

# ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT: AN EVALUATION OF USAID/SERBIA'S LW PROGRAM

## Evaluation Summary Report

### PROGRAM AND EVALUATION BACKGROUND

USAID's [Local Works \(LW\) program](#), located within the Local, Faith, and Transformative Partnerships Hub in the Bureau for Development, Democracy and Innovation (DDI/LFT), is the Agency's flagship locally led development program. Locally led development (LLD) is defined as the process in which local actors – individuals, communities, networks, organizations, private entities, and governments – set their own development agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality.

Since 2015, the Local Works program has supported locally led development programming in over 30 countries and enhanced the Agency's ability to empower local actors to lead their own development. With five-year discretionary funds, Local Works provides Missions more time and greater freedom to pursue locally led programming and innovative ways of working. Local Works supports USAID Missions with resources, tools, and opportunities to try new development approaches that are more flexible, locally responsive, and locally sustainable.

USAID/Serbia successfully applied to join the Local Works program during the first round of funding in 2015. Over the course of the program, the Mission made six awards to local partners to advance democracy and governance objectives shared by USAID and local civil society. These activities have demonstrated great success in many areas: engaging citizens in advocacy work and in community-level initiatives, increasing transparency in the judicial system, effecting policy change through public-private dialogue, and boosting local philanthropy.

This internal evaluation examines the factors that facilitated LLD processes at USAID/Serbia, and the link between these enablers and ways of working with local partners. As a Round 1 LW Mission, USAID/Serbia has been through the full program lifecycle, from applying to join LW to closing out and evaluating activities. As such, the Mission provides a useful case in examining the enablers and constraints to locally led development.

The internal evaluation of USAID/Serbia's Local Works program examines the enablers and constraints to locally led development practices in the Mission. This report provides a summary of its conclusions and recommendations. For details on evaluation methodology, findings that led to each conclusion, and a complete list of conclusions and recommendations, please see the full evaluation report (USAID internal only).



Photo credit: USAID Local Works

Members of The Seed Bank, a Local Works partner, meet to discuss preserving indigenous seeds which provide food security.

## Key evaluation questions probed the following topics:

- ✦ Factors that led the Mission to apply to the LW program
- ✦ Differences between LW and non-LW activities in design and implementation (and reasons for those differences)
- ✦ Perceived connections between activity management approaches and development outcomes
- ✦ Reasons for the high level of staff-buy in for the LW approach
- ✦ Reasons for - and benefits of - Foreign Service National (FSN) leadership
- ✦ Interactions among the offices within the Mission
- ✦ Working with a local Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) support contractor
- ✦ Intersection of the LW approach with political and diplomatic considerations in Serbia
- ✦ Support from Washington to the Mission, and from the Mission to LW partners, probing the types of support that were most valued

## EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS

The evaluator analyzed data from interviews with approximately 30 individuals, including current and former USAID/Serbia staff and LW partners. A sampling of conclusions that arose from this analysis is provided here. For a complete list of conclusions, see the full evaluation report (USAID internal only).

### Question 1: What were the factors that led USAID/Serbia to apply for the LW program?

- **Sustainability considerations motivated interest in applying for LW.** At the time of Serbia's LW application, the Mission was focused on phasing USAID out of the country while supporting the European Union (EU) accession process. This focus made the idea of working with local partners to set up legacy programs for sustainable citizen engagement - which would support broader EU democracy and governance objectives - a good fit.
- **The Mission knew there was a strong civil society sector in Serbia, so the LW model seemed feasible.** The team knew local organizations had the networks, knowledge, and capacities to be successful. Because the team had experience working with local organizations - having been a "champion" of the Local Solutions program - the LW model seemed more feasible than it might in other country contexts.

