PAPER SERIES ON CAPACITY AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Informing USAID's Self-Reliance Learning Agenda: Overview of the Paper Series

To help build understanding of how existing evidence can contribute to addressing USAID's Self-Reliance Learning Agenda (SRLA) learning questions, a USAID research team conducted a landscape analysis to provide an illustrative overview of how self-reliance concepts show up in existing literature.[1] The landscape analysis covered the range of development sectors in which USAID works, but was by no means comprehensive.[2] The Paper Series on Capacity and Capacity Strengthening shares insights from a subset of the literature examined by the landscape analysis with the aim of prompting further discussion of the implications for development efforts. USAID continues to invest in work that addresses the SRLA questions, and welcomes contributions from the wider development community.

Initiated during the developmental stages of the SRLA, the aim of this landscape analysis was to conduct an extemporaneous and iterative examination of how concepts related to self-reliance are discussed in existing international development literature. Several themes relevant to USAID's focus on self-reliance emerged through the landscape analysis, including discussions around organizational capacity, systems strengthening, and engaging local actors. The landscape analysis did not explore existing literature in the fields of policy reform and policy dialogue. Focused exploration of the literature relating to such efforts will address ways to foster commitment.[3]

Capacity and capacity strengthening quickly emerged as complex and contested terms, prompting the inquiries examined in this series of four papers. The literature examined by this landscape analysis engaged with issues of capacity at the organizational level, not at the country level as defined by USAID's Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps.[4] Key insights from the landscape analysis are further described in each paper of the series listed below. Additional analysis will explore country-level capacity, and will also further clarify how organizational capacity at the local and sub-national levels contributes to country-level capacity.[5]

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1 The team examined more than 50 USAID documents and 60 external documents for the landscape analysis.

2 For example, the landscape analysis examined academic, USAID policy, sector-specific, and learning-related documents, but did not delve into the programmatic evidence on the topic of self-reliance.

3 USAID's Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps define commitment as the degree to which a country's laws, policies, actions, and informal governance mechanisms — such as cultures and norms — support progress toward self-reliance. SRLA Question #1 addresses commitment: "What are the change pathways around how capacity and commitment come together to build self-reliance, and what are the implications for USAID programs? How can we foster the capacity and commitment of all actors at different levels of the system (local, sub-national, national, and regional)?"

4 USAID's Self-Reliance Country Roadmaps define capacity as how far a country has come in its ability to manage its own development journey across the dimensions of political, social, and economic development, including the ability to work across these sectors.

5 SRLA Question #1 also addresses capacity. See footnote 3 above.

INQUIRY 1: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES THAT DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS HAVE ON ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY?

- The literature reviewed for Inquiry 1 demonstrates a lack of conceptual clarity around key terms, including "capacity" and "capacity strengthening." As a consequence, fundamental assumptions about how capacity should be assessed, by whom, and for what purpose often remain implicit and unquestioned. Notably, the literature examined by this landscape analysis most often discussed capacity at the level of organizations, and occasionally individual actors.

- Two models for understanding the capacity of organizations appear to dominate the international development literature and are used pervasively. One model represents a relatively narrow aperture focused on specific technical skills (e.g., skills in financial management or human resources). The other model represents a broadening of that aperture, revealing additional dimensions of capacity that enable organizations to operate effectively within a broader context (e.g., building a healthy organizational culture, adapting to changing circumstances). Adopting the second model may better enable program designs that fully support and leverage local organizations' contributions to development processes.

INQUIRY 2: HOW DO DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS DETERMINE WHAT CAPACITY ALREADY EXISTS WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION?

- As discussed in Inquiry 2, some authors suggest that the imbalanced power dynamic between development practitioners and local actors can lead to generic statements that local capacity is lacking across the board, rather than assessments that identify specific shortages or skill gaps. Assessing degrees of capacity by examining areas of organizational effectiveness could lead to the identification of existing strengths overlooked by commonplace technical audits or skills assessments.

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

- Inquiry 3 describes how adopting a facilitative approach to strengthening the capacity of local organizations prioritizes developing their ability to continue pursuing development objectives independent of external support. Historically, partnerships between development practitioners and local organizations have often exhibited top-down tendencies, and have sometimes substituted for — rather than built — local capacity. A facilitative approach that fosters collaboration is more likely to result in sustainable capacity strengthening over time.

- There is a general consensus within the literature that active learning, as opposed to classroom-style training, is more effective at strengthening the capacity of both individuals and organizations. This argument is based on both historical experience and known best practices in adult learning. Experiential approaches to capacity strengthening commonly include an element of mentoring or apprenticeship, whereby new skills are learned over time and through repeated practice.

INQUIRY 4: HOW CAN DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS STRENGTHEN THEIR OWN CAPACITIES TO BETTER FACILITATE THE JOURNEY TO SELF-RELIANCE?

- The literature reviewed for Inquiry 4 notes that administrative bottlenecks, risk-averse policies and practices, management deficits, high rates of personnel turnover, lack of understanding of local context, and staff skill gaps can undermine efforts by development practitioners to strengthen the capacity of local partners and partner organizations.

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6 *Local actors and local organizations* refer to the range of indigenous organizations and individuals engaged in development work within their own country, including government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

- Funding and partnering approaches may need to be redesigned in order to enable capacity strengthening efforts at individual and organizational levels that respond to locally-identified needs. This could entail transitioning away from managing for discrete, measurable, short-term results and toward prioritizing complex, difficult-to-measure, longer-term outcomes.

The insights shared here and throughout the paper series are central to current discussions about aid effectiveness. These are complex and multifaceted issues, and this preliminary scan of the literature is by no means comprehensive. USAID welcomes additional sources, perspectives, and evidence that can help round out our understanding. Equally, the literature examined by the landscape analysis was largely conceptual, and we know that programmatic examples pertaining to these inquiries abound. Perspectives and evidence generated by USAID Missions and other organizations are essential for building a more robust understanding of what makes capacity strengthening effective. Continuing to explore these issues critically will benefit USAID as it supports countries on their journeys to self-reliance, as well as the wider development community.

USAID is excited to learn from you. Please contact us at SRLA@usaid.gov to share your experiences or evidence. You can also learn more about the Journey to Self-Reliance at https://www.usaid.gov/selfreliance.