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STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF LOCAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

GUIDANCE FOR ADVANCING USAID'S LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING POLICY IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PHOTO CREDIT

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

ADS   Automated Directives System

AMELP Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan

CLA   collaborating, learning, and adapting

CSO   civil society organization

ECE   early childhood education

EGR   early grade reading

EMIS   Education Management Information System

G2G   government to government

HEI   higher education institution

LCS   local capacity strengthening

LMA   labor market assessment

MEL   monitoring, evaluation, and learning

MoE   Ministry of Education

MSC   Most Significant Change

NGO   non-governmental organization

OU   Operating Unit

PTA   parent teacher association

PIRS   Performance Indicator Reference Sheet

RERA   Rapid Education and Risk Analysis

RFI   request for information

SNA   Social Network Analysis

TVET   technical and vocational education and training

USAID United States Agency for International Development

USG   United States Government

INTRODUCTION

This document aims to provide USAID Missions, Operating Units (OUs), and partners with guidance that will enable them to conceptualize, plan for, and manage local systems and capacity strengthening programs, activities, and initiatives within the education sector. The guidance provides practical tools and examples that help enable USAID staff and partners in the education sector,

from pre-primary through higher education, to take tangible steps to promote and integrate local capacity strengthening (LCS) across the program cycle. The guidance is informed by review of evidence and consultation with local and international partners and USAID staff around the world.

This guidance document contains the following sections:

I.   Local Capacity Strengthening in the Education Sector summarizes the evidence on education sector systems and capacity strengthening programming in low- and middle-income countries, including policies, limitations, and promising practices.

II.   Local Capacity Strengthening Across the Program Cycle presents practical guidance and examples for systems and local capacity strengthening within education programming.

III.   Conclusion offers action steps for aligning education sector programs, activities, and initiatives with USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Education systems consist of people, public and private institutions, resources, and activities who jointly contribute to improving, expanding, and sustaining learning and educational outcomes.

Sustainability means that the education system has the ability to produce learning and educational outcomes over time beyond the project or activity lifespan or USAID's presence in the country.

Education systems strengthening comprises strategies, partnerships, and activities to jointly improve the performance of an education system to produce locally valued learning and educational outcomes over time.

Local capacity strengthening is a strategic and intentional investment in the process of partnering with local actors—individuals, organizations, and networks—to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable development outcomes.

Local actors are individuals, organizations, and networks that originate from and are led by people within a given country or region, inclusive of government at national and sub-national levels.

Local partners are local actors working with USAID as either direct contractors or recipients or as subcontractors or subrecipients, whether under acquisition or assistance.

Refer to Annex I for more definitions.

I. LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

A. Policies

The USAID Education Policy, USAID Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, the U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education, and the Youth in Development Policy together serve as a compass for the design and management of USAID efforts to support local education systems and strengthen capacity across the education continuum.

USAID EDUCATION POLICY VISION

A world where **partner country education systems** enable all children and youth to acquire the education and skills needed to be productive members of society.

USAID's 2018 Education Policy places local capacity and education system strengthening at the heart of its vision.[1] The end goal of local capacity strengthening in education is to strengthen the local education system, whether at national, local, or community levels—to be more resilient to shocks and stressors, and better able to provide high quality education services to children, youth, and learners.

USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy guides USAID decisions about why and how to invest in the capacity of local actors and systems to better achieve inclusive and locally led development. The Policy identifies seven mutually reinforcing principles for effective local capacity strengthening, which are important to advancing USAID's education programming (Figure 1). Through the LCS Policy, USAID commits to collaborating with local actors and partners to define their own vision for success; strengthen their ability to be effective and relevant actors within their local communities and contexts; and elevate local ownership in sustaining development results.

FIGURE 1: Local Capacity Strengthening Principles

PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING OF LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

1. Start with the local system.

2. Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches.

3. Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners.

PRINCIPLES FOR EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS IN LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

4. Align capacity strengthening with local priorities.

5. Appreciate and build on existing capacities.

6. Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our support for local capacity strengthening.

7. Practice mutuality with local partners.

B. Evidence on Education Systems and Capacity Strengthening in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

USAID has invested in a range of activities that strengthen local education systems, and the evidence for what works in local capacity strengthening in education is growing. Table 1 identifies both limitations of current practices alongside promising practices drawn from emerging evidence from recent systems and capacity strengthening activities.

In reflecting on this brief synthesis of the evidence and the practices outlined below, it is important to keep in mind that promising practices in one local context may not be the "best fit" for another local context. It is for this reason that context analysis, described in Section B.2. Context Analysis, is an essential starting point when considering applicable approaches and practices in local systems and capacity strengthening.

Table 1: Moving from Capacity Building to Capacity Strengthening

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT PRACTICES	PROMISING PRACTICES
Deficient-based, north-south capacity *building*	**Asset-based, capacity *sharing***
Local actors have repeatedly highlighted the tremendous local capacity that already exists within their communities and is often overlooked by international actors.[2] USAID capacity building efforts in education have often incorporated a deficit-based approach with the assumption that the solution would be for global north expertise and best practices to be transmitted to the Global South.	"Capacity sharing" interventions[3] employ strengths- or asset-based approaches[4] and challenge "the assumption that local capacities are lacking."[5] In practice, this may include interventions that support local actors to identify their existing strengths and assets,[6] facilitating local innovation and solutions (such as problem-driven iterative adaptation),[7] south-south and peer learning capacity strengthening activities, supporting local capacity development marketplaces,[8] and mutual learning between local and international actors.[9]
Activities not truly locally led	**Employ meaningful locally led practices, always**
Activity-based service delivery interventions do not easily lend themselves to fully locally led interventions or transformational capacity change.[10] Local actors participating in capacity building activities often have limited voice to shape design decisions or influence ongoing adaptation of activities that respond to their feedback. In addition, activities often provide short-term training led by international actors and consultants.[11]	Successful education activities depend on strong working and trusted relationships with relevant local counterparts,[12] and activities that are aligned to local priorities, processes, resources, and timelines.[13] Locally led, co-led, and co-created activity design and flexible interventions (or "best-fit" interventions) that are evidence-based and aligned to existing or locally desired policies, norms, and processes, are more likely to succeed and respond to the capacity needs and priorities of local actors and partners.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT PRACTICES	PROMISING PRACTICES
Hyper-focus on learner and curricular level improvements	**Expanded focus using a systems lens on sustaining improvements**
While the individual learners are at the heart of education reform, activities often exclude other important actors, functions, or factors that influence learning and educational outcomes. Activity design and measurement can often focus primarily on student learning outcomes (basic/secondary) or curricular reform (tertiary), with little focus on larger capacity strengthening aims.[14] When activities are focused narrowly on delivery of discrete tasks, such as workforce development, in-service teacher training, or classroom materials distribution, without addressing systemic factors, even promising successes are unlikely to be sustained.[15]	Systems thinking[16] refers to a set of analytical approaches that help understand the system as a whole: actors and functions, and the relationships, rules, roles, and resources that shape performance results.[17] Systems thinking approaches utilized in diagnostics and political economy analyses (see B.2 Context Analysis) can help unpack root causes of low learning outcomes and identify leverage points where capacity strengthening is likely to be effective or where other methods may be needed to build more resilient education systems.[18] They can also help move beyond a focus exclusively on formal education delivery and recognize the role of communities and parents, donor and private networks,[19] middle tier administrators,[20] local and regional actors, and non-state schools.[21]
Misaligned education goals	**Collective action toward learning outcomes**
There is a need to improve coherence within education systems. For example, national policies are often cited as a motivator for stakeholders to take action, but policy alone is not sufficient to catalyze transformative changes.[22] Many different aspects of education systems must work together to support each actor in performing their functions in service of improved learning and educational outcomes.[23]	Education interventions that seek to strengthen system coherence—aligned purpose, rules, roles, and resources—across actors and functions are more likely to sustain performance. Approaches like collective action can enhance commitment and leverage resources to achieve greater capacity strengthening aims across multiple levels and sectors.
Workshop-based training	**Diverse capacity strengthening methods**
Too often, implementers default to an approach that relies on workshop-based training. These trainings can frequently model one-size fits-all ideas about how local actors should look and often prioritizes outside expertise over local knowledge.[24]	A combination of ongoing, partner-driven methods that develop communities of practice are more effective and more likely to be sustained than individual training or training workshops.[25] These may include coaching and mentoring, peer-to-peer learning,[26] secondments/embedded technical assistance, and grants for learning by doing. Asset-based models,[27] functional behavior science approaches,[28] and action learning methods[29] are also increasingly used to develop and measure improvement.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT PRACTICES	PROMISING PRACTICES
Short timelines for lofty goals In education programming, there is often an expectation of immediate returns on investment.[30] Education systems are expected to change very rapidly; timetables are often too short to see significant change at scale.[31] When programs are focused on short-term returns, they often struggle to establish the foundation for local ownership and capacity needed to sustain continuous improvement.[32]	**Long-term mindset with realistic timelines and targets** Education research shows that longer-term planning and multi-year capacity investment has a greater impact on sustained performance improvements than short-term.[33] Liaising with and building upon the work of other donors or other local networked approaches can also be effective in extending activity support for longer-term impact.[34]
Data for upwards reporting and attribution Education systems are often asked to collect large data sets (with competing demands from different donors), while lacking capacity to effectively collect and analyze data for decision-making. Likewise, there is limited evidence of a robust or shared basis for measuring and evaluating sustainability of capacity and systems strengthening.[35]	**Data for local decision-making** The education sector has increased its focus on the use of data for decision-making. Good practices include strengthening local capacity to collect, analyze, and utilize locally valued data and align USAID activity indicators to local data systems. In addition, engaging various levels of the education system in the analysis and dissemination of results goes a long way to increasing the use of data in collaborative learning and evaluation.[36] It is crucial to recognize people as experts in their own experience; it is therefore important to draw on various sources of knowledge, including from indigenous and local knowledge systems, when designing and implementing activities.
Limited engagement and approaches to address marginalized and underrepresented groups and/or people in vulnerable situations There is increasing recognition and application of approaches that engage and include historically marginalized or underrepresented groups or people in vulnerable situations.[37] More research and diagnostic study are needed to identify and address systemic factors to exclusion in education such as the interplay between marginalization, local conditions, and ad hoc versus systems interventions.[38]	**Addressing systemic barriers to equity and inclusion** It is helpful to start with a systems diagnostic,[39] anchored by "Nothing About Us Without Us" and Do No Harm[40] principles, alongside other investments that center engagement of marginalized groups, such as disabled persons organizations, indigenous groups, or refugee populations in education systems strengthening. This may also include exploring how diversity, equity, and inclusion apply to local education systems and utilization of social behavior change practices to shift norms that exclude certain groups.[41]

II. LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING ACROSS THE EDUCATION PROGRAM CYCLE

This section provides guidance, tools, examples, and discussion points to help USAID and partners operationalize the LCS Policy across the different components of the program cycle (see Figure 2). When incorporating LCS across the program cycle, it is important to consider how it can serve as both a specific objective of strategic planning and activity design, as well as a cross-cutting layer that can be added as an activity to strengthen sustainability of other outcomes. Additionally, while different activities and tools are referenced during specific sections, this is rarely a linear process and work may occur simultaneously at multiple stages in the program cycle.

