



Localization in Conflict Contexts

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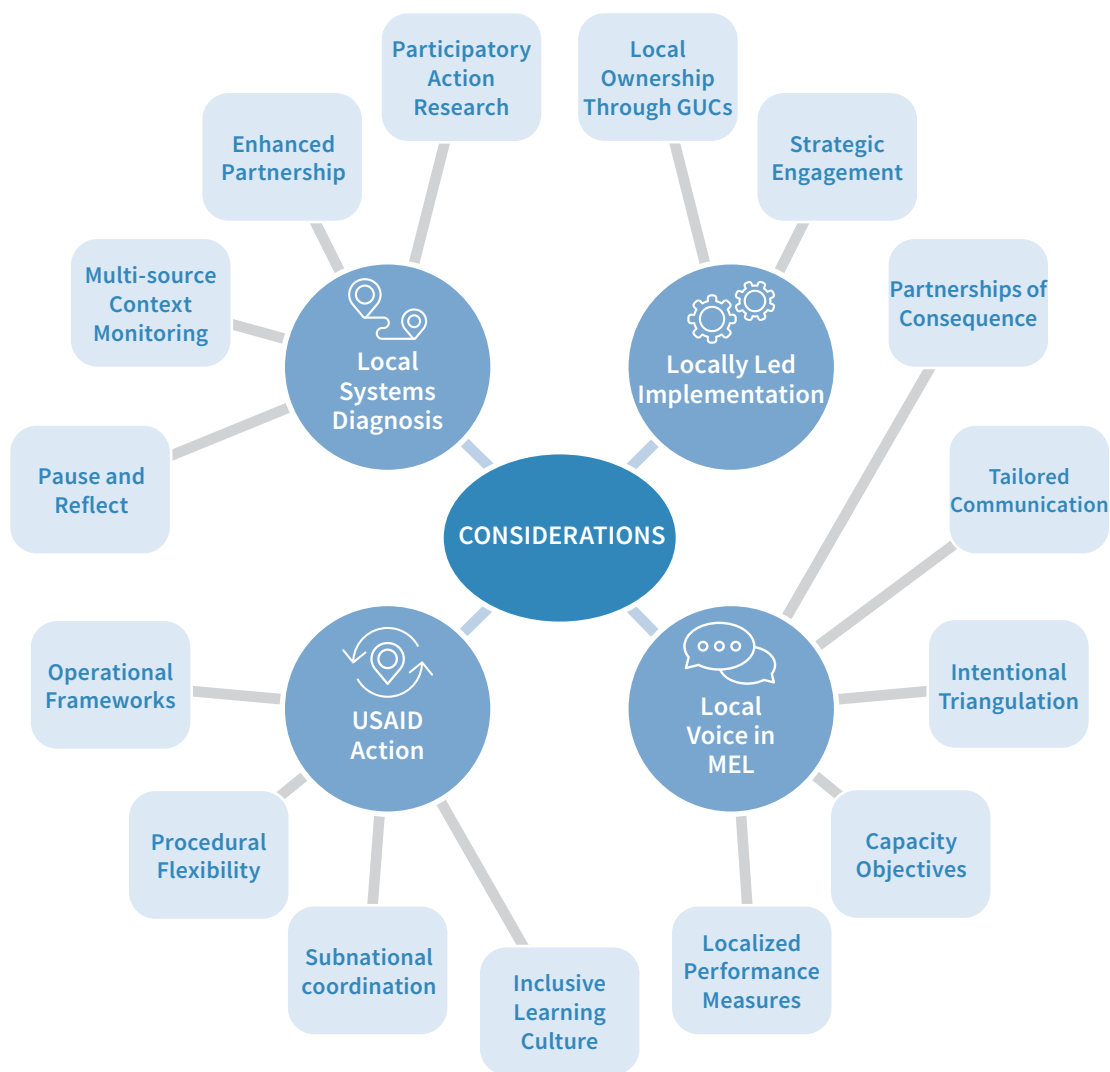


Executive Summary

Conflict is not a reason to run away from localization. And, with 80 percent of USAID countries presently categorized as fragile or conflict-affected, we simply must lean in. In some ways, we should even double down on localization in conflict contexts but do so thoughtfully and intentionally. Done incorrectly, efforts at localization can cause real harm; done properly, these efforts can positively affect peace and stability. To start, USAID and its international implementing partners must contextualize localization approaches; localization in Yemen will look different than localization in Ghana, for example. In conflict settings, we must adapt expectations regarding

localization to the specific context and develop localization objectives and strategies with an iterative understanding of the dynamics of the conflict. Success with USAID's localization agenda in these contexts has real implications for USAID's decision-making around program design, timelines and the use of limited resources.

