

PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STRATEGY ON ENGAGING LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should develop an official public strategy on civil society engagement. As the Journey to Self-Reliance recognizes, robust local civil society, with space to exercise its voice, is essential for sustainable, inclusive, and country-owned development.¹ Without a strong, vibrant civil society that can represent citizen interests and hold governments and others to account, the promise of sustained, equitable development progress cannot be fully met.²

USAID has a history of engaging, investing in, and protecting local civil society in partner countries. To ensure continued progress, MFAN encourages the agency to develop a public and formal strategy on civil society engagement. A public strategy that guides actions to support civil society and protect civic space will reinforce the agency's commitment to country self-reliance and will serve as an important communication tool—with Congress, partner countries, other donors, and implementing partners—about USAID's values, priorities and approaches. It can also reinforce the relevance of civil society engagement for U.S. national security interests, foreign policy priorities, and the goal of strengthened accountability.³

Civil society refers to any organization or institution, both formal and informal, that is not part of the national or local government, including schools, advocacy groups, professional associations, religious organizations, cultural institutions, and more.

Civic space refers to the structures, processes and legal instruments, and the absence of restrictions, that make it possible for citizens to associate, organize and act on issues of interest to them.

While the Journey to Self-Reliance Policy Framework and Country Roadmaps recognize the importance of civil society, and the agency has been actively reinforcing its messaging on the importance of a democratic enabling environment, the Journey's supporting strategies focus on engaging with the local private sector, engaging with government, and engaging service providers and implementing partners. A strategy for engaging with people is absent. While the private sector and government are essential for supporting a country's journey to self-reliance, USAID should formalize the importance of civic engagement, and a strong citizen-state compact, in promoting development and democracy around the world by developing an official public strategy.

¹ Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2018. "Putting the last first? Civil society's role in leaving no one behind." Development Co-operation Report 2018: Joining Forces to Leave No One Behind.

² Pouligny, Béatrice. 2005. "Civil society and post-conflict peacebuilding: Ambiguities of international programmes aimed at building 'new' societies." *Security dialogue*, 36 (4): 495-510.

³ While the scope of the strategy should include civil society at all levels – global, regional, national and community – it should focus on the role of local civil society, since its role is at the heart of effective, sustainable development.

Civil society is not a “one-size fits all” term. It is a broad umbrella that includes an array of institutions, professional and volunteer, which represent and mobilize a broad range of constituents and has an array of functions, including research, innovation, advocacy, political organizing, service delivery, accountability, and awareness-raising. Local civil society organizations can operate at the national, regional, or global level—and can be a significant source of employment in a country.

Civil society actors also take on a wide range of roles. These can include delivering services that the government and private sector can’t or won’t deliver, working to change social norms and behaviors, promoting evidence-based policy-making, disseminating information, monitoring government policy, presenting policy alternatives and innovations, educating citizens on issues, and advocating for and defending human rights, including those of marginalized groups, women, and girls. These efforts can contribute in important ways to poverty reduction, education, inclusive development and economic growth, conflict prevention, gender equality, and the advancement of democracy.⁴ Civil society also plays a critical role mobilizing the population, creating demand, and holding national governments, private sector actors, and multilateral institutions to account for and adherence to human rights principles and development impact. In some cases, civil society groups partner directly with these same actors to ensure they have a strong seat at the table, especially for groups that tend to be under-represented/voiceless, and create “shared value” outcomes. Any approach to civil society engagement needs to recognize the value of these diverse roles in the local and global development ecosystems and ensure that they have a strong seat at the table as a development partner.

Because of the diversity of local civil society—both in structure and in role—it is critical that USAID recognizes its vital role in engaging with these actors both as implementing partners and as independent citizen organizations that can advance development. As such, MFAN urges the development of a civil society engagement strategy based on the following principles and recommendations:

PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGING LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY:

1. Promote diverse and inclusionary civil society participation in priority setting.

To drive country self-reliance, civil society groups must be fully engaged in setting development priorities and goals. When communities in developing countries have a voice in their development journey and how foreign aid is utilized, it creates a pathway for greater impact and lasting results.

⁴ Edwards, Michael, Salava Ibrahim, and David Hulme. 2011. “Civil Society and Poverty.” *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*. Oxford University Press ; Ibrahim, Solava and David Hulme. 2010. “Has Civil Society Helped the Poor? A Review of the Roles and Contributions of Civil Society to Poverty Reduction” GDI, The University of Manchester. Edwards, Michael, and Mark Warren. 2011. “Civil Society and Democracy.” *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*. Oxford University Press ; Diamond, Larry. 1994. “Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation.” *Journal of Democracy* 5 (3): 4-17.

