The Local Capacity Strengthening Policy was adopted in 2022 to guide USAID in making strategic and intentional decisions about why and how to invest in the capacity of local actors based on a shared understanding of the principles for effective local capacity strengthening.

Development Outcomes

USAID Mexico implemented the Civil Society Activity (CSA) to improve institutional capacities of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mexico to more effectively address issues related to crime and violence prevention, legal justice reform, and human rights protection. The approach emphasized collaboration and respect for local actors and resulted in creating more mobilized and engaged local coalitions who worked to carry on the efforts after the award period.

Photo: USAID/Mexico CSA; Social impact

Key to Success: CSA viewed each CSO as interdependent members of a complex ecosystem contributing to public justice. Therefore, it designed approaches that included local stakeholders and also empowered CSOs to take on leadership roles and responsibilities, while supporting them with a variety of tailored resources and programs.

Local Capacity Strengthening Principles Exemplified in the Case Study

1

Start with the local system
CSA's project designers worked to understand Mexico's complex and dynamic government and civil society systems and their capacities, as well as learned how the local justice systems functioned.

2

Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches
CSA recognized that their stakeholders would benefit from different types of support. As a result, it provided grants, legal assistance, on-site coaching, institutional strengthening, and other customized support.

3

Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners
CSA facilitated a participatory process in which member organizations collaborated on defining common goals and objectives from the planning stage.

4

Align capacity strengthening with local priorities
CSA established a Learning Community for local CSOs and local stakeholders to collaborate on the most effective methods and performance improvement targets to set.

5

Appreciate and build on local capacities
The Learning Communities recognized the existing talents and experience of each member and organization by opening the process to collaboration. This increased the member CSOs' understanding of the local systems and strengthened their roles within it.

7

Practice mutuality with local actors
CSA spent considerable time with leadership and staff of each CSO to develop its adaptive, agile management style. Making time for these additional discussions showed respect for each partner organization's opinion and values and successfully laid the foundation for mutuality in CSA's capacity development efforts.

Photo: USAID/Mexico CSA; Social impact

Identifying, supporting, and empowering local networks were key to building robust, sustainable coalitions.

Amid the backdrop of several challenges, including migration and heightened restrictions on press freedoms and civil society work, USAID Mexico implemented the Civil Society Activity (CSA) to improve the capacities of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mexico to more effectively address issues related to crime and violence prevention, legal justice reform, and human rights protection. Social Impact Inc. implemented CSA in partnership with Fundación Appleseed, which provided the experience and support of a Mexican pro bono network to advance the legal compliance of CSOs.

From the outset, CSA viewed CSOs as one of many interconnected sets of actors within a system that included the government, civil society, the private sector, universities, individual citizens, and others. Therefore, a main component of CSA was the creation of "Learning Communities" that brought together CSOs and stakeholders to reinforce existing relationships, establish new ones, and build collaborative alliances within and across local communities.

Learning Community practices included:

- Shifting the power dynamics by enabling CSOs to more easily set the agenda

- Purposeful co-design and co-facilitation with CSOs to optimize collaboration

- Joint inquiry and evidence-based collaboration

- Joint site visits to member CSO activities

- Developing alliances based on geographic characteristics and constraints

- Fostering connections with experts in fundraising and alliance building

- Providing access to media and communications expertise

- Periodic reevaluation and adaptation.

Another approach was to offer three types of support:

- **Grants:** CSA awarded grants to CSOs to help them develop self-defined thematic projects and capacity development initiatives;

- **Legal Assistance:** Through a network of Mexican pro-bono law firms, CSA provided technical support to improve legal compliance in areas of corporate, fiscal, and labor law, money laundering, and data privacy;

- **Institutional Strengthening:** CSA supported CSOs to develop their capacities in three ways—improving internal capacities, strengthening abilities to create and sustain strategic alliances, and solidifying their positions within their local systems.

CSA's practices enabled collaboration and engagement among local actors, facilitated feedback and exchange about the crime and justice issues in question, and created alliances among previously disconnected CSOs.

For instance, the new coalitions of CSOs that came out of the Learning Communities worked together to share methodologies, ideas, resources, and data which enabled them to develop stronger arguments to promote change in the criminal justice system. In parallel, CSOs established new communication channels between public authorities and the civil society sector. This unprecedented communication—by groups that had rarely collaborated in the past—allowed government authorities to consider and use relevant information produced by CSOs and work more effectively with the target populations.

In another case, CSOs worked together to improve their methodologies in the prevention of secondary and tertiary violence in Mexico, with a specific focus on youth. Learning Community members identified common challenges they faced related to the promotion and protection of human rights, and opened new communication channels to promote collaboration, including online forums and digital platforms. In parallel, members of a Learning Community formed a group to prevent violence against women in the state of Sonora. Their project aimed to socialize how violence affects women and provided examples to involve the public and private sectors within the local system to prevent it. Similarly, another set of Learning Community members structured a project in Coahuila that contributed to peace-building efforts through new alliances between public institutions and the civil society sector.