In this paper, we explore four considerations regarding localization in conflict contexts (see graphic below), and present practical strategies and field-based examples to deliver conflict-sensitive localization results drawn from MSI's experience.





Introduction

USAID's renewed vigor to put the localization agenda at the forefront of foreign development assistance comes at a time when 80 percent¹ of the countries where USAID has a mission (or, at a minimum, a program presence) are fragile and/or conflict affected. USAID and its implementing partners are responding to complex crises, including in Lebanon, where the country teeters on the brink of economic and political implosion; in the Sahel, where political instability, ungoverned spaces and illicit economies are fueling an uptick in violent extremist events; and in Haiti, where unprecedented levels of violence carried out by heavily armed gangs almost daily is a deadly reminder of the country's political and economic crisis.

Globally, the destabilizing impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbating budget deficits and debt, amplifying governance and service delivery gaps, and deepening societal divisions. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has pushed many vulnerable countries into increased poverty and food insecurity, alongside rising authoritarianism and widespread protests. These factors highlight the relevance and timeliness of USAID's focus on localization in conflict contexts.

This paper aims to catalyze a conversation with USAID and international implementing partners around key

considerations and conflict-sensitive programming options to implement USAID's localization agenda in conflict contexts. This includes an acknowledgement that localization should look different in conflict contexts, informed by clear opportunities to address the drivers of conflict and the constraints of which USAID and its partners must be mindful of to avoid making a difficult situation worse. As a starting point, MSI believes that, at its core, *localization implies a lead role for local actors in program prioritization, implementation, monitoring and learning.*

While informed by USAID's procurement-specific target to provide 25 percent of direct funding to local organizations, this paper more specifically examines how we can achieve USAID's goal of 50 percent of USAID funding incorporating local voice and leadership. To contribute to the ongoing discussion, the paper includes observations and examples from our localization work in conflict-affected contexts and explores practical options for supporting localization without unintentionally exacerbating division in these highly contested and fractured environments. This paper does not reiterate previously examined, general reflections on localization.² It rather focuses on the special circumstances of localization in conflict-affected contexts.³

1 USAID: 2019. "USAID Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance," 4.

2 Cooley, L., Gilson, J., & Ahluwalia, I (2021). "Perspectives on Localization." Prepared in cooperation with the CIDC; Amis, S., Cohen, R. & Walsh, M. (2021). "Grants Under Contracts and Local Subcontracts: Helping Meet USAID's Locally Led Development Goals." Prepared in cooperation with PSC's Council of International Development Companies; Ingram, G (2022). "[Locally Driven Development: Overcoming the Obstacles.](#)" Brookings Institution.

3 We use the term "conflict-affected" to include countries experiencing active conflict, coming out of conflict, at high-risk for crime, violence and instability and/or facing growing extremist threats.



Actions to Support USAID’s Localization Agenda in Conflict Contexts

Conflict-affected environments feature polarization and sometimes factionalism across ethnic and religious divides; substantial capacity, service delivery and infrastructure deficits; and a fractious state-society relationship. Patronage systems are often the glue that holds weak ruling coalitions together in these contexts, making corruption pervasive. Strained and decaying institutions, pervasive distrust between government and citizens, and regions with limited state presence are typical features. Chronic instability is often entrenched by the presence of multiple competing actors including non-state armed groups (internal or external), organized criminal networks, and violent extremist organizations.

Political elites within these environments typically use violence, ideology and identity politics to capture resources, reinforce group boundaries, and shore up support for themselves. The interests of these elites, including those in government, are often not aligned with those of the United States. The country context

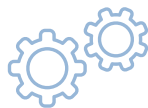
and related entry points for engagement vary. While hyper-local conflict dynamics may present additional distinct features, the macro-realities on the ground heavily influence the broader conflict context and operating environment.

These characteristics virtually ensure that any engagement involving the infusion and distribution of development assistance will be viewed through the lens of underlying grievances and local political economies and, as such, will be perceived as partisan by some key stakeholders. As a result, how voice is determined, heard, and responded to within the context of localization, and how these decisions then impact the distribution of assistance, becomes a highly charged political decision with the potential for positive and negative consequences.

