

Ten Years of Implementing the Local Systems Framework

usaidlearninglab.org • 5 mins

Jan 6th

In 2014, USAID introduced a groundbreaking approach to international development known as the [Local Systems Framework](#) (LSF). It emphasized the crucial role of strengthening and working with local systems to achieve sustainable development outcomes. USAID defines a “local system” as the interconnected set of actors, elements, relationships, rules, and resources that jointly produce and sustain a particular outcome. When these factors jointly produce an outcome, they are “local” to it. As outcomes may occur at many levels, “local systems” can be national, regional, or community-wide in scope. The LSF underscored the importance of thinking about the system as a whole (rather than individual actors or relationships in isolation) and strengthening a durable and adaptable local system that can withstand shocks and respond to changing circumstances. 🗨️ It advocated for development programming that is locally owned, led, and sustained, ensuring that development achievements are not merely attained but also endure over time.

In 2024, USAID undertook an extensive consultation process to revisit the LSF’s principles and update our approach to integrating systems practice into all of our work. What we learned is reflected in our new [Local Systems Position Paper](#), which officially replaced the LSF as a USAID policy document in October 2024. As we celebrate the release of this new position paper, we also wanted to celebrate the incredible

progress made over the last ten years for each of the seven recommendations set forth in the LSF’s “way forward.”

In this blog series, we will explore one or two recommendations each week, with some forward-looking thoughts in our final post. We invite you to share each blog post and its resources with your networks and share any reactions with us at LSPP@usaid.gov.

Spread Systems Thinking

The first recommendation in the LSF was to “spread systems thinking” by facilitating the dissemination of tools, techniques, and good practices. Following the launch of the LSF, USAID established an internal Local Systems Community of Practice that has since grown to include more than 400 staff from across the Agency. The community has hosted more than 160 in-person, hybrid, and virtual gatherings, covering a range of topics related to systems thinking and practice. In addition, as new policies were developed and released over the last ten years, many have embedded systems practice into their frameworks and approaches, including the [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#); the [Global Food Security Strategy](#); the new [Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Policy](#); the [Youth in Development Policy](#); the [USAID Climate Strategy](#); the [USAID Education Policy](#); and more. Finally, we’ve also seen many USAID Missions adopting a systems approach to their Country Development Cooperation Strategies, including most notably: [USAID/Kenya \(2020-2025\)](#), which places a strong emphasis on root causes and the interconnectedness of development challenges, and has an entire development objective (DO1) focused on systems; [USAID/Dominican Republic \(2020-2025\)](#), which uses a cross-cutting systems thinking approach to understand development challenges in the context of the network of stakeholders, influences, and incentives within which they occur, and uses systems practice as the foundation for capacity strengthening under IR 3.2; [USAID/Indonesia \(2020-2025\)](#), which took a systems approach to develop the strategy, using political economy

analysis to more deeply understand the local systems in eight focus provinces, elevating governance as a key cross-cutting issue that was foundational for success in all other DOs / sectors; and [USAID/Jordan \(2020-2025\)](#), which places a strong emphasis on the U.S. Government's relationship with the Government of Jordan and the importance of government-to-government (G2G) assistance for sustainability.

Embed Systems Thinking and Local Systems into the Program Cycle

The second recommendation in the LSF was to “embed systems thinking and local systems into the Program Cycle.” In 2016, when USAID's Automated Directives System (ADS) Chapter 201 was revised, one of the updates included adding a new principle to “Promote Sustainability through Local Ownership and Strengthening Local Systems,” emphasizing the importance of local systems and systems thinking. The May 2024 update to ADS 201 places significant emphasis on the fundamental importance of local systems and their inextricable connection to sustainability. This concept permeates the entirety of the document, underscoring the critical role of local leadership for achieving sustainable development objectives.

Shortly after the LSF was released in 2014, USAID developed the 5Rs Framework, a simple and practical tool to promote good systems practice by analyzing five key dimensions of systems: *Results, Roles, Relationships, Rules, and Resources* (see graphic below). From 2018 to 2023, the USAID/Honduras Transforming Market Systems (TMS) Activity used the 5Rs to foster competitive, resilient, and inclusive market systems that provide increased economic opportunities for poor, marginalized Hondurans and reduced incentives for migration. Their 5Rs analysis informed their theory of change by explicitly linking system changes to the 5Rs and identifying leverage points in the system where interventions could have a broader and more sustained impact. Throughout the program, the framework served as a communications

tool to facilitate a shared understanding of the system among stakeholders. USAID is currently updating the 5Rs to align with the Local Systems Position Paper and provide guidance for staff and partners on applying the framework at multiple stages of USAID's Program Cycle.

Many of USAID's Local Works programs also integrate systems practice into their design and implementation. For example:

- In 2018, USAID/North Macedonia's Local Works team conducted an [organizational network analysis](#) to provide insight into North Macedonia's development landscape by mapping key development actors and their networks. This exercise was conducted by LINC and supported by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC). The analysis looked at the dynamics, relationships, and levels of influence between local system actors and identified the most salient organizations with meaningful ties to other actors. The results informed the Local Works interventions to strengthen the capacity of local networks, and highlighted the role to be played by larger, well-established organizations, particularly those in the civil society development sector. These recognized leaders can be mobilized to support a more unified vision of locally led development that includes and advances a wider range of actors and groups.
- USAID/Burma used the "Whole System in the Room (WSR)" approach to address the complex issue of the [heroin epidemic in Kachin State](#), where local people estimated there is one drug user in every household. In 2019, the USAID team used WSR to bring together a diverse group of more than 100 stakeholders – from heroin users and their families, to government officials, to religious groups and CSOs – to build common ground and develop joint action plans to address the problem. The WSR methodology

requires organizers to do significant work over several months to understand a system from the perspective of local actors, map the system, and integrate the system through the WSR workshop. Following the workshop, USAID/Burma formed a local advisory committee and supported the resulting local priorities through direct local awards.

Stay tuned for the next blogpost in this series, which will be all about how we added to the ways we can support local systems and how we sharpened our risk management practices!