CSSP-sponsored recommendations.

3 CSSP-supported CSOs jointly formed the Movement of Initiatives for the Reform of the Law of Associations (MIRLA), which continues to exist after the end of the activity.

LESSONS LEARNED

▷ **Focus on improving the process of good governance.** Governance programming emphasizes improving the process of good governance. Building a culture of civic participation, raising awareness about the importance of participation in government, and building knowledge on how to collaborate and participate in democratic society are complex processes. Realizing higher-level outcomes, such as a "strong participatory governance," may take years.

▷ **Consider how to capture project impacts beyond the life of the project.** Because much of CSSP's work was process oriented, its results can take time to materialize. Years after the end of the activity, CSSP continues to inform ongoing government and non-government interventions. For example, the Ministry in Charge of Relations with Parliament and Civil Society recently launched its flagship civil society strengthening program, Nassiij—which has many similarities with CSSP, including adopting the cascade model and supporting reforms on the supply and demand sides. In a recent meeting, a senior Ministry official told USAID/Morocco that the CSSP model was useful in designing this new program. However, these results are not captured through existing USAID/Morocco mechanisms. Despite the clear link between Nassiij and CSSP, USAID/Morocco lacks a mechanism to trace CSSP's achievements within government, civil society, or private sectors following the end of the evaluation period.

▷ **Utilize the implementation team in evaluation design, but allow distance in conducting the evaluation.** When designing an evaluation to capture findings from a program, it is indispensable for the evaluation team to leverage the implementation team's strong understanding of the program. However, due to human bias, the implementation team should not be involved in actually performing the evaluation.

▷ **Choose an evaluation team with a strong grasp of subject-specific and technical knowledge.** The intentional selection of an evaluation team with local CSO expertise and mastery of both evaluation techniques and survey and methodology design was key to the CSSP evaluation. An effective evaluation team must have sufficient technical understanding of the program subject to deliver actionable recommendations.

▷ **Translate key communications documents.** USAID/Morocco developed evaluation summaries in Arabic and French, which the team shared with partner CSOs, key government institutions, and other development agencies and donors.

▷ **Valuable evidence is easily lost in the shuffle.** Many of the evaluation findings are still relevant today years after CSSP ended. However, it is challenging to ensure the evaluation findings inform the interventions of all of USAID's projects in Morocco (both ongoing projects and those in the design stage).

CSSP organizes a training on advocacy in public policies in Safi, April 2016.

COUNTERPART INTERNATIONAL