Our experience suggests that these dynamics require USAID and international implementing partners to act intentionally around four considerations. The following questions apply:



How is the “local system” defined and diagnosed, and by whom?



How does implementation support localization in ways that promote peace rather than exacerbate conflict dynamics?



How do local voices most effectively contribute to and benefit from monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)?



How can USAID take additional action to advance the localization agenda?

The following discussion examines these considerations and their implications for USAID’s decision-making for program design, timelines and the use of limited resources.



Consideration #1: How is the “local system⁴” defined and diagnosed, and by whom?

Defining and assessing local systems has direct implications for a range of design decisions about intervention priorities, geographic targeting and choosing partners. Making these decisions is particularly hard to do in conflict environments where the situation is complex, in constant flux and fragmented. When the elevation of any one voice or set of voices in a given local system has the potential to exacerbate societal division—and the relevant governments are not reliable as messengers of the people’s needs and wants—then diagnostic exercises risk exacerbating difficult situations.

Key questions for defining and diagnosing the local systems which USAID invests in and engages with include:

- **How—and by whom—is a determination made of which actors should take center stage to identify needs and implement solutions? What are the implications of that determination?**
- **How do USAID and its partners mitigate the risks of prioritizing some voices over others?**
- **How does USAID navigate instances where analysis is deemed too political to share publicly or with leading stakeholders?**
- **How do USAID and its partners deal with resource and time factors that limit the scope of assessments and/or the ability to create an inclusive and diverse informant pool?**
- **How does USAID reconcile or choose among divergent local views and ensure alignment between those views and United States’ priorities and interests?**
- **How can diagnostic tools facilitate the inclusion of local voices in support of iterative analysis needed to inform course corrections and robust adaptive management in volatile contexts?**

The volatile characteristics of conflict contexts require dedicated resources during the program design process and throughout implementation to monitor how the context is evolving and what impact this has on key elements of implementation. Adaptive management practices are now an embedded expectation in most

USAID programs. As a core tool within the broader adaptive management toolbox, USAID and its international implementing partners have developed a range of useful diagnostics (e.g., social network analysis) and frameworks (e.g., USAID’s Conflict Assessment Framework) that can be adapted and used to address some of these issues. These tools are particularly important in conflict settings, but more is needed.

In conflict settings where social and political dynamics are particularly complex, those who are excluded from participating in an analysis are likely to question its credibility. Thus, it is important to expand, rather than reduce, opportunities, methods and approaches for local actors to play significant roles in the generation of knowledge and information about the system and its interconnected actors and core dynamics. While there are many options for increasing and facilitating inclusive and participatory analysis, we offer four options (below) — participatory action research, enhanced partnership models, multi-source context monitoring and pause and reflect forums.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) Participatory Action Research describes a range of methodologies and approaches aimed at increasing the inclusion and participation of local stakeholders in the diagnosis of context dynamics. In addition to the resulting analysis, these methodologies create second-tier effects generating collective awareness, a sense of shared responsibility, and elevate dialogue as an instrument for promoting peace and social cohesion. MSI’s Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Solutions for Peace and Recovery (SPR) applied a PAR approach to support increased community resilience to conflict through the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in conflict diagnostics that led to more inclusive decision-making and social cohesion processes in seven territories across eastern DRC (see text box on next page).

4 Here we use “local systems” as defined by USAID to refer to those interconnected sets of actors—governments, civil society the private sector, universities, individual citizens and others—that jointly produce a particular development outcome. As development outcomes may occur at many levels, local systems can be national, provincial or community-wide in scope. USAID: 2014. “Local systems: A framework for supporting sustained development,” 4.



Participatory Action Research in Practice: The Case of DRC

MSI — through USAID/DRC’s SPR program — engaged in participatory and inclusive diagnostics to understand the local system and core dynamics in eastern DRC. In such a volatile environment, diagnostics must be broken down to the hyper-local level. Building from macro-level regional assessments each groupement (grouping of villages) led local assessments to account for the distinct dynamics that required local knowledge and cultural understanding of entry points and relationships. Patience and flexibility were key to success. MSI hired people within these communities to gain trust, building capacities if they were not already present.