FIGURE 2: The USAID Program Cycle

A. Country Strategic Planning and Engagement

The timeframe and scope of meaningful capacity strengthening often extend beyond individual activity timelines and should be incorporated into longer-term strategic efforts. The following steps are critical preconditions and ongoing work to enable progress beyond programs: Start with an understanding of the education system, form strategic and equitable partnerships, employ long-term mindset and planning, and engage in donor coordination and collective action.

A.1 Start with an Understanding of the Education System

Educational systems are complex, involving a variety of interactions between actors and functions. At the center of this complex system are children and youth who embody diverse aspirations, learning needs, socio-cultural identities and perspectives, and economic status. Evidence shows that education capacity strengthening programs that narrowly focus on one technical function—such as teacher training or Education Management Information System (EMIS)—or on one specific actor—such as a teacher training institute or a data management department—do not always result in a sustained performance and impact. Without considering how individual functions and actors interact with the wider system, such programs often only achieve short- term success.[42]

A comprehensive view of the education system, going beyond the function and capacity of individual education actors, can be instrumental in planning for and creating transformative change in educational outcomes and sustained performance of the system as a whole. When working to apply a systems lens to education system strengthening,[43] it is useful to consider the **mediated interactions** between **actors** and **functions** of the education system (see Figure 3).
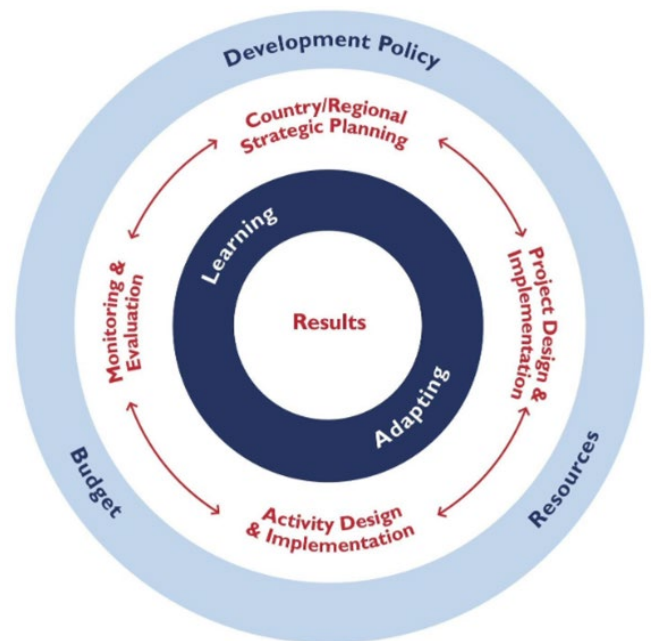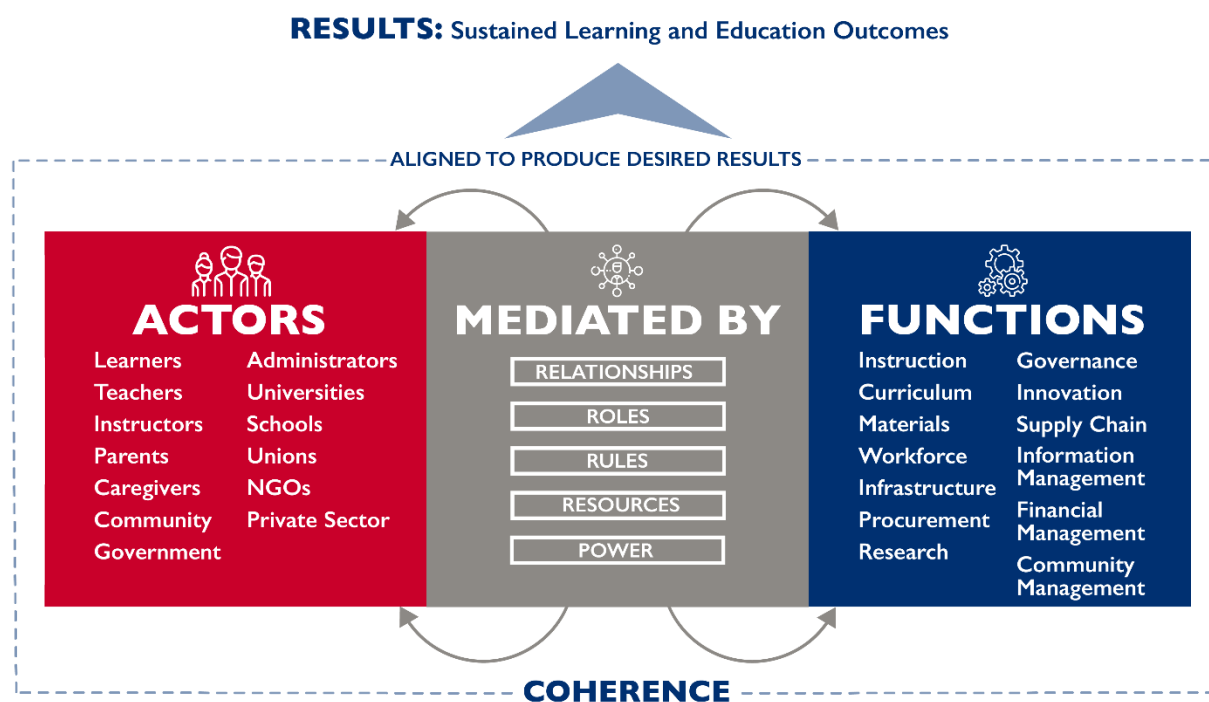
FIGURE 3: Systems Practice in Education

RESULTS: Sustained Learning and Education Outcomes

ALIGNED TO PRODUCE DESIRED RESULTS

ACTORS	MEDIATED BY	FUNCTIONS
Learners Administrators	RELATIONSHIPS	Instruction Governance
Teachers Universities	ROLES	Curriculum Innovation
Instructors Schools	RULES	Materials Supply Chain
Parents Unions	RESOURCES	Workforce Information Management
Caregivers NGOs	POWER	Infrastructure
Community Private Sector		Procurement Financial Management
Government		Research Community Management

COHERENCE

In this depiction of Systems Practice in Education:

- **Actors** include individuals, organizations, institutions, and networks at all levels of the system (national, sub-national, school) and the roles they play that influence education **results**. Actors also have their own internal relationships amongst their staff or departments, rules, resources, and power dynamics that shape their performance.

- **Functions** enable the system to achieve the intended **results**. These are the key performance areas or roles commonly required to achieve results in learning outcomes. Each actor and level of the system may have distinct or overlapping roles in performing these functions depending on the structure and decentralization of the education system.[44]

- **Mediating factors** influence actors' capacity and commitment to perform key functions. These include the relationships between and among actors and functions, the rules (both formal policies and social norms), resources, and other power structures and dynamics (for example, political economy, socioeconomics, patterns of inclusion and exclusion).

- Sustained performance requires continuous reflection and work toward **coherence**[45] among the actors and how they interact to perform functions. Incoherence within the education system may result in poor performance, an inability to scale promising practices, and/or unsustainable results.

- Sustained **results** may only be achieved when system actors, functions, and mediating factors cohere around an aligned purpose to improve learning and education outcomes.

See Section B.2. Context Analysis for specific guidance on tools for analyzing systems.

A.2 Form Strategic and Equitable Partnerships for Local Capacity Strengthening

Systems change is most effective when it is driven by the individuals and organizations that make up that local education system. Partnerships encompass the whole spectrum of actors in the education sector.

Understanding the system and then establishing strategic partnerships based on principles of solidarity and equity are core components of capacity strengthening. Developing equitable partnerships based on mutuality and respect may require a mindset shift among development partners. For example, activity design that starts with—and continues to foster—coordination between local actors can build on existing efforts, harness the collective impact of investments, and ensure the sustainability of reforms.[46]

> In pursuit of equitable partnerships for local capacity strengthening, USAID will embrace the spirit of "nothing about us, without us"… This means that no programming decisions about local capacity strengthening should be made without the active participation of members of the group affected by that programming. USAID must shift our paradigm from partnering "for" to partnering "with."
>
> - LCS Policy Principle 4

A.3 Employ Long-Term Mindset and Planning

Systems and local capacity strengthening is an ongoing process. There is no finite point at which an education system's work is done. In practice, systems change requires a succession of multiple, interconnected investments to achieve measurable progress. Taking a long-term view of planning for the education system and capacity strengthening activities, in partnership with local actors and other donors, results in stronger, more sustainable results. Pushing for immediate results can overload the local system and harm results by shifting limited resources toward unsustainable external priorities.[47] Illustrative strategies for employing a long-term perspective may include:

- Planning for multi-year activities and activities that build on each other over time.

- Employing a phased and sequential approach in activity design to meet the system where it is throughout implementation.

- Utilizing USAID investments to support an existing partner government initiative.

- Engaging with existing local planning processes to inform consultations for new activity design rather than parallel processes for stakeholder engagement.

- Incorporating education finance and collection of cost data within activity interventions to support more effective use of existing resources within the local system.

- Incorporating monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) methods that capture performance improvement and the capacity to sustain that improvement (see C. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning).

