



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



PHOTO: © MORGANA WINGARD

## PAPER SERIES ON CAPACITY AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

# Inquiry 3: Approaches to Strengthening Capacity with Local Actors

## INTRODUCTION TO THIS PAPER SERIES

USAID is committed to partnering with countries along their Journeys to Self-Reliance, as reflected in [USAID's Policy Framework](#). *Self-reliance* refers to a country's capacity to plan, finance, and implement solutions to local development challenges, and a commitment to see these through effectively, inclusively, and with accountability.<sup>1</sup> The [Self-Reliance Learning Agenda \(SRLA\)](#) contributes to a broader understanding of self-reliance and aid effectiveness, and addresses critical knowledge gaps.

The papers in this series summarize a landscape analysis<sup>2</sup> conducted by USAID to better understand how existing evidence can contribute to addressing the [SRLA learning questions](#). Initiated during the developmental stages of the SRLA, the aim of this landscape analysis was to conduct an extemporaneous and iterative examination of how concepts related to self-reliance are discussed in existing international development literature.

Capacity and capacity strengthening quickly emerged as complex and contested terms, prompting the four inquiries examined in this series of papers:

- [Inquiry 1](#): What are the different perspectives that development practitioners have on organizational capacity?
- [Inquiry 2](#): How do development practitioners determine what capacity already exists within an organization?
- [Inquiry 3](#): How should development practitioners approach strengthening organizational capacity with local actors?<sup>3</sup>
- [Inquiry 4](#): How can development practitioners strengthen their own capacities to better facilitate the Journey to Self-Reliance?

Each paper in the series summarizes perspectives found in the literature examined by the team, first through an analysis of external literature and then by looking at USAID documentation. These findings are shared in the hope of prompting further discussion, and are by no means comprehensive. In particular, while the investigation was largely conceptual, we know that programmatic examples pertaining to these inquiries abound. USAID invites you to share your experience and evidence. Please refer to the *How to Stay Engaged* section at the end of each paper.

---

## INQUIRY 3: HOW SHOULD DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS APPROACH STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY WITH LOCAL ACTORS?

Most of the sources reviewed for this landscape analysis primarily address the status quo, focusing on contemporary definitions of capacity and related approaches for strengthening it. The landscape analysis also encountered a corollary

---

<sup>1</sup> The literature examined for this landscape analysis engaged with issues of capacity at the level of organizations and individual actors, not at the country level as defined by USAID's [Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps](#).

<sup>2</sup> Between December 2018 and June 2019, the research team reviewed more than 50 USAID documents (e.g., policy, strategy, and learning documents produced at the bureau or office level, dating back to 2011) and more than 60 external documents (e.g., academic journal articles, gray literature).

<sup>3</sup> *Local actors and local organizations* refer to the range of indigenous organizations and individuals engaged in development work within their own country, including government agencies and NGOs.

discussion in the literature about what role development practitioners *should* play in capacity strengthening. Though limited to a few sources, these authors emphatically argue that local organizations must — and *can* — build their own capacity. From this perspective, the goal for development practitioners becomes fostering or facilitating the development of local organizations such that they can sustainably pursue their development objectives independent of external support. Partnerships between development practitioners and local organizations have often been criticized for being top-down and contractual rather than genuine collaborations that promote effective capacity strengthening.

In the literature reviewed, there is an assumption that capacity strengthening in this vein will differ in significant ways from previous approaches to capacity building. Instead of building capacity through formal training that attempts to shape local organizations into the image of Western businesses, this literature highlights the need for experiential approaches to capacity development. This suggests a mindset shift away from “capacity building,” which assumes a capacity deficit and runs counter to a focus on partnership. “Capacity strengthening,” by contrast, assumes that local capacities exist and can be further strengthened according to local needs and contextual considerations.



PHOTO: © JASON HOUSTON

## Role Vis-à-Vis Local Actors

The literature with a perspective on capacity that falls within the capacity 2.0<sup>4</sup> model demonstrates a strong penchant for experiential and peer-to-peer learning methods. In this scenario, development practitioners adopt a facilitative — rather than expert — posture, repositioning themselves as “a guide by the side, not a sage on stage.” There is a general consensus within the literature that active learning, as opposed to classroom-style training, is more effective at strengthening capacity. Experiential approaches to capacity strengthening commonly include an element of mentoring or apprenticeship, whereby new skills are learned over time and through repeated practice. While guidance and feedback remain close at hand (e.g., in the form of a mentor or knowledgeable peer), genuine learning occurs through an iterative process of trying something new, making mistakes, and persevering. Peer-to-peer learning can take a variety of forms, including twinning, communities of practice, site visits, and study tours.