When expectations exceeded the initial capacities of women and marginalized groups to participate, we slowed down implementation and worked slowly and intently with local and tribal leaders to gain access, and with marginalized groups to gain confidence before proceeding. This required flexibility on the part of USAID while MSI built local skill sets to lead conflict assessments and, importantly, to share back with the community at each interval and gain agreement. The foundational work on systems diagnostics afforded SPR the ability to build a movement of active peace actors across all levels of society in North and South Kivu including community members, village leaders, NGO actors, and local governance authorities.



A critical element of promoting locally led and locally supported diagnostics is to ensure that the perceptions, voices and resulting analyses reach beyond elite local voices. Time and resource availability, or even language capabilities, limits data collection, inadvertently narrowing the pool of informants to those with higher levels of education and/or English proficiency, or simply those in closer proximity to the research team (e.g., center versus periphery). Here again, these problems are exacerbated in conflict settings where it is not only difficult but also dangerous for non-elite voices to be heard. Two ways to circumvent this hurdle are careful sampling to ensure representation of those whose views and circumstances are least known (as the DRC example illustrates), and the use of technology to expand reach. Our experience includes several options for using technology to access and aggregate hard to reach local voices, including:

- Mobile-to-mobile IVR and SMS surveys to cell phone numbers in a targeted region
- Surveys via Facebook and other social media platforms
- Short surveys that pop up during free online games that otherwise-marginalized constituencies play
- QR codes on posters and brochures in public settings like health clinics and churches asking for interested partners to provide information — the QR code then leads to a short survey

- Use of AI and large data sets to integrate data and provide finer resolution data on conditions
- Crowdsourcing from a community of paid providers for timely data, which is especially useful for inaccessible regions where such a community has been assembled

In deciding between traditional or technological methods, it is important to weigh the pros and cons. Technology can help implementers diversify the pool of informants and overcome the problem of some topics being too sensitive for open discussion. It also allows for data to be procured and analyzed quickly and reach into non-permissive environments. Technology has its limitations, however, including risk of inadvertent exclusion and possible privacy breaches. For these reasons, where technology is the preferred approach to accessing local voice, MSI recommends incorporating, to the extent possible, traditional methods including in person key informant interviews, focus group discussions and community-wide town halls.

ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP A challenge that often limits the use of locally led diagnostics in conflict settings is the research, analysis and data collection capacity gap in many of these settings. Where this is the case, consideration needs to be given to alternate models for implementing locally led diagnostics that incorporate a capacity strengthening element. This would equip local actors to lead and drive knowledge generation.



Complementary partnerships between local actors and international implementing partners feature the local actors filling significant knowledge gaps regarding context, conflict dynamics, political economies and other elements. Local actors and organizations are often in the best position to access and interpret local knowledge and perspectives. Implementing partners, meanwhile, provide local actors with capacities, expertise and mentoring. USAID leverages the strengths of these partnerships while helping to ensure neutrality and minimize political capture.

MSI has successfully applied this partnership approach in several conflict-affected settings, integrating local professionals, research firms and/or consulting organizations from project inception, and including them in discussions about methodology, sampling, and engagement strategies. In addition to the immediate benefits in terms of actionable insights and enhanced credibility, these approaches led in several cases to strengthening local research firms' capabilities to support subsequent delivery of direct services for the project and USAID.

MULTI-SOURCE CONTEXT MONITORING Understanding how dynamics are changing, including how the program may be having impacts, and feeding this information into decision making and course correction are particularly important in conflict settings. MSI has learned that integrating inputs from a wide representation of local

staff and partners as primary sources of information, and then triangulating the information, is essential to mitigating any narrow interpretation, bias and knowledge gaps. We have also had success creating pathways to non-traditional interlocutors who, while they may be outside the typical USAID partner circles, are important and well-respected members of a community with valuable insights. Illustrative of this strategy, as part of the South Sudan mission's CLA strategy, MSI established a Council of Elders composed of highly regarded, apolitical national figures who met periodically to provide feedback on the operating context and its implications for donor programming.

PAUSE AND REFLECT MSI feels that pause and reflect forums at critical benchmarks of implementation, e.g., during strategic review sessions, scenario planning events and annual work planning, are versatile mechanisms for extracting and applying insights about changing and volatile contexts. Regardless of context, we find that the most effective stakeholder feedback mechanisms share two important features: 1) they are set up from the outset of programming, ideally during a project's start-up phase; and 2) the mechanism itself is identified in consultation with those it seeks to reach. In conflict-affected settings, it is also important to ensure that the mechanism or forum includes safeguards to avoid creating a security risk for those providing feedback.