> **CASE STUDY: Joint Planning for Long-Term**
>
> In Rwanda, USAID co-facilitated a five-year strategic planning process with the National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Board, which resulted in a plan that demonstrated shared agreements and design inputs not only from local and international government actors, but also among local and international non-governmental organization practitioners. This resulted in strengthened relationships among the board and partners, and outlined areas where roles and rules could be strengthened.

A.4 Engage in Donor Coordination and Collective Action

While this document focuses on integrating local capacity strengthening at the project and activity level, USAID through its convening power, global footprint, standing in key multilateral institutions, linkages with the private sector, and strategic communications channels can elevate the practice of development diplomacy to drive collective action far beyond the scope of an activity.

Development diplomacy can be a key contributing factor to the success of capacity strengthening at the larger systems level.[48] Illustrative strategies for engaging in collective action include:

> **CASE STUDY: Donor Coordination**
>
> To improve donor coordination with Lebanon's Ministry of Education and Higher Education, USAID co-chaired a donor forum, fostering a collaborative place to discuss issues and joint engagement with the government. Read the case study here: Donor Coordination for Enhanced Public Education Services.

- Actively engaging in existing planning forums, such as education sector plans and local education groups, and multilateral forums, including country-level donor coordination groups, the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait.

- Utilizing USAID's convening power to support the participation of diverse local actors in education decision-making, whether that be in community, government, or donor forums.

- Employing thinking and working politically approaches to advance USAID education priorities, such as partnering with locally well-networked individual champions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), higher education institutions (HEIs), or private sector companies.

- Utilizing participatory tools such as the Global Proficiency Framework[49] and the ALIGN toolkit[50] to align government and donor aims and jointly identify strengths and gaps in education inputs alongside education stakeholders.

B. Project and Activity Design and Implementation

This section provides resources and guidance for incorporating local capacity strengthening into the next part of the Program Cycle: Activity Design and Implementation. This includes the following subsections: collaborative design process, context analysis, theory of change, technical approaches, and models and award instruments.

B.1 Collaborative Design Process

Design planning can use different approaches to engage local actors as part of activity design.

One approach USAID often promotes is **co-creation**, defined by USAID as "an intentional, time-bound approach that centers on shared power and decision making for mutually beneficial outcomes." Before pursuing co-creation, it is important for USAID design teams and partners to first evaluate whether co-creation is the best choice to address their challenge and if "shared power and decision making" is possible in the given context. It is also critical to reflect on who is "in the room" (and who is not) to ensure that co-creation includes marginalized and underrepresented groups and/or people in vulnerable situations. **If co-creation processes for activity design are poorly executed, they can cause harm by excluding actors that may find it difficult to participate.**

Illustrative opportunities for collaboration during design include:

- **Participatory education systems reviews** (such as a Joint Education Sector Review[51]) that identify system assets, gaps, and capacity strengthening opportunities.

- **Co-design workshops** with relevant counterparts to inform the design of a USAID activity focused on system assets, gaps, and capacity strengthening opportunities.

- **Requests for Information (RFIs)** can assess experience, capacity, and ideas of local partners to implement a specific intervention or set of interventions.

- **Co-creation workshops** with local partners during the procurement cycle can inform activity and capacity strengthening priorities jointly with USAID.

- **An inception or iterative refinement period** to co-create a theory of change and related actions, that identify key priorities for capacity strengthening, and how collaborating,

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RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

USAID's Co-Creation guide is an important resource for evaluating when to use co-creation, and how to ensure the co-creation follows best practices, including how to mitigate and reduce participation barriers such as resources, concerns around intellectual property, etc. This guide differentiates between co-creation and co-design. Additional resources include USAID's Locally Led Development Checklist and USAID's Listening for Program Design. Under the New Partners Initiative, USAID has also developed a "How-To" Guide for Using Refinement Periods.

CASE STUDY: Co-creation for Activity Design

USAID/Morocco worked in partnership with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to hold a co-creation workshop that brought together critical stakeholders to collectively design solutions and agree on a detailed vision and work plan for an upcoming education project. Read the case study here: Design-stage CLA Engagement Helps 'Get it Right' Early.

USAID/Guatemala demonstrated its openness to ideas outside the Agency and its capacity to collaborate—both with external partners and across mission teams by inviting partners to collaborate early in the project design process through a Broad Agency Announcement, pooling their individual knowledge and expertise to develop a joint concept note. Read the case study here: Building Bridges to Collaboration.

learning, and adapting practices will be applied throughout the activity. This may include jointly identifying indicators to be measured and/or assessment tools to use to measure baseline capacity. See Section C. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.

- **Joint and participatory assessments and context analysis** conducted before and during the design phase to inform design and maximize buy-in of key education sector stakeholders—particularly those receiving or participating in capacity strengthening support.[52] The next section provides resources on selecting and conducting context analyses in education.

B.2 Context Analysis

A context analysis is a systematic assessment of the key factors influencing a development outcome within a given context, aiming to explain why things are the way they are.[53] Grounding systems and capacity strengthening activities in a robust analysis of the actors, mediating factors, and functions of the education system helps to ensure evidence-based, best-fit program designs. Context analysis helps to inform systems and capacity strengthening activities by:

- Identifying the **results** that the education system produces in terms of learning and education outcomes.

- Understanding the root causes helps to explain the results:
  - **Actors** and their respective roles, capacities, and incentives that drive their behaviors.
  - **Mediating factors** that influence actors' capacity and commitment to perform key functions. These include relationships, rules, resources, and other power dynamics.
  - Performance of education system **functions.**
  - **Coherence** across these levels and alignment toward learning outcomes.

- Understanding the **operating context and risks**, especially gender, social inclusion, conflict-sensitivity and potential to cause harm.

Based on this understanding, USAID, partners, and local actors can identify leverage points to highlight where and in what ways capacity strengthening will be most effective.

CASE STUDY: Applied Education System Diagnostic in Uzbekistan

In 2022, a USAID-funded team of technical staff from the University of Notre Dame worked with local subject matter experts under the SHARE activity to conduct a rapid systems diagnostic study in Uzbekistan to assess the quality of education for children with disabilities. The diagnostic study merged systems thinking and participatory approaches to identify root causes for the gaps in education quality. It led to a series of recommendations, developed through a process that engendered local ownership. Study results highlighted a critical need for further research and learning in systems diagnosis for improved policy and interventions to address gaps in quality of education for children with disabilities.[54] Read the full report here: Uzbekistan Inclusive Education Diagnostic Study.

Context analysis may be relevant to inform a range of decisions from country development and cooperation strategies to activity design, inception period design refinement, or ongoing learning and adaptive management. Selecting the most appropriate context analysis will depend on the key information needed to inform decision-making. Collaborative and participatory context analysis approaches can also help foster joint identification of priority actions within an activity, build shared

commitment to address them, and pave the way for partnership, buy-in, and meaningful engagement of local actors as part of an activity.

The resource spotlight below includes an illustrative list of context analyses that can be used in the context of local capacity strengthening in the education sector. Refer to the How to Guide on Context Analysis for Education Activity Decision for guidance on which analysis (or combination of analysis tools) may be most appropriate for informing USAID design decisions.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Examples of Context Analyses in Education

Applied Education System Diagnostic: Useful for understanding root causes and if and where capacity strengthening is a leverage point for change. See USAID's Applied Education System Diagnostic Toolkit.

Gender and Social Inclusion Analyses: Useful for understanding social norms and power dynamics between groups and ensuring inclusion of marginalized and underrepresented groups. See USAID's Guide to Inclusive Development Analysis and Youth and Gender Analysis Toolkit.

Market Assessments: Useful for understanding the market and private sector actors, especially relevant for designing capacity strengthening approaches for youth workforce and education finance programming. See USAID's guide to Labor Market Assessment and Five-Point Framework.

Local Partner Landscape Analysis: Useful for identifying potential local partners. See USAID's guide for Local Partner Landscape Analysis.

Political Economy Analysis: Useful for understanding how political, economic, social, and cultural incentives and constraints affect the political will and commitment of local actors and potential success and strategies for capacity strengthening activities. See USAID's Guide for Applied Political Economy Analysis.

Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation: Useful participatory methodology, often utilized as activity intervention, for fostering collective action through understanding of root causes, identifying entry points and solutions, and taking action and adapting solutions. See Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA).

Rapid Education and Risk Analysis: Useful for understanding contextual risks, including conflict-sensitivity, and assets important to operational context. See USAID's Rapid Education and Risk Analysis (RERA) Toolkit.

Social Network Analysis: Useful for visualizing and analyzing relationships between actors in a local system to inform network strengthening. For more: Social Network Analysis (SNA).