The goal for development practitioners becomes facilitating the development of local organizations such that they can sustainably pursue their development objectives independent of external support.

## Relationships with Local Actors

According to the literature, adopting a facilitative role rather than an expert role can fundamentally recast the relationship between development practitioners and local actors. This has significant programmatic ramifications. For instance, the level of involvement and investment required by development practitioners in the role of facilitator or broker will vary. In some instances, the demands on development practitioners will be minimal compared to more traditional approaches for the top-down transfer of expertise. Equally, adopting a facilitative posture requires that development practitioners form relational — as opposed to transactional — partnerships with local actors, built on mutual trust and recognition. Some authors argue, for example, that development practitioners cannot embrace the idea of local organizations owning their own development while still trying to direct and control the process. The literature posits that when development practitioners prioritize leveraging existing local capacity and utilizing locally-based assessments as their starting point, capacity-strengthening efforts should likewise shift in focus to ensure that local strengths are effectively identified, understood, and capitalized on.

<sup>4</sup> Capacity 1.0 represents a relatively narrow aperture focused on specific technical skills (e.g., financial management and human resources). Capacity 2.0 represents a broadening of that aperture, revealing additional dimensions of capacity to holistically account for the range of organizational abilities required to effectively operate within a broader context (e.g., the ability to build a healthy organizational culture and adapt to changing circumstances). Please refer to the [Inquiry 1](#) paper in this series that explores different perspectives on capacity, and their implications, in greater detail.

## Approaches to Strengthening Capacity of Local Actors

While few would argue with the intent of supporting sustainable local organizations — and many development practitioners are already working effectively in this vein — it does surface difficult questions about what forms external support should take. Recasting what development practitioners mean by capacity and how they measure it has ripple effects across how they support local capacity strengthening efforts.<sup>5</sup> Equally, the skills and mindsets required to effectively facilitate (rather than administer) capacity strengthening might be less familiar to some development practitioners. For instance, training emerges as a particular point of contention in the literature. Development practitioners have historically relied on training as a default capacity-building approach, in part because processes for delivering and measuring training are relatively straightforward. However, training has been widely scrutinized in the literature based on both historical experience and known best practices in adult learning. Critiques of technical assistance similarly suggest that well-established programming approaches have sometimes substituted for — rather than built — local capacity.

### In USAID Literature

USAID's *Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD) Model* (2011) is a holistic and systemic approach to addressing organizational performance. It views organizations as adaptive systems; focuses on tangible, measurable performance improvements according to six human performance factors (i.e., information, resources, incentives, knowledge/skills, capacity, and motives); and enables cyclical processes of performance improvement.

The holistic nature of HICD addresses institutional performance by identifying fundamental causes (or basic reasons) of performance gaps. It then designs performance solutions to address the root causes and related performance factors before establishing a performance monitoring system for continuous performance improvement. This model can be used with all types of partners, including public institutions, private sector firms, non-governmental organizations, and civil society organizations.

### Implications for the SRLA

The ideas discussed throughout this paper should prompt critical reflection about how development practitioners assess existing capacity in partner countries. They also surface broader questions about how to most effectively measure different types of capacity, especially when both measurements and capacity itself are a matter of perspective. The SRLA will continue to explore these issues while addressing the following learning questions:

*How can local, sub-national, national, and regional voices, priorities, and contributions be integrated into how USAID fosters self-reliance? (SRLA, Q10)*

*How can we best measure USAID's specific contribution to countries' progress on the Journey to Self-Reliance at the local, sub-national, national, and regional levels? (SRLA, Q12)*

## HOW TO STAY ENGAGED

The issues raised here are central to current discussions about aid effectiveness. Continuing to explore them critically will benefit USAID as it supports countries on their journeys toward self-reliance, as well as the wider development community. Perspectives and evidence generated in practice by USAID Missions and other organizations are essential for building a more robust understanding of what makes capacity strengthening effective.