Consideration #2: How does implementation support localization in ways that promote peace rather than exacerbate conflict dynamics?

Implementation strategies, practices and tools require numerous daily decisions and choices by USAID and international implementing partners as they work in partnership with local actors to achieve a program's development objectives. Key questions that may affect the impact of these micro-decisions on the dynamics of the conflict include:

- What are the assumptions and biases implicit in decisions about recruitment, geographic targeting, grant focus and selection, events and training?

- Are there specific consequences to the way voices are being elevated that put individuals, or the success of activity implementation, at risk?
- How do cultural bias and language impact how we listen and in what is communicated?
- Are there instances where local organizations are unable to maintain neutrality or safety in conflict environments, and therefore a politically neutral and possibly external actor is needed to create distance and lower potential risk to local actors?

While the implementing partner must tailor engagement strategies during implementation to the specific



Strategic Engagement in Practice: The Case of Colombia



In helping to implement USAID/OTI’s Transforma program in Colombia, MSI used a collaborative tripartite model to engage local stakeholders in planning, design and implementation of community-prioritized small infrastructure and renovation projects like footbridges, tertiary roads, and community centers in conflict-affected areas of Colombia. Under this model, the municipal government provided skilled labor, the community volunteers provided unskilled labor, and Transforma supplied in-kind materials and equipment to implement the infrastructure projects. Application of the tripartite model strengthened collaboration among local actors and enhanced local ownership of projects, while simultaneously demonstrating peace divi-

dends and improving community resilience. Two independent evaluations on the collaborative tripartite model, including 28 communities and 600 key informants with control groups, delivered clear evidence that, in addition to optimizing the use of limited resources, the tripartite approach solidified commitments, increased transparency, and strengthened the skills and relationships among stakeholders — all essential factors to achieving the Peace Accord’s vision of territorial transformation. One community action board representative stated, “These projects help us to recover our trust in institutions, in the government — little by little, between all of us we are progressing with implementation of the Peace Accord.” Transforma has supported over 800 projects in 44 municipalities benefiting 180,000 people.

development goals and operating environment, MSI has found the following approaches useful in advancing the localization agenda during implementation without escalating societal division, undermining marginal voices, or reinforcing inequitable, existing power dynamics:

STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT Robust, ongoing engagement mechanisms with local stakeholders, communities and institutions have elevated, not reduced, in importance in conflict settings. The process for linking governments, communities and citizens can deliver indirect outcomes such as increased levels of trust, social cohesion, more equitable decision-making, and community and institutional resilience. This engagement must be done with particular sensitivity to conflict drivers and the potential for effects (positive or negative) on the legitimacy of the government and other key actors. Conflict settings also require consistent monitoring to ensure that these engagement strategies do not inadvertently privilege certain voices over others or reinforce inequitable power dynamics regarding who gets to speak and for whom, especially those most vulnerable to exclusion such as youth, women and LGBTQIA+ people. MSI’s work in support of the Government of Colombia’s implementation of

the 2016 Peace Accord offers an example of how certain engagement strategies can help mitigate the risk of elevating division or exacerbating conflict dynamics (see *text box above*).

LOCAL OWNERSHIP THROUGH GRANTS-UNDER-CONTRACT

In conflict-affected contexts, programs that incorporate a grants-under-contract (GUC) component offer particular promise for fostering locally led implementation. Grantmaking builds on the engagement strategies described above and incorporates community engagement in the identification of the problem and development of the right solutions. It also builds in community leadership in activities, including use of local vendors and monitoring of implementation, to shore up “ownership” of the activities and improve the likelihood of success.

Often, in these contexts, communities have experienced trauma, and project implementers must earn their trust before carrying out sensitive programming. In these instances, quick win, rapid grants can provide much needed support and confidence in local institutions while simultaneously jump-starting necessary trust and confidence in the international implementing partner’s desire and ability to make a positive impact. Once trust



is established, grantmaking can help to create and solidify linkages between the government and the community in support of more positive local engagement. Activities are often layered and sequenced to establish the basic capacities, linkages and partnerships that will allow the implementing partner and USAID to achieve catalytic change.

Local partners have diverse capabilities to comply with the USG's financial and contractual regulations, particularly in conflict-affected environments. In-kind grants are an effective tool for project implementers to work with local partners with technical qualifications and community access but less ability and experience in compliance than more experienced grantees. Good grantmaking also creates space for capacity development with in-kind grantees, providing them with the

opportunity to graduate to become cash grant recipients over the life of the program.