B.3 Theory of Change

The literature on education systems and capacity strengthening suggests that for activities to achieve sustainability they must be designed from the outset with a clear vision or end-state in mind, as well as a theory of change that articulates what it will take to get there. A strong vision and narrative theory of change will also reflect critical assumptions and mitigating effects and will be flexible enough to adapt in case of potential unintended outcomes and ongoing learning that require alternative approaches. Engagement of local partners in development and revision (if necessary) of the theory of

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Theory of Change Workbook

For more on best practices with Theory of Change, see the Theory of Change Workbook, which includes workbooks and examples to help collaboratively develop theories of change.

change will assist in accounting for varying mediating factors that may affect actors and their functions in complex education systems.
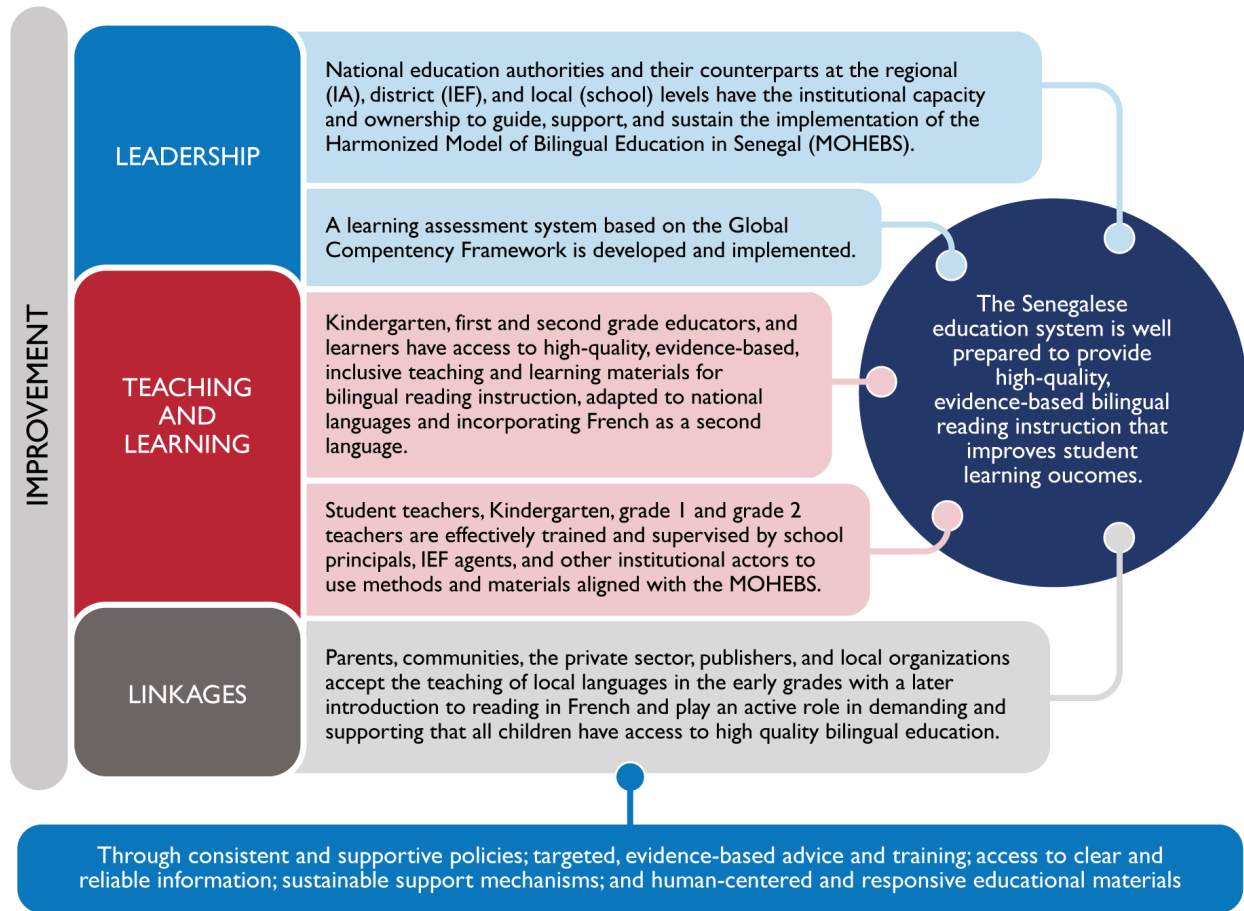
Effective theories of change for systems and capacity strengthening are:

- **Context-Driven:** Alignment with existing government and civil society priorities including the political will and community appetite for change along with meeting the systems where they are to match intended outcomes with the current system's capacity and aspirations.[55]

- **Chart a Plausible Change Pathway:** A strong theory of change should include a detailed, context- specific articulation of how change will happen considering the actors, mediating factors, and the functions.

Oversimplified theory of change: It is best to avoid a sparse simple theory that focuses on simple cause and effect logic.[56]	For example: "If educator capacity is strengthened, then student learning will improve."
Enhanced theory of change: An enhanced theory of change will reflect the complexity of what it takes to strengthen local systems and capacity in education.[57]	For example: "Learner appropriate curriculum instruction and data driven-decision-making (**functions**), when carried out by a capable management and teaching workforce (**actors**), and supported by effective policies, governance, finance, and information (**mediating factors**), will enable learners to read and to learn throughout the remainder of their learning experience."

- **Explicit:** Define specific capacities of the system you are trying to strengthen with well-defined, evaluable outcome statements.[58] Consider the following questions when developing statements:
  - Whose capacities are you strengthening? Which combinations of local actors at various levels of the system will be involved?
  - What capacities are you strengthening: individual, organizational capacities, network and enabling environment capacities? What capacity strengthening priorities have local actors identified?
  - How will you be strengthening them? What combinations of interventions will support improved performance?

- **Plot the Journey:** The results framework should reflect the changes anticipated to occur through capacity strengthening. For example, where initial success creates conditions for further success and strengthened capacity, activities may change over time based on the capacities strengthened.[59] Prioritization of achievable outcomes is also important for gaining momentum and making incremental progress.

- **Updated Based on Observation:** A theory of change is both a "theory" that needs to be tested through implementation, and a work in progress that is revisited regularly to reflect the changing interactions between key relevant elements and functions of the education system. Observation-based methods to continually refine the theory of change such as outcome harvesting and most significant change can help in this regard.[60] See Section C.4 for more on complexity-aware methods.

- **Illustrate the change narrative:** Figure 4 is a visual theory of change from the USAID/Senegal *Renforcement de la Lecture Initiale pour Tous* (RELIT) program.[61]

FIGURE 4: Theory of Change from USAID/Senegal RELIT

IMPROVEMENT

LEADERSHIP

National education authorities and their counterparts at the regional (IA), district (IEF), and local (school) levels have the institutional capacity and ownership to guide, support, and sustain the implementation of the Harmonized Model of Bilingual Education in Senegal (MOHEBS).

A learning assessment system based on the Global Compentency Framework is developed and implemented.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Kindergarten, first and second grade educators, and learners have access to high-quality, evidence-based, inclusive teaching and learning materials for bilingual reading instruction, adapted to national languages and incorporating French as a second language.

Student teachers, Kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 teachers are effectively trained and supervised by school principals, IEF agents, and other institutional actors to use methods and materials aligned with the MOHEBS.

LINKAGES

Parents, communities, the private sector, publishers, and local organizations accept the teaching of local languages in the early grades with a later introduction to reading in French and play an active role in demanding and supporting that all children have access to high quality bilingual education.

The Senegalese education system is well prepared to provide high-quality, evidence-based bilingual reading instruction that improves student learning oucomes.

Through consistent and supportive policies; targeted, evidence-based advice and training; access to clear and reliable information; sustainable support mechanisms; and human-centered and responsive educational materials

B.4 Technical Approaches

The following section highlights promising technical approaches for strengthening local capacity. Approaches may be selected based on best-fit responding to the context analysis and the theory of change that was co-designed and co-created with local actors during the design process.

Capacity strengthening interventions are ideally integrated within program design rather than planned as standalone activities. This helps to ensure alignment of capacity strengthening toward sustained learning and educational outcomes.

Creating the Preconditions for Capacity Strengthening

Effective local capacity strengthening requires buy-in from all parties and a significant level of trust in the process. Stakeholder engagement activities at the beginning of an activity[63] can set the stage for the collaborative relationships and alignment of vision, activities, resources, and roles that may facilitate effective capacity strengthening and openness to change within a system.

CASE STUDY: Stakeholder alignment sets the stage for education system strengthening in Nepal

In Nepal, the EGRP I Activity (2015-2020) brought together implementing partners and stakeholders to design and implement a national program for early grade reading in 16 districts in Nepal. The Activity did this by setting goals and a reform strategy in partnership with the Government of Nepal, which set the stage for longer term capacity strengthening support and expansion to 22 new districts under EGRP II (2020-2022). Read the case study here: USAID Systems Strengthening Review: Case Study - Nepal.[62]

Strengthening Actors: Organizational Capacity Strengthening

Organizational capacity strengthening supports organizations, a group of people who work together in an organized way for a shared purpose, to achieve their strategic aspirations and deliver results for the stakeholders they serve.[64] Local capacity strengthening can support a diversity of organizations in education, from youth-led organizations or disabled persons organizations to Ministries of Education, district education departments, TVETs, or HEIs. For a more exhaustive list, see Annex 2. Examples of Education Organizations.

Areas for organizational capacity strengthening include:

- **Technical capacities** that enable organizations to perform specific **functions** related to their role and/or services provided in the education system. See Figure 3. Systems Practice in Education above for a list of illustrative functions.

- **Organizational and adaptive capacities** that enable organizations to effectively plan, manage, and sustain services. These may include areas such as human resource management, financial management, or monitoring and evaluation. They could also include capacities for both the organization and the larger system, to be resilient to shocks, to be responsive to their program participants, and/or to pursue financial sustainability.

The following provide an illustrative list of evidence-based interventions for organizational capacity strengthening in education:

Capacity Action Planning: Participatory capacity assessments are the most common methods for facilitating local actors to identify their own priorities for performance improvement and plan capacity strengthening interventions to respond to those priorities.[65]

Table 2 highlights several capacity assessments and capacity frameworks used in the education sector. This is not an exhaustive list; given the importance of locally defined priorities, mutuality, and adaption.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Capacity Action Planning

The USAID Learning Lab's Guide to Distinguishing Tools Used for Local Capacity Strengthening offers guidance to assist USAID staff and partners select tools for performance measurement, capacity action planning, and risk mitigation and provides guidance as to what a high-quality tool looks like in each category.

Table 2: Illustrative tools for capacity action planning in education

Tools	Examples
Organizational Capacity Assessment Tools for Action Planning: There are many versions available of this structured tool for the facilitated self-assessment of an organization's administrative and institutional capacities followed by action planning for capacity improvements.	USAID Learning Lab's OCA Tool and OCA Tool for Community-Based Organizations; Organizational Performance Index (Handbook), SOAR Analysis, and Education Institution Capacity Assessment Tool for G2G
Sector-Specific Technical and Organizational Assessments: There are also assessments that combine specific technical and organizational capacities of different local actors, such as youth-serving organizations, higher education institutions, TVET institutions, and other post-secondary institutions.	Youth Programming Assessment Tool; the Higher Education Institutional Capacity Assessment (HEICAT); Research and Evaluation Capacity Assessment (RECAP), and the OCA-TVET
Conceptual Frameworks: Frameworks may also be helpful tools for capacity action planning. For example, USAID's Reading MATTERS (Mentors, Administrators, Teachers, Texts, Extra Practice, Regular Assessment, Standards) Conceptual Framework highlights seven components that evidence shows are critical to fostering reading acquisition for all.	USAID Pre-Primary Framework, USAID Higher Education Program Framework, USAID Reading MATTERS, Positive Youth Development, Youth Systems Framework,[66] and ALIGN Toolkit

Capacity strengthening direct funding: Financial assistance, often through grants, directly to local partners to prioritize their own institutional strengthening priorities, whether that be hiring a strategic officer to drive system change within their institution or contracting their own technical assistance provision.