Donors should work with local civil society groups as partners in order to achieve sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATION: Engage a diversity of local civil society on the strategic focus of U.S. investments and programmatic priorities – seek the inclusion of marginalized groups, women, and girls. When designing development projects, USAID should involve civil society organizations across the spectrum of functions and representing a wide variety of constituencies. Already, USAID’s guidance for Country Development Cooperation Strategies, its program cycle operational policy, and its new Acquisitions and Assistance Strategy all encourage active participation and engagement with local stakeholders, governments, and citizens in strategy development and program identification and design. USAID strategy and program teams should ensure that the guidance is implemented in practice and ensure local consultation includes marginalized people.

RECOMMENDATION: To ensure missions implement agency operational guidance that encourages engagement with local stakeholders, they should be required to document and report on their local consultative processes. USAID has implemented some measures encouraging local input, but these guidelines are typically framed as recommendations without requirements to meet quality standards for civil society engagement. U.S. development agencies should commit to local consultation in every instance and take specific measures to ensure sustainable results.

2. Strengthen and protect civic space.

For civil society to effectively provide public services, mobilize constituents, hold the government to account, educate populations, and advocate for change, it needs a political, policy, financing, regulatory, cultural, and legal environment that allows it to fulfill those roles. Burdensome legal restrictions, corruption, financing restrictions, and a disregard for civil and political rights are just some of the obstacles to civic space. Excluded and marginalized groups can face even more severe challenges. As USAID has noted in its Policy Framework, global trends point to an alarming closure of civic space as many countries experience a weakening of democratic institutions and a resurgence of authoritarianism.⁵ A lack of civic space can exacerbate state fragility, limit the effectiveness of humanitarian responses, diminish access to essential services, increase the potential for human rights violations, and inhibit development progress.

RECOMMENDATION: Invest in programming that strengthens and protects civic space, including through bilateral interventions and multilateral institutions. USAID should work with partner countries to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society at all levels. These efforts should extend beyond bilateral interventions to include clear commitments by UN agencies and other multilateral institutions.

⁵ USAID Policy Framework, <https://www.usaid.gov/policyframework/documents/1870/usaaid-policy-framework>

RECOMMENDATION: Identify opportunities for collaboration with other US government agencies to ensure a coordinated response to closing civic space. USAID’s civil society engagement strategy should identify points of engagement with the State Department, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Department of Defense, and other agencies active in the countries in which USAID operates. As such, the strategy should highlight opportunities to leverage diplomatic tools and coordinate with security assistance. Foreign aid is an important tool for strengthening the enabling environment of civil society and addressing the challenges of closing civic space; combining those efforts with other tools in the US foreign policy tool box will improve the likelihood of agencies working in a coordinated fashion, thereby increasing impact.

3. Invest in local civil society actors.

USAID should invest in local civil society actors, including marginalized groups, to increase their operational capacity and elevate their profile in-country. Core support—in addition to project-based partnerships—is vital to building effective civil society institutions. Investments should be tailored to support the specific goals, objectives, and priorities of each civil society group. Support may include helping build risk preparedness and strengthening advocacy, analysis, budgeting, and management functions, depending on local context and needs.

RECOMMENDATION: Expand Local Works and other existing initiatives focused on locally-led development, which support the leadership of local civil society actors in development efforts. USAID often funds support for local civil society through its standard development programming, but it has several other initiatives focused directly on empowering local participation in development. Under USAID’s Local Works, missions compete for five-year, flexible funds to advance locally-driven and citizen-led efforts. Other initiatives support cooperative business and systems or research on locally-led development. Yet, all of these efforts are relatively small in scope with limited funding and reach. USAID should expand Local Works and other initiatives focused squarely on locally-led development. Broadly, USAID should invest in holistic capacity strengthening and the transfer of power to local actors for effective and sustainable implementation.⁶

RECOMMENDATION: Focus assessment and evaluation on locally-identified measures of success. In addition to being focused on locally-led development, USAID initiatives should be accompanied by a strong learning agenda and utilization of locally-developed metrics for assessment and evaluation. The best judge of success and effectiveness of programs should be the beneficiaries of those programs.