In-kind GUCs to government partners can also bolster local governments' ability to deliver on services and shore up confidence and legitimacy. At a minimum, it is important to ensure that grantmaking does not inadvertently undermine government legitimacy, which typically weakens in conflict environments due to citizens losing confidence in their government's ability to provide basic services, security and livelihoods. Strategies like the tripartite model are designed to support government legitimacy by having the government as a visible partner in delivery of services and resources. It is particularly important that the distribution of grants does not inadvertently reinforce prevailing narratives about exclusion or favoritism.



Consideration #3: How do local voices most effectively contribute to and benefit from monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)?

There is much that we do not know about conflict drivers, violence prevention and variation within and across countries. This difficulty is compounded by three likely conditions in conflict-affected countries: 1) available data may be low in quantity and quality and outdated; 2) there are likely to be many and diverse political micro-situations; and 3) perceptions are likely to diverge from "objective" realities and to vary widely among respondents. It is also important to verify that planned investments are spent as intended (and not abused), since such investments consume significant MEL resources and require high levels of MEL expertise. While none of these challenges is unique to conflict contexts, they are all exacerbated by them.

Often denied significant participation in MEL, local partners lose opportunities to learn. Consensus on an activity between partners and donors can easily diverge, particularly in turbulent and contested environments. Yet, as with the issues associated with Consideration #1 above, questions of which voices dominate MEL debates have substantive and political implications. Where competing elites fight over power and resources and show minimal interest in actual governing — and where public space is dominated by military actors or

competing factions — the risks of distortion and hidden agendas increase dramatically. While working from a set of shared facts will not resolve these conflicts, it can help. The inverse — hoping to avoid these problems by minimizing the role for local voices — is almost always counterproductive.

Specific questions that need to be addressed for MEL localization in conflict contexts include:

- **How do international implementing partners best identify and support local MEL talent in ways that align with current levels of funding and program periods of performance?**
- **What are the most promising models for local actors to be at the forefront of determining MEL approaches that align with local needs and inform joint learning?**
- **Where interests or pressure may produce bias, how can this problem best be identified and managed?**
- **How can USAID-specific and non-essential reporting be kept to a minimum to leave space for context and impact monitoring of particular interest to local organizations?**
- **Where particular kinds of data and analysis are hypersensitive, what are the best access, use and sharing protocols to ensure risks to participants are mitigated?**



Enhancing Local Voices in USAID's CLA



MSI's work on a USAID MEL platform in Mozambique supported two provincial communities of practice (CoPs) comprised of local CSOs and IPs who shared learning and tried to coordinate interventions. This work provided the impetus for a similar effort in South Sudan. This context is hyperlocal and complex. Even the terrain of the country complicated knowledge acquisition and made information sharing difficult. In response, MSI helped USAID design a system of county coordinators to provide backbone coordination support for USAID's 100+ IPs and local partners in target states. GIS mapping of activities is one key ingredient of this coordination. Sharing knowledge about the context and challenges and providing a foundation for on-the-ground coordination helps implementers improve performance and assists USAID to deliver on its commitment to placing communities at the center of its resilience program-

ming. Our experience suggests that this type of coordination requires a proactive and conflict-aware organizer, and dedicated resources, in addition to a mandate, mechanisms and good intentions.

Options to address these challenges include the following:

LOCALIZED PERFORMANCE MEASURES An additional means of amplifying local voices in conflict settings has been to engage local stakeholders in defining progress measures and outcomes in terms that are meaningful for them. This is particularly true with regard to assessment of perceptions of peace, security and trust. In addition to providing useful technical input, this approach supports buy-in to, and community consensus. Some experience suggests, for example, that using this approach to develop everyday peace indicators shows promise in elevating local voices at the community level and provides useful input as to whether communities feel increasingly secure.

One challenge in doing this is that activity-level MEL plans and baseline data/targets are typically put in place before target communities and institutions are selected and can be adequately consulted. In such cases, procedures should include adjusting these metrics and targets as conditions and plans change, and as space can be created for adding or altering indicators to reflect partner and community perspectives.