Technical Assistance: Training is just one of many tools available for capacity strengthening in education. "Learning by doing," following the basic principles of adult learning to build on extant knowledge, is the key mechanism by which capacity strengthening occurs and sustainable performance improvement is achieved.

- **Coaching and mentoring** for on-the-job assistance facilitated by evaluation tools, job-related development activities and tools, and expert mentors available to guide desired practices.

- **On-demand technical assistance** based upon specified criteria and a menu of available options (materials and resources, mentoring, consulting or training) to support locally led interventions.

- **Consulting services** to implement education reforms.

- **Templates, protocols, and guidance** designed to facilitate implementation or professional development around key performance areas.

- **Learning partnerships** between local, regional, or international partners. Peer learning networks mutually reinforce capacities and share knowledge, resources, and lessons learned.

- **Embedding** (or seconding) program technical staff to work within organizations, networks, ministries, or HEIs for in-house capacity strengthening support. These arrangements can deepen partnerships, support bi-directional learning, and provide ample opportunities for in-time coaching, mentoring, and support in rapidly changing policy, financial, and implementation contexts.

- **Resource hubs:** Establishing international partners as technical assistance providers or "expert consultants" and **positioning Ministries of Education or other key system actors[68] as the client** places power with local entities and enhances locally led development within education systems. It is particularly effective when there are feedback loops in place that ensure the products and services delivered to the local client meets their expectations. This capacity strengthening approach aligns capacity strengthening with local priorities, by embedding technical assistance resource hubs within the education system and builds on existing capacities.

> **CASE STUDY: Partner-Driven Technical Assistance**
>
> The Leveraging Education Assistance Resources in Nigeria (LEARN)[67] to Read is a five-year activity working to strengthen and scale early grade reading best practices using a technical assistance approach. Although prior projects had many achievements, lessons learned demonstrated that there were many activities that could not be sustained because the adopted implementation model did not prioritize mutual accountability with state partners. To overcome this challenge, the team adopted a on-demand partnership technical assistance approach that is both partner-centric and program-focused premised on co-ownership of processes, responsibilities, and outcomes. As a result, seven local partners have demonstrated their commitment by solely dedicating resources and personnel for the sustainability of the milestones agreed upon with LEARN to Read. Read the case study here: Achieving Sustainability through CLA-Driven On-Demand Partnership.

> **RESOURCES SPOTLIGHT: LCS Interventions**
>
> For a guide on selecting LCS interventions, see: Capacity Development Interventions: A Guide for Program Designers. Relevant evidence gaps maps include: Research for Development, Non-State Actors in Education, and Strengthening Civil Society.

Strengthening the Enabling Environment Capacities

Enabling environmental factors of relationships, rules, resources, and power dynamics often directly affect local actors' ability to perform key education functions. As such, effective local capacity strengthening must also consider interventions at the network and system levels.

Interventions to strengthen the enabling environment of the system include:

Network Strengthening: Social network analysis, network weaving, strengthening relevant organizational or thematic networks, and strengthening individual and institutional relationships all strengthen the relationships between education system actors.
- *Resources*: Social Network Analysis and Network Strengthening Toolkit.
- *Examples*: Youth Excel Activity includes a focus on strengthening youth-led and youth-serving networks. One Health Workforce Next Generation supports regional workforce networks Africa One Health University Network and Southeast Asia One Health University Network.

Education Governance: To strengthen the rules governing the system, interventions may include policy change, research, civil society strengthening, civic education, and engaging through multilaterals.
- *Resources:* Evidence gap maps on Strengthening Civil Society and Good Governance Through Government Effectiveness, Civic Education in the Digital Age, Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), and How 'Soft Governance' Can Help Improve Learning Outcomes.
- *Examples:* The Strengthening Educational Accountability in Ghana is working to strengthen the accountability and performance of education system actors. The Local Governance Strengthening Program works with Provincial Education Inspectors to improve accountability and reduce teacher absenteeism.

Education Finance: Education finance interventions focus on the allocation, use, and accounting of both public and private resources across the full student lifecycle. Common approaches include Public Financial Management, Domestic Resource Mobilization, Public-Private Partnerships, and Blended Finance.
- *Resources:* Education Finance How-To Note, Guide to Public-Private Partnerships in Basic Education, and the Higher Education and Industry Collaborations: A Primer.
- *Examples:* ABC+: Advancing Basic Education in the Philippines works to improve local mobilization of funds for education. The CATALYZE Activity mobilizes blended finance for non-state schools.
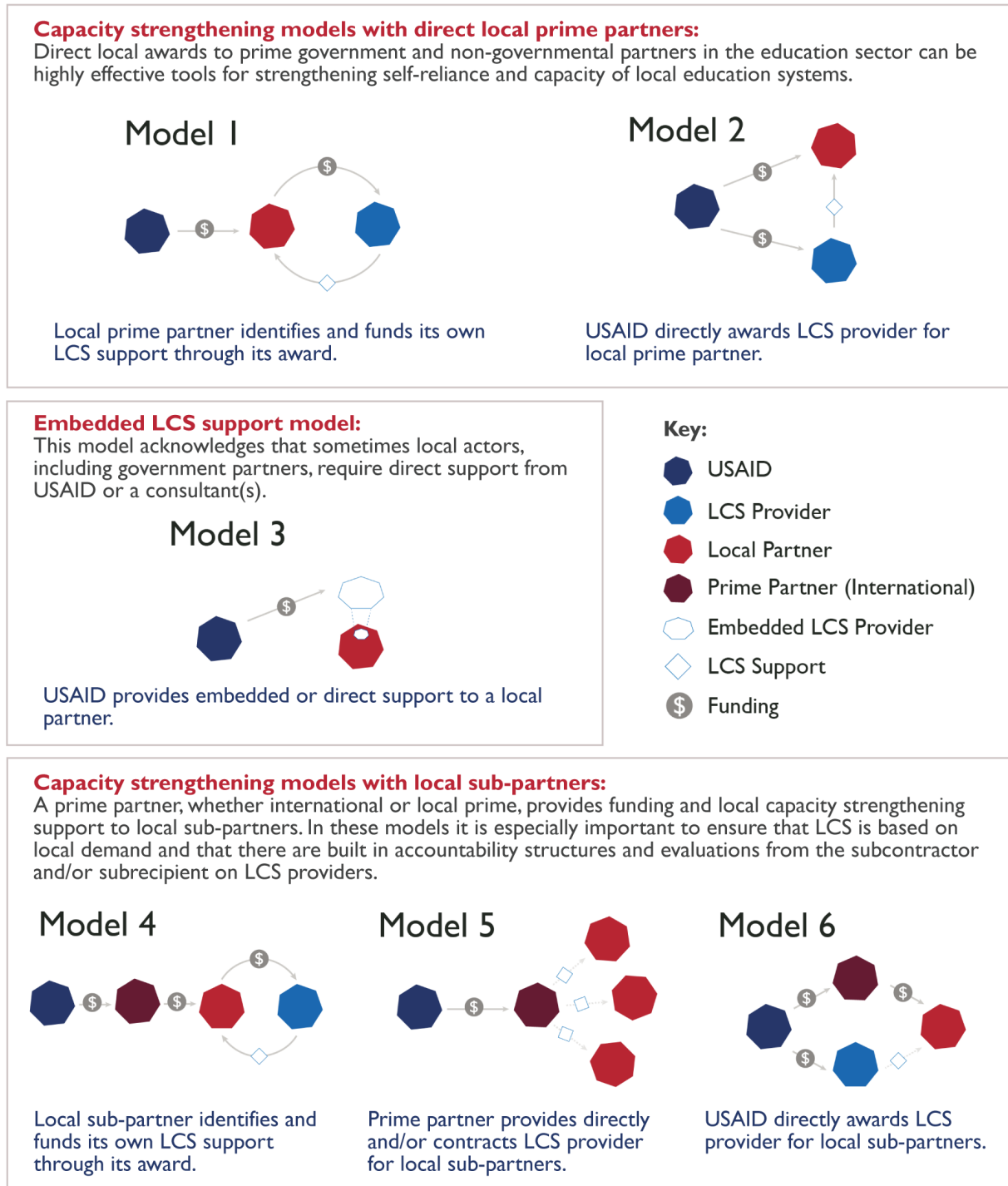
Power Shifts: Methodologies such as Thinking and Working Politically and Social and Behavior Change can identify and begin to shift power dynamics affecting education and learning outcomes.
- *Resources:* Thinking and Working Politically through PEA and UNICEF's Social and Behavior Change Toolkit.
- *Examples:* The Liberia Accountability and Voice Initiative supported citizen-led campaigns to shift more funds to education. The Together We Learn (Colombia) Activity increases community and parent participation in education-related decision-making.

B.5 Models and Award Instruments

This section outlines six illustrative models[69] for structuring the capacity strengthening of **local partners, whether it be a governmental[70] or a non-governmental partner.** The models describe situations of local capacity strengthening in which USAID is entering into an award. The models illustrate both the transfer of funds and provision of capacity strengthening, with varying relationships to USAID as the donor. These models may not be education sector specific, but, together with the other strategies and activities outlined in this guidance document form an important part of the "how" for local capacity strengthening in education. Models should be selected based on the "best fit" for the activity, and informed by the context analysis, design process, and theory of change. See Annex 3 for more details along with pros and cons of each model.

FIGURE 5: Models for Structuring Capacity Strengthening of Local Partners

Capacity strengthening models with direct local prime partners:
Direct local awards to prime government and non-governmental partners in the education sector can be highly effective tools for strengthening self-reliance and capacity of local education systems.

Model 1

Local prime partner identifies and funds its own LCS support through its award.

Model 2

USAID directly awards LCS provider for local prime partner.