RECOMMENDATION: Expand the New Partnership Initiative and increase the number of direct funding partnerships with local civil society actors to shift power and resources to local entities. USAID’s local partnership efforts tend to focus on capacity development instead of

⁶ www.powerofownership.org

realizing the value in shifting power and authority to local change agents. When USAID directly partners with local civil society organizations to design and implement aid-funded projects, those organizations are better able to set USAID's priorities, implement USAID projects, and co-resource USAID's programs.⁷ Stronger local ownership allows for context specific approaches that are sometimes more sustainable because they are better able to tap into and strengthen the existing local systems and respond to local needs. With this ownership in mind, the goal of increasing direct procurement to local institutions should be supported and expanded along with stronger ways to measure ownership. (See Save the Children and Oxfam America's Local Engagement Assessment Framework⁸.) To realize more local ownership, USAID should continue to provide resources in a way that allows civil society organizations to act in an independent manner, including increased overhead support and pooled funding. USAID has begun to take important steps, including the New Partnerships Initiative. Additionally, PEPFAR has set an ambitious goal that by 2020 its main implementing agencies, including USAID, will seek to direct 70% of funds to programs implemented by local partners.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop guidelines on capacity development for a more vibrant and diverse civil society. USAID's promise to put local partner capacity and performance back at the center of its approaches is welcome. Many existing capacity development programs lack a coherent strategy on working locally. This is especially true in nations whose institutions have collapsed as a result of conflict or in countries where human and financial resources are limited. Emphasis should be placed on hearing the perspectives of local communities on how they define and measure capacity development success. A more consistent, strategic approach is warranted, along with a strong capacity building learning agenda. Targeting specific types of organizations, including women's rights organizations, should also be considered. In the past, the agency's commitment to partnering locally has ebbed and flowed with mixed emphasis on—and understanding of—whether and in what circumstances local partnerships actually build organizational capacity. Indirect partnerships (i.e. when international implementing partners subcontract to local civil society organizations for some or much of the work) provide another option to building capacity. While the goal of increasing direct procurement to local institutions should be supported and expanded, when it comes to building local organization capacity, the agency should determine the best type of relationship (prime vs. sub) jointly with the local entity, considering the requirements of the program.

⁷ <http://modernizeaid.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Metrics-for-Implementing-Country-Ownership.pdf>

⁸ www.powerofownership.org

RECOMMENDATION: Assess the strength and sustainability of local civil society and civic space as part of any aid transition and explore ways to mitigate any transition-related impact. As countries move forward on their journey towards more independence and transition away from traditional development assistance, they will need support in organizational development and fundraising. Funding gaps can threaten their sustainability. The U.S. government should evaluate civil society needs and civic space, at all levels, and explore ways to ease the funding transition, including, potentially, by leveraging philanthropic resources.

4. Ensure an equitable and inclusive approach across all elements of a civil society strategy to ensure the empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups, including women and girls.

Inequality within societies is a drag on economic growth and can cause or exacerbate conflict and instability.⁹ To foster sustainable, long-term stability and development, donors should prioritize the inclusion of civil society actors who represent the most marginalized groups in society, including women, girls, refugees, migrants, and religious or ethnic minorities.¹⁰ These more vulnerable individuals may have less capacity and more limited access to civic space than majority groups or the elite. Civil society can play an important role in advocating for these groups and defending human rights, and this will help address inequalities and create a more inclusive economy and society.

RECOMMENDATION: Engage in partnerships with and get feedback from local civil society actors who represent marginalized groups. It is important to work with and get feedback from civil society organizations representing marginalized groups since they might have less access to traditional power channels or the public arena. It is necessary to hear all people's voices, particularly those in society who have traditionally been excluded or pushed to the margins.

RECOMMENDATION: Strengthen gender and social analysis throughout all programs, policies, and procedures, and integrate findings into USAID's work. USAID's gender policy requires missions to do gender analysis and gender mainstreaming throughout its programs. These analyses should advance USAID's learning agenda to inform investments in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

RECOMMENDATION: Continue to invest in disaggregated data by age, sex, ethnicity, income, and other factors. USAID has begun this important work but should make even more significant investments in data disaggregation to determine the gaps in progress especially among vulnerable groups, like women and girls. USAID should ensure that efforts to gather gender data are strategic, coordinated, and public and they know where and how to invest for even greater impact.

⁹ "Growth That Reaches Everyone: Facts, Factors, Tools," IMFBlog, <https://blogs.imf.org/2017/09/20/growth-that-reaches-everyone-facts-factors-tools/>

¹⁰ <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195398571.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195398571-e-31>