There may be differences between USAID's preference for standard indicators and quantitative targets and what local communities and institutions value, and there may also be important differences across communities. These differences can sometimes be addressed by "bundling" (e.g., the percentage of communities showing

improvement in self-defined conceptions of security), but these indicators take real expertise to construct and interpret, and we have found that trade-offs between methodological rigor and local ownership are often unavoidable.

CAPACITY OBJECTIVES Where credible and impartial information sources are scarce, we have seen great value to donors and implementing partners providing explicit focus on enhancing MEL and CLA capabilities among their own staffs, in local partners and grantees, and in local MEL service providers such as think tanks, universities and consulting firms. This includes larger-than-normal funding for formal and on-the-job training in MEL and CLA, adequate short- and long-term technical assistance to support MEL tasks and training, and manageable timelines for MEL deliverables so that full inclusion of local voices becomes the default mechanism. Planning should also include a phased approach for turning more and more MEL-related tasks over to local grantees and entities over the life of an activity as capacities develop and for the creation of CLA platforms for multi-member sharing of information and learning (*see text box above*).

In some cases, it is useful for USAID to turn to mission MEL and third-party monitoring platforms — or to local universities or firms — to conduct capacity building on a larger scale, working in close cooperation with implementing partners to understand their baseline skills and needs and the capacities that they are most committed



to strengthening. Other useful mechanisms include co-creation of multi-stakeholder learning agendas, learning events for partner institutions and communities, mentorship programs, and internships for graduate students. Our experience shows that incorporating outputs, intermediate results and indicators related to MEL and MEL capacity building into contractual documents helps to ensure funding and accountability for these actions.

INTENTIONAL TRIANGULATION Especially in conflict-affected settings, it is essential to build redundancy into the MEL system. Additional resources will help to ensure the accuracy, adequacy, credibility and representativeness of data. Gaps and delays can be expected. Informal qualitative methods (such as storytelling and most significant change analysis) can and should supplement more formal and quantitative ones. Certain technology options described above may be useful. Interpreting data can also benefit from diverse perspectives. Perception data are particularly important in conflict settings and may not align with reality, providing an important signal for program adjustment. To this end, community monitoring committees have long served as accountability and ownership measures, ensuring that local investments materialized and are resulting in benefits, particularly from the perspective of the intended beneficiaries.

TAILORED COMMUNICATION USAID’s activities typically generate mountains of data, but it can be difficult for local actors to make sense of or use this information. The fact that much of the data and analysis produced for USAID is written in English can be an additional challenge for local organizations. We have found that,

especially in harder-to-understand conflict contexts, it is useful for implementing partners to simplify data to enable effective use, producing information in different formats and offering it via varied forms of outreach including via virtual and in-person events. Compromises may be needed over what information can be shared and with whom for USAID to avoid compromising its reputation or doing harm to partners. But, much more can and should be shared than currently seems to be the case.

PARTNERSHIPS OF CONSEQUENCE Even in conflict-affected settings, there are often universities, think tanks and consulting firms that enjoy local reputations for professionalism and impartiality. Sustained partnering between international partners and these local research entities to provide MEL services, MEL capacity building, and conflict sensitivity and analysis training, and to ensure a flow of work from which they can learn, is a strategy we have found particularly useful for promoting sustainable localization.

In the best cases, these partnerships are long-term and strategic — partnerships of consequence, not merely of convenience. Where capacity is nascent, it may be possible to work with regional or third country organizations with relevant language and cultural skills and pair them with local organizations. As examples, MSI partners with two Jordanian MEL firms, the skills of which MSI helped to build under a Jordan-focused project on third party monitoring activities in Syria and Iraq. In some cases, we have also found that establishing regional research networks can promote a further benefit by encouraging peer-to-peer learning and fostering partnerships to take on new work.



Consideration #4: How can USAID take additional action to advance the localization agenda?

There are additional actions USAID could take to help international implementing partners advance the localization agenda at a faster pace in conflict-affected settings while USAID works toward more direct funding relationships with local partners. While not intended to be an inclusive list, these actions include:

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORKS Years ago, following the conflict-forced evacuation of USAID from South Sudan and its subsequent return, MSI engaged with USAID in an experiment that began from the premise that, while broad objectives were clear, the situation on the ground remained too fluid to permit detailed long-term planning. In recognition, USAID’s plans included broad



objectives but did not incorporate detailed targets. USAID's plans also provided for intensified monitoring and adjustment on the ground, making use of greater contextual monitoring and input from a Council of Elders. While that approach was subsequently abandoned, we believe that held promise for efforts in conflict-affected countries where it is vital to design programming realistically and provide an enhanced role for local voices.