Embedded LCS support model:
This model acknowledges that sometimes local actors, including government partners, require direct support from USAID or a consultant(s).

Model 3

USAID provides embedded or direct support to a local partner.

Key:

- ⬣ USAID
- ⬣ LCS Provider
- ⬣ Local Partner
- ⬣ Prime Partner (International)
- ⬡ Embedded LCS Provider
- ◇ LCS Support
- $ Funding

Capacity strengthening models with local sub-partners:
A prime partner, whether international or local prime, provides funding and local capacity strengthening support to local sub-partners. In these models it is especially important to ensure that LCS is based on local demand and that there are built in accountability structures and evaluations from the subcontractor and/or subrecipient on LCS providers.

Model 4

Local sub-partner identifies and funds its own LCS support through its award.

Model 5

Prime partner provides directly and/or contracts LCS provider for local sub-partners.

Model 6

USAID directly awards LCS provider for local sub-partners.

In addition to these models, *results-based financing*, whereby organizations are paid based on the achievement of specific outcomes (such as milestone-based grants like Fixed Amount Awards, pay-for-performance, social impact bonds, or outcome funds), may prove to be an effective strategy for accelerating capacity strengthening and improving the delivery of education services. Co-designing these approaches with the apparently successful applicant/offeror is critical to shifting and sharing power, ensuring local ownership, setting realistic targets and strategies, and maximizing the potential for

success. In addition, it is important to create capacity-strengthening milestones in a Fixed Amount Award, to ensure that organizations have the resources and incentives to prioritize capacity strengthening alongside other activity deliverables.

In circumstances where USAID seeks to invest in local capacity to directly implement and manage USAID education activities as prime recipients, *transition awards* can support local partners in achieving greater readiness to move to this type of funding and support mechanism. For example, USAID might issue an award to an administratively strong education partner with the explicit objective of strengthening the capacity of a particular local actor to the point of readiness for transitioning to direct funding.

Critical considerations for selecting models for local capacity strengthening:

- *Mutuality:* The LCS Policy principle of mutuality applies to **all of these models**, as capacity strengthening is not unidirectional. Mutuality is a positive condition or shared mindset about a relationship whereby two (or multiple) partners aim to balance power differences by striving for reciprocal partnerships that accrue benefit to each partner through relationships built on trust and respect. Programs should seek opportunities for mutual learning and mutual accountability.

- *Sufficient funding and mutual accountability for capacity strengthening*: Whether supporting capacity strengthening to local prime or sub-partners, it is critical to ensure sufficient funding and prioritization within the MEL plans of capacity strengthening. This should include both holding partners accountable for performance improvement and ensuring accountability of LCS providers to deliver quality and responsive support to local partners. These measures will ensure capacity strengthening of local partners is not an afterthought but rather a core part of an activity's design and responsive to their needs and priorities.

> USAID investments in local capacity strengthening focus on supporting local actors to perform roles that enable them to achieve their own goals for positive and sustainable change, not simply capacity strengthening to be able to manage USAID funding effectively and with proper compliance.
>
> - USAID Acquisition and Assistance Strategy (2023)

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Different types of direct local awards may be more appropriate depending on the activity design and Mission readiness. A helpful starting place for working with local partners is workwithusaid.gov.

For more on **Government Direct Awards** in education, see the Government-to-Government (G2G) Education Toolkit and for USAID staff the Government Agreement Technical Representative Toolkit. Awards to the government may also be through multilateral partnerships.

For more on **Non-Governmental Direct Awards**, see USAID's Furthering Localization Through Instrument Selection and for USAID staff the COR/AOR Toolkit: Managing Local Awards.

Subaward and Transition Award Resources: For resources on sub-awards and transition to local actors see: How-To Guide on Ensuring Locally Led Development is Incorporated into Subawards, Advancing Equitable Partnerships: Subawards, SAS+ Responsible Transitions to Local Actors: Procurement Language; and SAS+ Responsible Transitions to Local Actors: Toolkit.

For more on **Fixed Amount Awards** see Paying for Results: Managing Risk in Fixed Amount Awards with Local Partners.

C. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

This section outlines approaches for monitoring, evaluation, and learning for capacity strengthening in education. This includes the following subsections: key considerations, MEL at activity inception and startup, monitoring capacity strengthening, evaluating capacity strengthening, and learning for adaptive management.

C.1 Key Considerations

When planning how to monitor and evaluate an activity's progress, results, and success in local capacity strengthening, a few key considerations are important to keep in mind.

- **Foster participation:** Involve local stakeholders not only in the initial development of the theory of change, but also in selecting performance improvement priorities; conceptualizing and operationalizing capacity/performance measurement approaches (including drafting of any tools, rubrics, etc.); data collection and sensemaking from data; and in refining and adapting capacity strengthening approaches, interventions, and indicators based on ongoing learning.[71] Setting targets around what education system actors can jointly accomplish creates incentives to develop solutions in ways that work for them, rather than adopting cookie-cutter best practices.

- **Focus on measuring performance not capacity**: Capacity is a form of potential and is not visible until exercised. Therefore, any programmatic considerations regarding local capacity strengthening must measure changes in performance—not just latent capacity. It is through changes in performance, or the demonstration of capacity, that local actors show the achievement of their own development priorities. Where feasible and applicable in relation to an activity's objectives, measurement can be used at all levels of performance: individual, organizational, and enabling environment.

> **KEY DEFINITIONS**
>
> **Performance** refers to the extent to which an actor is able to achieve its intended outcomes effectively and consistently. It is the key consideration in determining whether capacity has been changed.

- **Be realistic about the timeframe:** Local capacity strengthening is an incremental and nonlinear process. It takes time for new practices and behaviors to become institutionalized. While a theory of change may take a big picture approach to mapping change, MEL plans should identify outcomes that are attainable within a given time frame and allow for realistic and sequential progress.

- **Frequently test theory of change assumptions**: As noted in the Theory of Change section, due to the complexity of systems and capacity strengthening interventions, it is crucial that MEL approaches periodically examine and test the various causal hypotheses within the activity's theory of change. MEL processes should continuously provide data that reevaluates the underlying contextual assumptions concerning the broader complex system.

- **Employ complexity-aware methods to capture an activity's influence:** Because systems and capacity strengthening outcomes occur as a result of myriad factors in the education system, incorporating complexity-aware qualitative and exploratory methods may be valuable. These methods capture intersecting contributions within complex systems as well as expected and unanticipated outcomes. While USAID encourages rigorous attribution methodologies that show a causal link between interventions and outcomes utilizing comparison groups where feasible, such methodologies may not be a best fit for all LCS activities.[72]

C.2 Initial MEL Priorities at Activity Inception and Startup

Inception Context Analysis: Section B.2 outlines the importance of initial and ongoing participatory context analysis using a systems lens on the education sector.

Participatory MEL Plan Development: The inception of any activity's MEL plan is a key step that requires careful consideration of useful data that will inform programming and ensure accountability. In this stage, implementers should thoughtfully engage and identify key partner actors and stakeholders in MEL design. Activity and partner MEL staff should be involved in defining the following key processes as appropriate: design of data collection instruments; sampling designs; data collection logistics; training of staff; partners or hired data collectors; qualitative and (possibly) quantitative data analysis; and results dissemination. These analyses should strive to maximize participation of relevant education sector stakeholders and reflect their needs in addition to activity priorities.

Baseline Organizational Capacity Assessments and Performance: Where an activity has explicit objectives for performance improvement of local educational organizations, some form of baseline assessment or stocktaking is essential. This should be done in a participatory fashion as it will establish consensus on overall organizational capacity, clarify the local organization's priorities for capacity strengthening, and catalyze capacity action planning. If an organization has recently completed a capacity assessment and/or if an organization has an existing capacity action plan, USAID should work to support progress on already identified priorities and be careful not to over-assess the organization. Once areas of focus have been established with local organizations, one or more desired performance metrics can be identified for baseline measurement.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

USAID's Guide to Distinguishing Tools Used for Local Capacity Strengthening provides suggestions on tool categories for measuring performance improvement, capacity action planning, and risk mitigation.

USAID's CBLD-9 Guidance for the Education Sector provides guidance on how to operationalize the CBLD-9 capacity strengthening standard indicator in the education sector. It includes details on processes for assessing organizational performance gaps, selecting performance improvement priorities, and designing metrics to track improvement. Additional resources on measuring performance improvement include the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy and Local Capacity Strengthening Measurement page.

C.3 Monitoring Capacity Strengthening

Core components of monitoring for local capacity strengthening activities include using USAID and custom indicators, ongoing context monitoring and analysis, and collecting data on implementation fidelity to understand the role of an activity in shifting outcomes.

Standard and Custom Indicators for LCS: For measuring and reporting on the expected systems and capacity strengthening outcomes, intermediate results, and key outputs identified in the theory of change, a first step is to identify the relevant standard and supplemental indicators (see Annex 4). Common expected programmatic outcomes and associated indicators might include some combination of the following (see Table 3).

Table 3: Examples of common capacity strengthening outcomes and illustrative indicators

LCS Technical Approach	Example	Output Indicators	Intermediate Outcome Indicators	Outcome Indicators
Improved **individual** performance	Faculty members at teacher training institutions improve instruction of teaching candidates	ES.2-52	Custom	SUPP-10
Improved **organizational** performance	District education offices provide more regular and higher quality supervision of primary schools	CBLD-11[73] ES.1-12	Custom	CBLD-9 (applying a *metric* focused on this supervisory function)
Improved **enabling environment**	Relationships: Improved parent and community engagement	Supp-7, Supp-20, or ES.1-12	Custom	Custom
	Rules: Government ministry establishes credentialing guidelines for technical and vocational training centers	Depending on modality of support to ministry(ies): ES.1-12, CBLD-11, or Custom	Custom	ES.1-59
	Resources: Commercial entities increase financial investment in primary and secondary schools	CBLD-11 or Custom	Custom	CBLD-10, PSE-4, SUPP-19, or custom

USAID recommends the use of CBLD-9 in local capacity strengthening activities as an outcome-level indicator. CBLD-9 is designed for measuring whether USG-funded organizational capacity strengthening efforts have led to improved performance in local organizations. When CLBD-9 is selected, it is important to consider relatively simple, valid metrics focused on organizations' prioritized capacity strengthening area. Performance metrics ideally are not excessively complex or burdensome for the organization to operationalize. Refer to the CLBD-9 Guidance for the Education Sector for more information. See Annex 2 for an illustrative list of organizations including government sub-units where the use of CBLD-9 may be applicable.

