

Deep Dive 3: Considerations for Locally Led Activity Design

The Local Works program strives to equip local actors to develop and implement solutions to locally-identified development challenges. For local partners, working with USAID can create an opportunity for long-term growth and organizational sustainability. When USAID and implementing partners (IPs) transform their relationships with local organizations to partnerships of mutual respect, they unleash the capacity of these local actors to achieve their goals.

This case study probed local implementing partners' and supported initiatives' views of USAID support. Their feedback is synthesized here as a resource to help inform future activity designs.

Small grants helped equip the most “local” initiatives.

Small local organizations and initiatives cited funding as a major challenge. Fundraising demands time and resources, and initiatives are often pushed to shift their focus to align with donor priorities. Small grants (some of them only \$500) afforded initiatives an opportunity to focus on attracting and engaging local resources as a foundation for long-term sustainability. Some were structured as challenge grants, in which local organizations could “unlock” additional funding by mobilizing additional resources; these created useful leverage that helped them attract funds from private sector actors or local businesses. Additionally, the flexible reporting structure of these small grants provided space for initiatives to focus on their long term goals, rather than short-term (but often unsustainable) outputs for the purpose of donor reporting. Lastly, grants provided an entry point for IPs to help local initiatives identify their primary mission, pushing them to remain “authentic” to local priorities and identify strategies for community resource mobilization (rather than changing their goals to attract external funding).

In the words of a local partner:

“*Some organizations get funded and become bigger and bigger, and smaller organizations are left out. The new structure of Local Works funding has provided room for support for local activists, and we see more and more new grassroots and informal groups emerging in the past couple of years...*

Villages don't need formal organizations to work toward the public good. Instead, we need to find ways to support bridges for local people to do this work.

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Partners value demand-driven capacity development.

In some cases, IPs invited local initiatives to self-identify the capacity development activities most important for their own organizational growth. Many respondents highlighted support in marketing and communications as very helpful, as it equipped them to share their story and accomplishments. One IP reported that even the initiatives not selected for funding were interested in partnering because they valued the capacity support in government engagement strategies. (The interviewed government representative, too, found that the support provided to initiatives in advocacy, negotiations, and communications was worthwhile in equipping these groups to be partners in policy formation.) IPs went beyond training to offer mentorship and coaching (for example, coaching in how to use existing channels to file public complaints or initiate legal proceedings), provide additional tools (e.g. for advocacy or marketing), and facilitate relationships across organizations. IPs also described adapting their support based on the size, maturity, and needs of each organization.

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When IPs act as true partners and mentors, as opposed to technical implementers, that has a positive impact.

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- USAID/Serbia LW Team

A group of young activists mobilized community members to address needs in their town. One project included beautifying a public space with a mural of Nicola Tesla.

Photo Credit: USAID/Serbia

Initiatives appreciate opportunities to network within and across sectors.

IPs facilitated opportunities for supported initiatives to form relationships with each other. One supported initiative leader named this as the most valuable part of support, as it allowed her to identify potential synergies between her work and that of other initiatives. IPs also leveraged their own connections and reputations to help initiative leaders get their foot in the door with government decision-makers, and facilitated connections between civil society and the private sector. For example, with the support of IPs, a CSO supporting entrepreneurship connected with small businesses throughout Serbia to formulate and present to the government unified recommendations for tax reform.

Beyond tangible skills, IP support can help local initiatives build confidence.

IPs listened to the priorities expressed by local organizations and helped them create strategic plans and step-by-step goals, which helped initiatives identify their existing assets and perceive goals as attainable. Additionally, training in the areas of marketing and communications, which helped initiatives better express their work and accomplishments, had the added bonus of giving organizations a more complete view of their strengths and contributions, boosting their confidence.

In the words of a local implementing partner:

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Local organizations know their communities. With confidence in their abilities, they can move mountains.

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