PROCEDURAL FLEXIBILITY Recent actions by USAID to enhance procedural flexibility regarding the award and administration of grants, cooperative agreements and contract mechanisms hold particular promise for enhancing localization in conflict-affected settings. This

includes enhanced provision for locally based mechanisms such as inception phases; iterative work planning; setting preliminary theories of change that get tested and adapted overtime when/as needed; and greater use of conflict modifiers. Giving voice and agency to tested local partners is particularly important when conflict dynamics escalate, and programming pivots are required (*see text box on next page*). Additional flexibility around the qualifications of key personnel, language requirements, and the sophistication required for deliverables, would also allow for local voices to take a larger role in knowledge generation, presentation, and dissemination and would strengthen the likelihood that the knowledge generated is grounded in local perspectives.

Flexibility in Practice: Pivoting in Accord with Local Requirements in Ukraine

Since 2017, MSI has been the prime contractor for USAID's flagship anti-corruption effort in Ukraine, Support to Anti-Corruption Champion Institutions (SACCI), empowering key governmental institutions to fight corruption and building public support for and engagement in anti-corruption efforts. This involved working with an array of capable institutions on what was, arguably, one of the key public concerns in the country.

This changed abruptly on February 24, 2022, when the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine and the fight against corruption faded into the background, as the urgency of defending the nation arose. USAID responded to the new challenges by pivoting major projects. SACCI consulted extensively with its partner organizations in government and civil society to learn their priorities and needs and to rethink the support the activity could provide.

Consultations resulted in shifting the activities of the anti-corruption agencies to ensuring transparency and accountability in the handling of billions of dollars of humanitarian aid. More recently, the Ukrainian government began to develop a comprehensive reconstruction plan anticipating the influx of funds pledged by the international community. SACCI again pivoted, drawing on international experience to advise Ukraine on best practices for preventing corruption in major reconstruction programs and supporting a newly formed coalition of CSOs that is promoting integrity, sustainability and efficiency in the country's recovery.

The presence of an array of strong local institutions, the trust established through 5 years of close partnership, and USAID's flexible programming approach, led by the priorities of local partners, allowed MSI to provide this support remotely and permitted anti-corruption programming to remain relevant in the face of these dramatic and unanticipated changes.

SUB-NATIONAL COORDINATION Even in settings where there is a full complement of USAID staff in-country, the ability of these staff to regularly circulate and engage with project participants and partners in



conflict-affected countries is limited by physical constraints and security requirements dictated by the USG. While international partners and FSNs often play the role of connector, USAID would benefit from investing more



heavily in coordination mechanisms that allow them direct access to a diversity of voices, including those outside of main cities and urban hubs, and the ability to bring local voices to the table even in environments where it is difficult for USAID to be present.

INCLUSIVE LEARNING CULTURE We recommend increased efforts to assemble local and international partners to learn and invest in understanding what works regarding localization and how best to address constraints. This includes partnering at the national level with

implementing partners, international and local, on a learning agenda around localization that includes topics such as what it means to listen in a context where political, cultural and language differences can impede, or bias skews communication; and how the impact of trauma in conflict settings affects the ability of local voices to speak and to be heard. It also includes continued USAID investments in learning mechanisms such as “Stopping As Success” and doubling down on the agency’s global learning agenda around locally-led development.

Conclusion

USAID’s localization agenda comes at a time when the global conflict landscape is significantly heightened, raising the urgency of holding a conversation around the setting and pursuit of localization goals in conflict-affected contexts. If local voices are to play leading roles in prioritization of interventions, decision making and implementation in conflict settings, a secondary benefit of these efforts can and should be enhanced social cohesion and improved linkages between government and community, two of the key ingredients to long lasting peace and stability. The localization agenda also carries particular risks in contexts where capacity is compromised, neutrality is evasive and “voice” is politically situated, contested and embedded in a web of historical

relationships, dynamics, past and present grievances. USAID’s localization aspirations and localization strategies in these settings need to be adapted to reflect the dynamics of the conflict and the agency’s ability to resource and accommodate the extra effort needed to ensure a prominent role for credible and effective local voices. We share our experience in the hope that doing so contributes to further exploration of successful practices, tools and approaches that can help USAID effectively implement its localization agenda in these challenging settings.



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