To ensure key outputs and intermediate results envisioned in the theory of change are sufficiently measured, MEL plans may include additional *custom* indicators. For example, where systematic improvement in the frequency and quality of coaching and mentoring of teachers is hypothesized as a key intermediate result toward improving classroom instruction, a custom indicator could be designed to measure and report on this practice.

Context monitoring: As emphasized in Section B.2, initial and ongoing **context analysis** is key to understanding factors contributing to local capacity change. These analyses may alert implementing partners and USAID to contextual factors that may influence activity success and warrant regular, systematic monitoring using **context indicators**. Context indicators do not directly measure the results of USAID activities, but rather the contextual factors that are beyond the management control of USAID likely to affect an activity, such as macro-economic, social, or political conditions.[74] They are often particularly relevant to capacity strengthening, as they may signal windows of opportunity where certain capacity strengthening initiatives are likely to be most successful as well as periods of time that may be less opportune, and where alternative approaches or priorities may be more promising. Examples of context indicators could be overall government budget allocations to the education sector, continuity of key leadership in the MoE, and incidence of conflict or crime in implementation areas.

Monitoring Fidelity and Quality of Implementation: Since capacity and performance strengthening are complex and challenging processes, measurement and reporting on the **fidelity and quality of implementation** of all interventions is crucial to testing assumptions outlined in an activity's theory of change and understanding why performance has or has not improved. Measuring fidelity of implementation provides a deeper understanding of dosage received by program participants and provides increased confidence in attributing improvements to the intervention.[75]

Such monitoring should centrally include regular **direct structured feedback from those receiving the LCS interventions**. Participant feedback is also a requirement of ADS 201 in which activity MEL plans must request regular feedback directly from beneficiaries to validate the quality and relevance of activities and respond to that feedback. Monitoring data about fidelity, dosage, quality, and appreciation of LCS interventions is often not tied directly to defined performance indicators for an activity; however, it should receive focused and sustained attention with well-designed systems for its regular collection. Analysis of such monitoring data may give rise to specific questions for dedicated implementation research that more deeply probes LCS implementation factors or tests implementation variants (see Section C.5 for more on this).

> **RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Education Context Indicators**
>
> The Guidance Note on Education Finance Indicators and Context Indicators in the USAID Education Sector may be a helpful starting points for identifying context indicators to help anticipate sustainability and absorption capacity of the local system for capacity strengthening efforts.

> **RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Feedback on Quality of Implementation**
>
> For guidance on collected feedback from recipients of capacity strengthening supports see: USAID's "How-To" Guide on Developing an Accountability and Feedback Plan.

> **CASE STUDY: Feedback Loops**
>
> The Education Crisis Response Activity in Nigeria employed formal and informal feedback loop mechanisms at multiple levels to gather and analyze evidence and modify its approach and implementation.

C.4 Evaluating Capacity Strengthening

As with all evaluation, approaches for evaluating capacity strengthening activities should aim to understand if the desired results of an intervention were achieved. However, given that activities may be influenced by many factors outside of an activity's control, complexity-aware approaches are well suited for looking at desired outcomes outlined in the theory of change as well as any unanticipated outcomes. Several useful approaches for evaluating local capacity strengthening and education systems strengthening activities are listed below.

- **Outcome Mapping/Harvesting:** An approach to use when change may not be linear (e.g., systems strengthening). This approach collects evidence of what has changed, then works backward to determine whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes.

- **Social Network Analysis:** The process of investigating social structures using networks and graph theory. SNA can be useful in evaluating changes in local networks or uptake of desired behavior changes such as changes in collaboration, information sharing, or resource allocation.

- **Most Significant Change:** Uses qualitative interviews and selection processes to evaluate performance and identify unintended outcomes. MSC is a useful approach to gathering local stakeholder values by soliciting criteria which they think makes an outcome "most significant." This provides useful information about which outcomes programs might pursue.

- **Ripple Effect Mapping:** Engages stakeholders to map intended and unintended consequences, or ripples, of a program retrospectively and visually.[76] This participatory approach helps to understand how an intervention contributed to an outcome or change in a system.

- **Contribution Analysis:** Helps implementers understand the role an intervention played in specific outcomes and observed system changes where the causes of change are difficult to trace.[77]

- **Developmental Evaluation:** Offers an approach to continuous adaptation of interventions through the use of evaluative thinking and feedback.[78]

Activities should engage local stakeholders in evaluation to the extent possible. This might include gathering local input on evaluation questions, participation in data collection, or engagement in analysis.

C.5 Learning for Adaptive Management

As noted throughout this guidance, systems and capacity changes are complex. This means that activities need to employ a robust approach to learning, continually check assumptions in the theory of change, and adapt as needed.

Activity Learning Agenda: The intentional inclusion of learning questions related to capacity strengthening in an activity learning agenda can help guide the focus toward critical areas of inquiry and enable effective assessment and understanding of the impact and efficiency of capacity strengthening activities. See below illustrative questions:

> **RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT:**
> **Complexity-Aware Methods**
>
> The Guide to Complexity-Aware Monitoring Approaches for MOMENTUM Projects offers an introduction to key concepts and tool overview of complexity-aware methods.

> **RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT:**
> **Education Learning Agendas**
>
> USAID's education learning agendas are helpful resources for identifying relevant systems strengthening learning questions.
>
> Foundational Skills
> Education in Crisis and Conflict
> Youth Workforce Development
> Higher Education
> Latin America and the Caribbean Education

- How can USAID education programs equitably engage local knowledge, assets, and practices?
- What are the unique barriers and opportunities to locally led development in USAID education programming, especially by traditionally marginalized groups?
- What works to foster sustainable improvements in learning and educational outcomes in both crisis and non-crisis affected contexts?
- How can USAID education programs best monitor and evaluate progress toward the sustainability of improvements?

Adaptive Management: Embedding flexibility in the award supports activities in managing frequently changing contexts and in truly *adapting* LCS implementation approaches based on learning from monitoring data and emerging results. Examples of adaptive approaches include crisis modifiers, scenario planning, and other flexible adjustments that could be made to activity interventions (e.g., moving from face-to-face to remote management). Modeling adaptive management and learning alongside partners can also strengthen capacity for greater system resilience in the face of disasters, crises, and conflicts.

As a core element informing adaptive management, **feedback loops** should be embedded into programming through joint work planning, learning agenda development and implementation, and annual pause-reflect-adapt joint data interpretation workshops, learning exchanges, and even fail fairs. Data review or pause-reflect sessions with smaller groups (e.g., at district-level or private/community), the results of which are then presented by local representatives to larger national networks for review and support of local initiatives and feedback at a national or regional level, are effective.

CASE STUDY: Scenario Planning

The QITABI 2 Activity in Lebanon was designed to strengthen the education system's institutional capacity for sustainability and self-reliance. At the onset of political uprising in 2019, the QITABI 2 team recognized that implementation under the rapidly changing context required development of a systematic and forward-looking adaptation framework to identify and monitor factors that cause operational uncertainty and brainstorm and plan for likely scenarios.

Implementation research: Implementation research is concerned with why and how an intervention or reform works by considering the context, stakeholders, and process of implementation. It can shed light on the contextual, institutional, relational, and individual factors affecting the implementation of an intervention or reform in a particular government or implementer's system. The questions for implementation research studies will be informed by an activity's learning agenda developed during activity startup or may emerge in light of monitoring data and initial results. Refer to the Guidance Note on Using Implementation Research in Education for further information.

III. CONCLUSION: PUTTING THE LCS PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

The principles for effective and equitable local capacity strengthening programs and partnerships outlined in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy are not new to the education sector. There are a great number of existing tools and resources, frameworks, and approaches designed to strengthen the capacity of local systems actors and local education systems to be more resilient to shocks and stressors, and to better provide high quality education services to children, youth, and learners. The goal of this guidance document is to provide clear, actionable steps to partner with and learn from local actors and to jointly define a path to improved service delivery and programming in the education sector.

The task ahead for USAID Mission and Operating Unit staff and partners from across the sector is to contribute further to the evidence-base of what works, and to share that learning in service of stronger, more resilient education systems, better alignment between and among the actors that make up those education systems, and ultimately improved education outcomes for children, youth, and a diversity of learners across the education sector.

To access and contribute to an expanding selection of case studies, tools, and resources, visit the EducationLinks LCS Toolkit page.

ANNEX 1. DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions are key terms for USAID local system and capacity strengthening in education.

Capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, and motivations as well as the relationships that enable an actor—an individual, an organization, or a network—to take action to design and implement solutions to local development challenges, to learn and adapt from that action, and to innovate and transform over time.[79]

An **education system** consists of people, public and private institutions, resources, and activities who jointly contribute to improving, expanding, and sustaining learning and educational outcomes.

Education systems strengthening comprises strategies, partnerships, and activities to jointly improve the performance of an education system to produce locally valued learning and educational outcomes over time.

Local actors include individuals, organizations, and networks that originate from and are led by people within a given country or region, inclusive of government at national and sub-national levels.