**Question 2: Are there any differences between LW and non-LW activities in the way USAID has interacted with partners and managed activities?**

- **LW activities differed from non-LW activities in the design phase.** The Mission did more local consultation and outreach with local partners in the pre-solicitation and pre-award stages than they do outside LW. During the co-creation phase with partners, the team put in more focused effort to design activities with partners than they typically did in other activity designs. This process created time, opportunity, and supportive power dynamics for partners to define and defend their own problem statements, priorities, and approaches.
- **The implementation phase of LW awards featured very supportive and collaborative relationships between USAID and partners.** Partners appreciated frequent, supportive, and candid communication with their Agreement Officer Representatives (AORs), and AORs saw it as core to their professional roles to strengthen partner capacity in USAID ways of working (e.g. navigating reporting, managing public communications). There was a high level of flexibility in implementation, facilitated by both AOR attitudes and the structure of the LW award mechanisms (which kept program descriptions short and left details to work planning). While there is

Members of ZooPlanet, a Local Works partner, spend time with rescued rabbits.



clear evidence for USAID’s collaborative, communicative, nurturing, and flexible approach to working with local partners, there is mixed evidence regarding whether these characteristics are a product of the LW program; some respondents felt this approach was common in non-LW awards as well.

**Question 3: Is there a perceived connection between the way the Mission team manages activities and interacts with partners and the development outcomes partners achieve?**

- **The Mission approach of choosing sectoral topics - leaving the activity approach up to the applicants - facilitated development of robust consortia, which became the foundation for stronger networks.** The Mission chose sectoral topics (e.g. philanthropy, rule of law), but did not pre-design technical approaches to address specific challenges. In response, local organizations grouped themselves into consortia around the sectoral topics. Instead of trying to build networks directly, the Mission’s approach allowed relationship and network strengthening to happen more organically - a result facilitated by Serbia’s well-developed civil society sector. Some LW partners have already begun to work together on new initiatives outside of LW. This suggests that the LW experience of working together and developing a common vision has helped establish strong networks that will serve as the foundation for future work - a development result in its own right.
- **The flexibility with which USAID managed the LW awards bolstered activities’ development results.** The award structure and AOR attitudes enabled partners to shift activities based on lessons learned, and to seize new opportunities that emerged to advance local priorities.

**Question 4: What are the reasons for the high level of buy-in for the LW approach at USAID/Serbia?**

- **Local staff were already “believers” in the locally led development approach,** asserting that it is the best and most sustainable way to do development work. Many Mission interviewees remarked on FSNs’ enthusiasm for collaborative design processes and willingness to walk alongside their local partners as they navigated work with USAID. Reasons for this enthusiasm included the

“  
*We sit together and think through the activities. For me, it’s not normal to have this with other donors. It’s really acting like a partner.*  
- Local Works partner

”



Photo credit: USAID Local Works

Members from The Sokobanja Ecological Society visit a new waste pick-up site as they work to end illegal dumping.

“  
*We need to ask why we're here and translate it into our daily process...is it only the money or reputation of working for the USG? Or is it facilitating development of a country toward a more resilient democracy? Which is why I'm here. And then I translate that into smaller tasks of working with local organizations.*  
- Foreign Service National  
”

opportunity to be more creative by engaging with the local system, the satisfaction that comes from seeing organizations' deliverables improve over time through mentorship, and the belief that there should be something left when the donors leave, necessitating local capacity strengthening.

- **Mission leadership in the technical office and in OAA prioritized local partnerships, which contributed to staff buy-in.** While most local staff were already “believers” in the locally led development approach, support from leadership - in the form of providing space for longer design processes and defending staff time spent mentoring local partners - served as an enabler and amplifier of local staff commitment.
- **OAA and OFM had knowledge, flexibility, and bandwidth.** Agreement Officer (AO) knowledge of various award mechanisms helped them work hand-in-hand with the technical team to select the best-fit award types. Both junior and senior AOs were oriented toward flexibility and willingness to devolve authority, first to AORs and ultimately to local partners. Past OFM experience working with local partners on the pre-award process helped them problem-solve with new partners to overcome barriers - rather than seeing them as

insurmountable disqualifiers for USAID funding. Lastly, the regional OAA (ROAA) supporting USAID/Serbia had more staff bandwidth than is the case for most Missions. Respondents expressed the need for Washington support to reduce the management burden on OAA, which reduces appetite for and ability to make awards to local partners.

