

## Tips for Strengthening Local Capacity To Assess Incentives and Conduct Savvy, Adaptive Programming

*These tips are part of a series of tips and resources to support context-driven adaptation in programming. For other resources, see the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection at <https://usaidlearninglab.org/context-driven-adaptation-overview> (internal staff version at <https://programnet.usaid.gov/collection/context-driven-adaptation>) or the Google Doc versions [here](#).*

While immediate programming benefits when it is implemented in a way that observes and adjusts to shifts in context - particularly incentive structures and power dynamics - over the long term, effective development programming must empower local actors to more routinely implement their own efforts in similar ways. This can be thought of as developing the capacity of local actors to design and manage context-driven, adaptive programming, or to think and work politically (TWP)<sup>1</sup>. This document is an effort to compile some good practices in supporting local capacity to TWP. Related documents can be found in the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection on Program.net.

### Strengthening Skills

1. **Embed data collection with and through local partners.** Adaptive management, especially with respect to power dynamics, depends on a regularly-refreshed situational awareness. If your partners can be engaged in all forms of data collection and analysis that enable this awareness, they can gain skills that will enable them to do this well beyond your partnership. This includes both making use of surveys and supporting partners to lead on qualitative data collection and analysis. For example, in the Nigeria SAVI project, local partners took the [lead in conducting political economy analysis](#) with some coaching and technical assistance from the project.
2. **Bring local partners together to conduct sense-making<sup>2</sup>.** Adaptation to power dynamics is not algorithmic - the data will not, by itself, imply what shifts in programming approaches may lead to better outcomes. The process of reviewing and making sense of data is a critical practice. Many local partners bring deep contextual understanding and perspectives, and feed this into USAID-led efforts at making sense of data. Helping local partners to go beyond simply providing their own perspective, and enabling them to more effectively triangulate across many perspectives is key to growing their capacity as leaders of politically-savvy adaptive programming. Techniques such as [Everyday PEA](#) can reinforce this skill.
3. **Use monitoring that requires local interpretation of data.** Partner leadership of local sense-making can be reinforced through use of monitoring that embeds local interpretation in the data itself. For example, a technique such as [most significant](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Thinking and Working Politically is a term of art; for more, see [www.twpcommunity.org](http://www.twpcommunity.org)

<sup>2</sup> Sense-making, or data reviews and learning, often builds on narratives by participants and interpretation by different stakeholders. See examples [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#).

[change](#) requires local perspectives on what is changing and why it matters as the data doesn't speak for itself. The process of making sense of what patterns of change stories signify is stronger when local actors are involved, and reviewing such patterns to make sense of them is a valuable peer learning opportunity for the local actors..

### Changing the Locus of Learning

4. **Reframe investment of learning from “how to adjust our project” to “how the team can discover key factors of relevance to outcomes.”** Adaptive management can often be seen as how donors and implementers adjust programming, with the only valuable outcome being a more effective project or activity. However, as USAID and other donors seek to shift ownership to local partners in driving toward development outcomes, learning should shift from being anchored in a USAID-funded activity to being anchored in a development outcome that matters to country stakeholders. There is often little gap between these in practice, but describing the learning process as [discovery of what goes on in the local system](#) helps to make it learning that is equally valid for a local organization working in a sector for many years to come. Alan Hudson [offers some questions](#) to ask yourself about planned learning to see if it supports this type of learning.
5. **Shift who is asked to set learning agenda questions.** In following through on the desire to shift the locus of learning, invite local stakeholders (local think tanks and universities, relevant civil society or government officials, or anyone else with a stake in the outcomes) to help shape the learning agenda. This can apply to a formal [learning agenda](#), or to how local perspectives are reflected in [advisory bodies](#). Here's an example (internal USAID only) from [Zimbabwe](#) where Pact pulled together civil society organizations to identify questions of interest, and then generated research products that those actors had said would be useful.
6. **Support local partners build a practice of triangulating multiple perspectives.** Often, local partners are eager to take a lead role in programming, including in shaping how we will learn together about shifts in the power dynamics that bear on the outcomes we're jointly pursuing. Sometimes, partners may resist involving others, perceiving broader engagement as a threat to their own expertise. We want to encourage local partners not just to speak for their communities, but to actively bring other perspectives into the learning space and learn how to facilitate a diversity of input. We can help local partners learn to triangulate across many perspectives, and understand how this is essential to them growing into stronger implementers of politically-savvy adaptive programming and leaders in this space. Supporting local partners embrace a facilitative role, leading from behind or serving as a [backbone organization](#), is a slow shift that can be accomplished through coaching when working on joint learning. Facilitative leadership also is often more valued by other stakeholders, and practicing it can enhance partners' credibility and influence.

### Fostering Relationships

7. **Value who partners know and can go to as a key form of capacity.** Local partners have rich networks of peers and allies. These networks will continue to be a primary source of learning and adaptation when USAID programming ends. Supporting partners to strengthen relationships in ways that help them collectively tap into knowledge about a local system is a powerful investment in them, and particularly in their capacity to learn and adapt in years to come. Making this investment requires intentional steps by USAID, both in terms of costs (such as for technical assistance) and in terms of time. Allowing partners time and space to establish trust and learn to relate effectively is an important part of strengthening the local capacity for TWP. Much more on the connections between relationships and capacity can be found in this set of resources on [Capacity Development 2.0](#)
8. **Map and build on existing networks of relationships.** Given the importance of connections to information flow and learning, it can be a powerful way of understanding your context, and your ability to learn from it, to [map networks](#) of collaboration or information exchange. These result in visuals and can be analyzed mathematically to better understand who is playing which roles in a network, and the implications for programming. Here are some examples of mapping as linked to [systems](#) and [political economy](#).
9. **Integrate the Savvy and the Excluded.** Partnering locally, and working in politically-savvy ways, can quite naturally lead us to emphasize those who are already well-connected and influential, as those tend to be precisely the partners and stakeholders who can make change happen. This is a key theme of “working with the grain.” However, we do not want our efforts to achieve change to reinforce exclusion locally, even as a byproduct. Learning agendas are an excellent space in which to more intentionally include marginalized voices. Women, youth and representatives of marginalized groups often offer different perspectives on data patterns and help make sense of them. They will certainly benefit from observing how data is analyzed and power dynamics reflected in programming, and even more so from being included in meetings and discussions that help establish networks. Doing so is also not costly - including a few extra people at an advisory council meeting, in a sense-making workshop, or in a pause and reflect adaptation point is an easy and meaningful step toward working with the grain inclusively. Here are some useful [thoughts and ideas](#) on balancing the tensions and opportunities around TWP and gender.