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PAPER SERIES ON CAPACITY AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Inquiry 4: Development Practitioners' Own Capacities

INTRODUCTION TO THIS PAPER SERIES

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

The papers in this series summarize a landscape analysis² conducted by USAID to better understand how existing evidence can contribute to addressing the [SRLA learning questions](#). Initiated during the developmental stages of the SRLA, the aim of this landscape analysis was to conduct an extemporaneous and iterative examination of how concepts related to self-reliance are discussed in existing international development literature.

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

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

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

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

As discussed in the other papers in this series, the documents reviewed for this landscape analysis suggest that development practitioners hold a variety of expectations and perceptions related to capacity and capacity strengthening. The landscape

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

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

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

analysis also indicates that development practitioners' own capacity is rarely questioned or systematically assessed. Some sources within the literature have begun to question what effects development practitioners' capacity deficits might have on their capacity strengthening work. Based on this landscape analysis, the literature about how development practitioners can develop their own capacities to better support capacity strengthening remains scarce. This is in stark contrast to the significant amount that has been written about capacity strengthening efforts for local organizations in developing countries.



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Structural Issues and Skill Gaps

The literature notes that discussions about the capacity of local actors should not be detached from discussions about the capacity gaps of development practitioners. 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 all undermine capacity strengthening efforts of development practitioners, particularly when those efforts aim to engage in collaborative and participatory approaches. The literature generally acknowledges that it can be difficult to interact effectively with local organizations in ways that depart from the transactional arrangements that have historically dominated such relationships. This literature also recognizes that past capacity strengthening efforts of development practitioners did not necessarily result in more local ownership of those efforts. One reason offered

for this is that development practitioners have historically tended to adopt a directive posture focused on strengthening the capability of local organizations to implement external resources (i.e., donor money).

If, instead, the objective of development practitioners is for the organizations they support to become more effective and self-reliant agents of their own development solutions, then, the literature argues, a more facilitative approach is required. Adopting a facilitative (rather than directive) posture requires that development practitioners and institutions reflect on their own skill gaps and structural challenges. Additionally, development practitioners may also need to consider whether their funding and partnering approaches could be redesigned to enable capacity strengthening efforts that more effectively respond to locally-identified needs. One key component of shifting toward a facilitative approach, identified in the literature, involves transitioning away from managing for discrete, measurable, short-term results and toward prioritizing complex, difficult-to-measure, longer-term outcomes. This shift may involve development practitioners taking on less-familiar roles as convenors and knowledge brokers that require recognizing one's own limitations of experience and perspective. If these are challenges you have considered in the context of your work, USAID is eager to learn about your experience; please refer to the *How to Stay Engaged* section at the end of this paper.

Blind Spots and Hidden Biases

The literature also reflects the importance of development practitioners considering the frames of reference and attitudinal perspectives that they adopt in their capacity strengthening work. Development practitioners should consider how both explicit definitions and policy requirements, as well as blind spots and hidden biases, may cause them to inadvertently mold local partners in their own image, possibly impeding local partners' effectiveness. Some authors argue that the validity of international interventions to

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strengthen local capacity is dependent on a critical review of development practitioners' perceptions of local capacity and of capacity gaps within their own organizations. The literature suggests that, in theory, development practitioners may struggle to fully adopt approaches to strengthen the more holistic dimensions of capacity attributed to the capacity 2.0⁴ model without also taking steps to build these dimensions of capacity internally.

Implications for the SRLA

The ideas discussed throughout this paper should prompt critical reflection about development practitioners' blind spots, hidden biases, and organizational deficits affecting their ability to assess and strengthen capacities within their own organizations. They also surface broader points about how to most effectively measure different types of capacity, especially when such measurements are often a matter of perspective. The SRLA will continue to explore these issues while addressing the learning question:

How can USAID's organizational structures and staffing, policies, guidance, technical assistance, and capacity-building enable us to foster self-reliance? In what ways can USAID/Washington provide effective field services to operationalize the Journey to Self-Reliance? (SRLA, Q13)

Over time, learning about how local, sub-national, national, and regional voices, priorities, and contributions can be integrated into how USAID fosters self-reliance (SRLA, Q10) could also contribute to a more nuanced perspective on how local perceptions of capacity and capacity strengthening can meaningfully inform assessments of development practitioners' own strengths and weaknesses.

HOW TO STAY ENGAGED

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

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

- If you are working to strengthen your own organization's capacity, please let us know what approaches you are using and which capacities you aim to strengthen.
- Also, please share any other tools or frameworks for strengthening development practitioners' capacity that could help inform the SRLA.

Please contact USAID 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>.

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

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