**Question 5: To what extent has the FSN leadership of the LW program in Serbia made a difference in activity implementation and outcomes? What are the factors that enabled FSN leadership?**

- **FSN leadership facilitated relationships of trust and open communication between USAID (especially AORs) and local partners.** FSNs are connected and embedded in the CSO ecosystem in a sustained way that Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) who rotate cannot be, which enables them to develop longer-term relationships with local organizations. Additionally, their continuity in the Mission allowed them to oversee entire activity life cycles of five years or longer. Engaging continuously from design, through activity management, and through closeout helped make these activities passion projects for FSNs.
- **FSOs proactively facilitated FSN leadership of the LW program.** Mission leadership was supportive of FSNs’ time spent outside the office mentoring local partners in the ins-and-outs of working with USAID (and, in the case of the local A&A Specialist, walking partners

“  
*A lot of it comes down to the OAA. Having a contracting officer that is interested and engaged... makes all the difference in the world.*  
- Mission staff member  
”

A young girl visits ZooPlanet to learn about caring for animals and connecting with nature.



Photo credit: USAID Local Works

“  
*My job was to facilitate, not be in the lead of development. I will never understand the context like Foreign Service Nationals. If I can give them the space and resources to make those contacts and work better in the context, that's something important.*

- Foreign Service Officer

step-by-step through pre-award processes). This FSO role, combined with FSNs' existing enthusiasm for collaborating with and strengthening the capacity of local partners, suggests that there is an important role for both FSNs and FSO leadership in LW: FSN leadership is important for building relationships with local organizations that persist through FSO rotations, while FSO leadership has a role in providing the space for FSNs to do that.

#### **Question 6: What opportunities and challenges did the LW AORs in the Mission face in working across the Mission?**

- **Overall, there was a collaborative and productive working relationship among the technical team, OAA and OFM.** There was a high level of buy-in from AOs and OFM staff, and they engaged frequently with the technical teams in the LW design phase. One respondent reflected that the way the technical team, OFM, and OAA worked together on the pre-award survey set them up for a good working relationship throughout the life of the activities. No respondents reported any challenges working with OAA or OFM in relation to the LW program in Serbia.

#### **Question 7: The Mission created a local-only MEL IDIQ. What have been the benefits and drawbacks of this approach (as compared to working with international partners)?**

- **The technical capacity of the local MEL provider chosen to support LW partners was strong, providing high quality support at a lower cost than international providers.** While some staff expected the contractor to exhibit lower capacity than that of international providers, that was not the case. The contractor brought a strong command of relevant MEL approaches and fresh ideas on how to conduct monitoring in the Serbian context. A couple of respondents felt that the MEL provider needed more support in understanding USAID rules and processes, but one of these respondents asserted that at the end of the day, the contractor provided high quality support.
- **The cost was lower** for a level of support equal to that of U.S.-based providers. One respondent remarked that most evaluations conducted by international firms hire local consultants - so it makes sense to procure the same quality at a lower cost.



A woman enters The Seed Bank, a Local Works partner that distributes free indigenous seeds to the local community to help preserve and cultivate them.

**Question 8: The USAID Mission in Serbia works in the context of unique political and diplomatic considerations, which can constrain the areas of work. How has the LW requirement to work only with local partners who have limited experience with USAID made it easier or more difficult to work within these constraints?**

- **LW money was conducive to addressing the democracy and governance priorities related to EU accession from a citizen-led angle.** At the beginning of the LW program, the Mission was phasing out of some sectors with an eye to graduation from USAID support and toward EU accession. This made it strategic to have legacy programs that were implemented by - and could be continued by - local actors past the end of USAID presence. Because LW requires direct partnerships with local organizations, the program helped drive resources toward ensuring reforms related to EU accession met citizen needs. For example, the Mission was already working on judicial reform through engagement with national-level government agencies (through an international IP), but the LW program enabled them to support a local organization to boost citizen engagement in local judicial processes.
- **The LW approach enabled the Mission to make progress on democracy and governance objectives in a closing democratic space, which they became unable to do through direct work with the government.** For example, the rule of law activity consisting