---

<sup>5</sup> The research team anticipates that programmatic examples of working in this way exist and invites you, the reader, to share your experience. Please refer to the *How to Stay Engaged* section at the end of this paper.

We are excited to learn from your experience or evidence that you would like to share in this collaborative effort:

- If you are working to strengthen local capacity, please let us know how you have used experiential approaches, such as peer-to-peer learning, mentorship, and communities of practice.
- Please share which capacity areas you most frequently prioritize in your capacity strengthening work.
- If you have used locally-based tools to assess capacity that would help inform the SRLA, please share your experience with us.

Please contact USAID at [SRLA@usaid.gov](mailto:SRLA@usaid.gov) to share your experiences or evidence. You can also learn more about the Journey to Self-Reliance at <https://www.usaid.gov/selfreliance>.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

- Barbelet, V. (2018). *As Local as Possible, as International as Necessary*, ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper. Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/publications/1238-local-possible-international-necessary-understanding-capacity-and-complementarity-humanitarian>
- Cohen, M.J., Ferguson, K., Gingerich, T.R. and Scribner, S. (2016). *Righting the wrong: strengthening local humanitarian leadership to save lives and strengthen communities*. Boston: Oxfam America
- De Geoffroy, V., et. al. (2017). *More than the money: localisation in practice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/policy/more-than-the-money-localisation-in-practice.pdf>
- Dichter, T. (2014). *The capable partners learning agenda on local organization capacity development*. Retrieved from: <https://www.developmentcapacity.org/>
- Ellerman, D. (2005). *Helping people help themselves: from the World Bank to an alternative philosophy of development assistance*. Retrieved from: [https://books.google.nl/books?id=o459B0OxbgMC&pg=PA147&lpq=PA147&dq=David+Ellerman+%E2%80%9Cguide+by+the+side%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=7NpowNOs4X&sig=ACfU3U2b9eJLOTrlOcXxy8p-6M7EcVyAgxA&hl=en&sa=X&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=David%20Ellerman%20%E2%80%9Cguide%20by%20the%20side%E2%80%9D&f=false](https://books.google.nl/books?id=o459B0OxbgMC&pg=PA147&lpq=PA147&dq=David+Ellerman+%E2%80%9Cguide+by+the+side%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=7NpowNOs4X&sig=ACfU3U2b9eJLOTrlOcXxy8p-6M7EcVyAgxA&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=David%20Ellerman%20%E2%80%9Cguide%20by%20the%20side%E2%80%9D&f=false)
- Glennie, J., et. al. (2013). *Localising aid: sustaining change in the public, private and civil society sectors*. Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8284.pdf>
- Glennie, J., et. al. (2012). *Localising aid: can using local actors strengthen them?* Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7789.pdf>
- Glennie, J, Rabinowitz, G. (2013). *Localising aid: a whole of society approach*. Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8457.pdf>
- McKechnie, A. (2013). *Localising aid: is it worth the risk?* Retrieved from: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8456.pdf>
- United States Agency for International Development. (2019). *The Journey to Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps*. Retrieved from: <https://selfreliance.usaid.gov/>
- United States Agency for International Development. (2018). *Capacity development interventions: a guide for program designers*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ngoconnect.net/resource/capacity-development-interventions-guide-program-designers>
- United States Agency for International Development. (2018). *Monitoring organizational capacity development efforts*. Retrieved from: [https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/monitoring\\_organizational\\_capacity\\_development\\_efforts\\_final\\_v1.pdf](https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/monitoring_organizational_capacity_development_efforts_final_v1.pdf)
- United States Agency for International Development. (2017). *Local capacity development suggested approaches*. Retrieved from: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2496/Local\\_Capacity\\_Development\\_Suggest\\_Approaches\\_1.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2496/Local_Capacity_Development_Suggest_Approaches_1.pdf)
- United States Agency for International Development. (2011). *Human and institutional capacity development handbook*. Retrieved from: [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADW783.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADW783.pdf)
- Van Brabant, K, Patel, S. (2018). *Localization in practice: emerging indicators and practical recommendations*. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/localisation-practice-emerging-indicators-and-practical-recommendations>
- Watson-Grant, S, Xiong, K, Thomas, J.C. (2016). *Country ownership in international development: toward a working definition*. Retrieved from: <https://www.measureevaluation.org/resources/publications/wp-16-164>