Local partners include individuals, organizations, and networks that originate from and are led by people within a given country or region, inclusive of government at national and sub-national levels when they work with USAID as either direct contractors or recipients or as sub-awardees, whether under acquisition or assistance.[80]

Local capacity strengthening is a strategic and intentional investment in the process of partnering with local actors—individuals, organizations, and networks—to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable development outcomes.[81]

Sustainability means that the education system has the ability to produce learning and educational outcomes over time beyond the project or activity lifespan or USAID's presence in the country. See USAID's Implementation Guidance for the USAID Education Policy for more detail.[82]

ANNEX 2. EXAMPLES OF EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS

Education sub-sector(s)	Organizations (or organizational units)
Pre-primary	• Early childhood education (ECE) providers (public, private, community) • NGOs/civil society organizations (CSOs) focused on pre-school quality, access, advocacy • Ministry of Education (central ECE department and specific sub-units, e.g., standards, inspection, and state, regional, district offices) • Ministry of Family/Social Welfare (specific departments and sub-units) • Higher education institutions (colleges/training institutes)
Primary and Secondary Education	• Ministry of Education (central departments and specific sub-units, e.g., curriculum, assessment, and state, regional, district offices) • Teacher training colleges (as a whole, or by departments) • NGOs/CSOs (e.g., accelerated or alternative education providers, advocacy organizations, parent-teacher associations, community groups) • School management committees • Schools (public, private, community, non-formal) • Private sector (textbook publishers, non-state school networks, non-state school lenders)
Youth and Workforce Development	• Secondary and post-secondary TVET institutions • Quality assurance and accreditation systems of both formal and non-formal TVET institutions • Youth-led and youth-serving organizations • Private and non-profit training providers • Ministry of Education (central departments and specific sub-units) • Ministry of Labor (central departments and specific sub-units) • Ministry of Youth and Sports (central departments and specific sub-units)
Higher/Tertiary Education	• Universities (Specific faculties, departments, and service-oriented offices, e.g., career services) • Teacher training colleges • Community colleges • Technical institutes and polytechnics • Academically linked research centers • Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research • Accreditation entities • Higher education associations

ANNEX 3: MODELS AND AWARD INSTRUMENTS

This Annex includes information on the pros and cons of six models for **capacity strengthening of local partners**, whether it be a governmental or a non-governmental partner. The models primarily describe situations of local capacity strengthening in which USAID is entering into an award.

Models	Description	Pros	Cons
Capacity strengthening models with local <u>prime partners</u>: Direct awards to prime government and non-governmental partners in the education sector can be highly effective tools for strengthening self-reliance and capacity of local education systems. The table below presents two models for supporting capacity strengthening of local prime partners.			
Model 1: **Local prime partner identifies and funds its own LCS support through its award**	The local prime partner directly hires capacity strengthening support for its own organization. For example, the partner may have education sector technical expertise, but hires a LCS provider to strengthen its administrative capacity in finance and/or human resources. **This model is best aligned to the principles of local ownership**.	• Partner is empowered and can direct the capacity-strengthening trajectory. • Could be co-funded with the partners' other donors or by the organization itself. • Local partners can identify local (or regional) service providers capable of providing capacity support, increasing sustainability and networks within the marketplace of LCS providers.	• Less USAID insight or control of the capacity development activities. • If using an international NGO to provide LCS support, it can take time to rebalance the relationship. • Contracting their own LCS support can require time, resources, and attention from the local prime partner.
Model 2: **USAID directly awards LCS provider for local prime partner**	USAID has a direct award or G2G assistance with a local prime partner where USAID is funding a programmatic outcome; concurrently, USAID has a direct award with a LCS provider which will support the local partner. This model can be used when specific LCS interventions are required that were not part of the original scope and budget, or when additional capacity strengthening support may be required outside the scope or skill set of the prime. Activity Example: USAID Ghana's Strengthening Accountability in Ghana's Education System (SAGES) Activity has two awards. One to the government and one to an organization to provide technical assistance to the government.	• USAID has full insight into all activities and directly observes changes in performance and capacity. • USAID can support resolution of any challenges and there is three-way accountability. • LCS provider is specialized in capacity strengthening and not distracted or influenced by the need to deliver programmatic results.	• Heavy USAID management lift. • LCS provider is focused on capacity strengthening and can sometimes demand too much time, resources, and attention from the partner, which can affect relationship or activity implementation.

Embedded LCS support model: This model acknowledges that sometimes local actors, including government partners, require direct support from USAID or a consultant(s).			
Model 3: **USAID provides embedded or direct support to a local partner**	This model may be selected regardless of whether USAID is directly funding the local actor and is meant to explicitly support capacity strengthening and knowledge transfer rather than an "extra hand" to do work. This model can also be used in advance of a new prime award to help position a potential partner to apply for a future USAID award. **Activity Example:** USAID has utilized Improving Education in Asia for all Learners to provide capacity strengthening of local partners to organizations with which USAID does not have a direct award.	• Less USAID management since capacity strengthening for many sub-partners via a single award.	• USAID has no direct connection to local actors through an award and thus little control over capacity strengthening outcomes. • Power differential could make it difficult for local partners to direct capacity strengthening efforts and to be fully transparent about their challenges.
Capacity strengthening models with local <u>sub-partner</u>s: A prime partner, whether international or local prime, provides funding and local capacity strengthening support to local sub-partners. In these models, it is important to ensure that LCS is based on local demand and that there are built in accountability structures and evaluations from the subcontractor and/or subrecipient.			
Model 4: **Local sub-partner identifies and funds its own LCS support through its award**	The local sub-partner uses activity funding to subcontract or subaward support for capacity strengthening for its own organization. For example, the prime partner may allocate a portion of a subaward or subcontract for a local sub-partner's capacity strengthening. The sub-partner can then hire its own support to strengthen its existing systems. This model works best when capacity strengthening is incorporated into results framework and MEL plans of prime partner.	• Local sub-partner is empowered and can direct the capacity strengthening trajectory. • Could be co-funded with the sub-partner's other donors or by the organization itself. • Local sub-partner can identify local (or regional) service providers capable of providing capacity support, increasing sustainability and networks within the marketplace of LCS providers.	• Less prime insight or control of the capacity strengthening activities. • Contracting their own LCS support can require time, resources, and attention from the local sub-partner.
Model 5: **Prime partner provides LCS for local sub-partner**	Prime partner provides direct or subgrants/contracts capacity strengthening services for local sub-partner(s). This is the most traditional model of capacity strengthening for local sub-partner. This model works best when capacity strengthening is incorporated into results framework and MEL plans of prime partner. **Activity Example:** In Supporting Holistic & Actionable Research in Education (SHARE), the prime partner both provides capacity strengthening to sub-partners and facilitates exchange of capacity between sub-partners.	• Prime partner has full insight into all activities and directly observes changes in performance and capacity. • Prime partner can support resolution of any challenges with the LCS provider. • Less direct management burden by USAID.	• USAID and local sub-partners are not connected directly. Therefore, it may be difficult to obtain feedback from local sub-partners on the quality of support. • If LCS is not explicitly included in the results framework, then there are incentives for the prime to focus on project-related objectives rather than capacity

			strengthening of sub-partners.
Model 6: **USAID directly awards LCS provider for local sub-partner**	This model of providing LCS support to a local sub-partner through a USAID contracted LCS provider can be used when specific LCS interventions are required for the local sub-partner that were not part of the original scope and budget of the prime partner or when additional capacity strengthening support may be required outside the scope or skill set of the prime partner. For example, Missions may use a Mission-wide MEL platform to support data quality and reporting capacities of local actors if it is within the scope of the mechanism.	• LCS provider is specialized in capacity development and not distracted or influenced by the need to deliver programmatic results. • Model may fill gaps when the original scope and budget of the prime partner did not include capacity strengthening of sub-partners.	• Significant coordination required between LCS provider, existing prime partner, and local subaward. • LCS providers and local sub-partners are not connected directly, which could decrease accountability to sub-partner priorities.

ANNEX 4: USAID STANDARD AND SUPPLEMENTAL INDICATORS FOR MEASURING LOCAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

The following are relevant standard indicators for local systems and capacity strengthening that can appropriately be applied to education sector activities:

CBLD-9: "Percent of USG-assisted organizations with improved performance." CBLD-9 is designed for use by implementing partners to measure whether USG-funded capacity strengthening efforts have led to improved performance in organizations receiving capacity development support. It thus allows USAID to track agency-wide progress in strengthening the performance of local organizations. CBLD-9 reporting should always be accompanied by narrative detail about performance strengthening interventions as designed, as delivered, and as appreciated by the actors and organizations receiving them. See the CBLD-9 Guidance for the Education Sector for more detail.

CBLD-10: "Sum of the total value in USD ($) of non-donor resources contributed to achieve local development priorities as a result of USAID projects and activities." This indicator contributes to measuring the catalytic effect of USAID investments for unlocking the resources of other development actors.

CBLD-11: "Number of organizations pursuing their own performance improvement priorities with USG capacity strengthening support." This indicator is the *output* level indicator corresponding to the outcome indicator CBLD-9, described above. (Note that the value for this indicator will typically be the same as the denominator value for CBLD-9.

Locally Led Programs Indicator: The new Locally Led Programs indicator will measure the percentage of USAID-funded activities that create space for local partners and the local communities they serve to lead development efforts—including in priority setting, design, partnership formation, implementation, and defining and measuring results—in a given fiscal year. The indicator will cover multiple types of engagement with local actors, whether they are recipients of direct funding, sub-partners to an international intermediary, participants in a USAID program, or members of a community affected by USAID programming.

There are also a number of education-specific standard and supplemental indicators that measure aspects of system strengthening. These indicators are mainly coded as ES; their Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS) are found in the Compendium of Standard PIRS for Education Programming and Compendium of Supplemental PIRS for Education Programming:

- **ES.1-59**: Education system strengthened through USG-assisted policy reform.
- **ES.2-1**: Number of host country higher education institutions receiving capacity development support with USG assistance.
- **ES.2-52**: Number of individuals affiliated with higher education institutions receiving capacity development support with USG assistance.
- **ES.1-6**: Number of educators who complete professional development activities with USG assistance.
- **ES.1-12**: Number of education administrators and officials who complete professional development activities with USG assistance.
- **Supp-7**: Number of parents or community members trained to support children's education with USG assistance.
- **Supp-10**: Percentage of educators providing quality classroom instruction with USG support.
- **Supp-11**: Percentage of instructional time lost to teacher absenteeism.
- **Supp-16**: Education data systems strengthened through USG assistance.
- **Supp-19**: Value of private capital mobilized with USG assistance to support education.

- **Supp-20**: Number of parent teacher associations (PTAs) or community-based school governance structures engaged in primary or secondary education supported with USG assistance.
- **Supp-22**: Percentage of learners targeted for USG assistance who have the appropriate variety of reading materials in the language of instruction with inclusive representation of diverse populations.

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[68] These may include universities, private sector actors, departments within ministries, continental groups (e.g., the Association for the Development of Education in Africa) or established multilateral initiatives.

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