*If Serbia was going to embark on this set of ambitious reforms, Local Works could be useful to drive resources not just to partners but to processes to ensure reforms met the needs of citizens and implant that type of democratic process with the citizens.*

*- Mission staff member*



of direct engagement with the government had largely stalled, but one of the Mission's local partners worked with local judges to set up events in which citizens could see the inside of a courtroom and ask these officials questions about the judicial process. Leveraging their relationships with local officials allowed the partner to advance the activity goal of improving judicial transparency, even during a time when the government was resistant to change.

**Question 9: What types of support from Washington, and aspects of the Local Works program structure, have been most useful to the Mission team? What support would be useful?**

- **The ability to hire a LW Coordinator with program support funds can be limited in utility, as there are other barriers to hiring new staff.** Often, Missions don't have cubicle space for a new hire. It takes time to get a new staff member AOR/COR certified (and even longer for them to get the experience to become a great AOR/COR). Mission leadership also expressed concerns about how to fund this position past the end of the LW program. Because of these limitations, the Mission did not hire a LW Coordinator.
- **The Mission would value examples of how policies and directives on working differently with local partners translate into daily work.** New policies and programs from Washington - such as Local Solutions, Local Works, the New Partnerships Initiative, and most recently, Localization - are frequent, and often don't come with clarity around how they ought to impact daily work. Examples of how other Missions have made different or creative choices to reduce the burden of Automated Directive System (ADS) and Foreign Acquisition Regulation (FAR) requirements when working with local partners would be useful.

Conclusions also emerged around Washington support as it relates to barriers to local partnerships beyond the Local Works program:

- **Missions need Washington support to reduce the management burden on OAA, which reduces appetite for and ability to make awards to local partners.** While the LW program in Serbia benefited from a level of OAA bandwidth that was higher than the norm, respondents called for Washington support to address the problem of inadequate staffing - and especially an inadequate number of individuals with warrants - at the Agency level.

- **Washington should structure funding to reduce the pressure to obligate funds, which is a barrier to local partnerships.**

The pressure to quickly obligate funds to avoid losing them - especially in Missions without a Development Objective Agreement (DOAG) in place with the host country government - incentivizes partnerships with larger, non-local organizations. These organizations more often have the internal structures required to absorb and quickly spend large amounts of funding. The pressure has only increased over time, as most Missions now receive their annual program budgets in the second year of their appropriation.



An aerial shot of Sokobanja, Serbia.

#### **Question 10: What types of support from the Mission did LW partners find most useful? How could support be more useful?**

- **Partners would have liked more support with MEL.** Partners felt confusion around USAID MEL expectations, and would value templates and examples to assist in the development of MEL plans, as well as more clarity from USAID on what is important to measure. Additionally, partners would welcome assistance with integrating programmatic learning into their activities in a more systematic way.
- **Partners feel their activities need more time to maximize development results, and are eager for more information from USAID on the future of LW programming in Serbia.** Partners praised USAID for the LW program. They urged continuation of direct engagement with local actors that in turn support local initiatives, asserting this is the most promising path toward democracy and governance objectives. While it is logical that LW partners would urge continued funding for their own activities, almost all partners shared the perspective that USAID had found a strategy that worked, and that led to more transformational development results. As one partner urged, “Can USAID...keep things that are already working, rather than asking for new things?”

## EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on conclusions, the evaluator developed recommendations through a collaborative process involving Mission staff and the LW team in Washington. A sample of the recommendations is provided here. For a complete list of recommendations, see the full evaluation report (USAID internal only).

### Recommendations for LW Washington

#### Selecting LW Missions

- When selecting LW Missions, LW Washington should **seek to explore the level of staff buy-in** for locally led approaches, as the positive orientation towards local partnerships was a driving force behind LW success in Serbia. The team should seek to understand the appetite of technical office staff for collaborating with, nurturing, and building the capacity of new local partners, as well as the openness of leadership to provide time and space for staff to do so. The team should also especially consider the extent to which OAA and OFM staff, especially local staff, view mentoring and problem-solving with new partners to be core to their professional roles, and understand their bandwidth for (and commitment to) practicing creativity and flexibility in the award process. (Ref. Q2, Q3, Q4.)

To understand staff buy-in, LW Washington might consider asking Mission teams - in their LW Letters of Interest - to reflect on their skills and experiences conducive to locally led development, and the skills and experiences they would like to gain through participation in the LW program. The team might also offer the Mindsets in LLD course just before the call for Letters of Interest for a new LW round: this strategic timing may raise awareness among Mission staff of the types of skills and attitudes needed for a successful LW program, while also demonstrating to LW Washington where enthusiasm exists.

- If a Mission is not well-poised to implement a LW program given bandwidth or buy-in issues, the LW team in Washington should instead work with teams of interested individuals in those Missions to **assess their current situation and work to resolve barriers**. This may include seed funding to give the Mission experience managing one or two local awards; exposing staff to the benefits of locally-led development through training or experiential learning; assisting Missions to include mentorship of local partners as part of job descriptions for new staff or as part of merit criteria for existing staff; or helping the Mission connect to support for addressing acquisition and assistance (A&A) backlogs. (Ref. Q4.)

## Onboarding LW Missions

- When onboarding new LW Missions, LW Washington should continue to emphasize the uniqueness of the multi-year funding of the LW program, and the opportunity this presents to engage in local consultation and co-creation by mitigating the pressure of obligating funding pipelines. Messaging should emphasize that **co-creation in LW is not simply negotiations with partners under the “co-creation” label**, but rather a commitment by the Mission to afford flexibility to partners and show restraint. LW Washington should provide examples to support this messaging. (Ref. Q2, Q9.)
- **LW Washington should communicate clearly with LW Missions about the administrative and management implications of the program.** Towards the beginning of LW startup in a Mission, the LW Washington team should hold a discussion involving Mission leadership, OAA, program and technical offices to review anticipated design and A&A schedules and critically consider relevant staff bandwidth. This discussion should inform the number of awards planned during program design. (Ref. Q4.)

## Supporting Missions Encountering Administrative and Management Challenges

- LW Washington should continue to support Missions in overcoming A&A-related hurdles to local partnerships. This may include assisting the Mission in **raising OAA and technical staff awareness of the flexibility of various award mechanisms** by providing information in a supportive way, leveraging existing relationships where possible. It may also include working with M/OAA’s Professional Development Training team and PPL’s AOR/COR Hub in Washington to incorporate LLD content into AO/CO and AOR/COR training, respectively. (Ref. Q4.)
- LW Washington should **provide guidance and examples that help LW Missions navigate bureaucratic hurdles** and practically implement policy priorities from Washington. Areas in which Missions may benefit from specific examples include: structuring award documents (program descriptions, milestone plans) in ways that allow for flexibility throughout an activity; steps for co-creating activity MEL plans with local actors; fulfilling Initial Environmental Examination (IEE) requirements without placing excessive burden on local partners; and navigating “shoulds” versus “musts” in ADS and FAR regulations. (Ref. Q9.)



Photo credit: USAID Local Works

A boy grooms one of the horses at ZooPlanet, a Local Works partner that supports animal therapy for people living with autism.

- To ensure LW programs receive the staff support they need, LW Washington PoCs should work with Missions to find **creative solutions to hiring constraints**. This might include hiring someone who teleworks, creating hoteling space, hiring someone to work in another region closer to local partners (using LW funds for satellite office space), placing new hires in Activity Manager roles pending AOR/COR certification, or working with LW Washington to set aside funds to support staffing in future years. (Ref. Q9.)

### Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

- LW Washington should heavily encourage Missions to **budget for a MEL contractor** tasked specifically with supporting LW partners when submitting their funding requests with their LOIs. Given the benefits of local MEL providers, LW Washington should encourage and support Missions to hire local MEL contractors in countries where this is possible, and to [draw on local MEL expertise in other ways](#) (USAID internal-only resource) in countries where it is more difficult to partner with a local MEL provider as a prime contractor. (Ref. Q7.)
- LW Washington should **proactively provide guidance and resources on locally led MEL approaches** to AOR/CORs, Mission MEL Specialists, and contractors (both local and international) working with LW partners. This may include MEL plan and indicator reporting templates. It may also include practical guidance on specific topics, such as measuring outcome-level indicators that are challenging to quantify, or approaches to capturing systems-level change. (Ref. Q7.)

- The LW team in Washington should **build a structured process for Missions nearing the end of their LW funding to reflect on their LW successes and lessons learned**, and to conduct action planning regarding how they will build on this moving forward. Support provided by LW Washington may include: helping Missions consider the use of [transition awards](#) to continue expanding their local partnerships; assisting Missions to integrate LW learning - both programmatic and operational - into CDCS development and strategic planning; conducting or supporting an evaluation; or launching new awards to local partners with additional LW funding. (Ref. Q10.)

## Recommendations for LW Missions

### Activity Design and Management

- Working with new, local partners requires mentorship, and can require more staff time than managing experienced USAID partners. Designating (or hiring) a LW Coordinator can be helpful. When hiring a new LW Coordinator, LW Missions should **seek candidates with enthusiasm for mentoring new partners**, as this passion among AORs was the driving force behind USAID's positive relationships with partners in Serbia. These relationships built trust and openness about activity progress, enabling course corrections that improved program outcomes. Additionally, Missions should hire a LW Coordinator or other needed staff as early as possible after selection for LW participation to allow for AOR/COR certification before activities begin. (Ref. Q2, Q9.)
- To effectively respond to emerging local needs and opportunities, Missions should **craft award documents to be as flexible as possible**. OAA and technical office staff should work together to structure awards in a way that leaves details to work planning. This may include crafting Cooperative Agreements to include only high-level objectives, and Fixed Amount Awards to include milestones that allow for a variety of scenarios (possibly by referencing the work plan, rather than specifying details in the milestone plan). Awards crafted to promote this flexibility will reduce the bureaucratic burden of award modifications on OAA and technical office staff. (Ref. Q2, Q3.)
- To support MEL activities of interest to partners themselves, Missions should consider including a **budget for small grants within the MEL provider's contract budget**. This would allow the MEL provider to support emerging opportunities for partner learning, such as data collection to assess community-level opinions, or pilots of methodologies discussed at the annual MEL training (such as contribution analysis or beneficiary feedback mechanisms). (Ref. Q7.)

- When planning meetings of all LW partners in a country, Mission LW teams should **build agendas that provide time for partners to connect informally with one another** and have conversations about their work. Unless programming areas are very similar across activities, they should steer away from formats in which partners share about learning specific to their own programming. Additionally, AOR/CORs should facilitate targeted connections of partners when there are common areas of work, and Washington PoCs should support these types of connections across LW countries. (Ref. Q10.)

### Advancing Localization: Recommendations for LW Washington

1. LW Washington should continue to **advocate for structural changes that reduce OAA bandwidth constraints**. (Ref. Q4, Q9.) Specific recommendations from former and current Mission staff members on how to reduce OAA bandwidth constraints include:
  - a. Invest time in building FSN A&A Specialist skill sets. Strong A&A Specialists who can handle tasks relatively independently relieve the bandwidth constraints on warranted COs and AOs.
  - b. Hire an AO/CO, or A&A surge support staff, as part of the Local Works Washington team, for Missions to tap into.
  - c. Use FAAs and fixed price contracts more often, since these have a lower management burden over the life of the award.
2. The LW team in Washington should encourage LW Missions who have successfully worked through operational challenges to locally led development to **apply for additional LW funding** so they can continue acting as the “front line” of cultural and procedural shifts at the Agency. (Ref. Q9.)

Do you have questions, comments, or reactions to this evaluation? We'd love to hear them!  
Email the Local Works team ([localworks@usaid.gov](mailto:localworks@usaid.gov)).