This multifaceted, collaborative approach transformed what could have been a donor-driven model to one based on meaningful consultation and collaboration with participant CSOs during each step of the process. It exemplifies several of the principles in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy.

Photo: USAID/Mexico CSA; Social impact

Principle 1: Start with the local system

CSA's project designers worked to understand Mexico's complex and dynamic government and civil society systems and their capacities, and learned how the local systems functioned.

Principle 2: Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches

CSA recognized that their stakeholders would benefit from different types of support. As a result, it offered grants, legal assistance, and institutional strengthening rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Also, it offered on site-coaching and CSO-specific technical assistance. CSA deliberately tailored its capacity strengthening approaches for each partner CSOs' individual needs and contexts, and used a holistic approach in addressing these needs.

Principle 3: Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners

CSA initiated each Learning Community event by facilitating a participatory process in which member organizations collaborated on defining common goals and objectives from the planning stage. Encouraging local ownership, and latert leadership, of this model was intended to foster an environment where CSOs could gain experience in jointly identifying common interests and recognizing the value of one another's contributions to the legal and justice system. At the same time, the Learning Communities created a framework to measure improvement against goals that had been defined collaboratively.

Principle 4: Align capacity strengthening with local priorities

CSA's Learning Community was used to facilitate collaboration with local CSOs and other stakeholders on the most effective methods and performance improvement targets to set.

Principle 5: Appreciate and build on local capacities

The Learning Communities recognized the existing talents and experience of each member and organization by opening the process to collaboration. For instance, it co-developed agendas and goals for Learning Community meetings with CSO partners to emphasize the value of CSO alliances. This increased the member CSOs' understanding of the local systems, and strengthened their roles within it.

Principle 7: Practice mutuality with local actors

CSA found that customization required agile, adaptive management. This meant spending more time with leadership and staff in each CSO. Making time for these additional discussions showed respect for each partner organization's opinion and values, and successfully laid the foundation for mutuality in CSA's capacity development efforts. Moreover, CSA's approach to facilitation of Learning Community events was important to promote inclusive and substantive participation by individuals from different levels in each organization. CSA also dedicated time, resources, and expertise to designing facilitation methodologies to encourage participatory and productive meetings, and selected rotating facilitators to provide different staff with these opportunities.

Results

CSA strengthened the capacities of forty-five organizations working with human rights, crime prevention, and justice reform in Mexico between 2016 and 2020. From 2016-2020, CSA Tier 3's Learning Community Group, composed of eight local leaders from the states of Sonora and Coahuila, participated in a Colombia study tour to learn from the Colombian peace-building experience. After traveling to Colombia, Tier 3's Study Tour Learning Community structured a collaborative project to prevent violence in Sonora and Coahuila, with CSOs, the government, and other sectors working together within a newly formed alliance to share information and best practices to prevent violence and protect the most vulnerable groups in these two Mexican states.

Positive outcomes were also reported for the following key issues:

* **Innovation in the Criminal Justice System:** Seven Tier 1 CSOs shared methodologies and ideas to better understand the criminal justice system in Mexico and shared resources, such as key contact information, international best practices, and human rights guidelines to work with local authorities. Tier 2's CSOs that worked to protect human rights shared data on sensitive issues, which enabled them to compare and contrast figures, identify inconsistencies in national and regional data, and develop stronger arguments to promote change in the criminal justice system. Tier 3's members of the Learning Community established new communication channels between public authorities and the civil society sector. This unprecedented communication by groups that had rarely collaborated in the past allowed government authorities to consider and use relevant information produced by CSOs and work more effectively with the target populations.

* **Secondary and Tertiary Violence Prevention:** Four Tier 1 CSOs worked together to improve their methodologies in the prevention of secondary and tertiary violence in Mexico, with a specific focus on youth. Tier 2 Learning Community members identified common challenges they faced related to the promotion and protection of human rights, and opened new communication channels to promote collaboration, including online forums and digital platforms. Three members of the Tier 3 Learning Community formed a group to prevent violence against women in the state of Sonora. Their project aimed to socialize how violence affects women and provided examples to involve the public and private sectors within the local system to prevent it. Similarly, four members of the Learning Community structured a project in Coahuila that contributed to peace-building efforts through new alliances between public institutions and the civil society sector.

* **Technology for Social Change:** Three Tier 1 organizations designed programs that used technology to prevent violence and to promote social change. The CSOs improved their use of technology such as apps or websites and shared best practices with each other to be more effective.

Photo: USAID/Mexico CSA; Social impact

Conclusion

CSA's work expanded the convening power of Mexican CSOs and created an enabling environment for CSO capacity strengthening and advocacy. CSA's system-focused, appreciative, and participatory approaches contributed significantly to the improved advocacy capacity of Mexican partner CSOs, enabling them to work together to influence government policy and program development. This improved the quality of public discourse and support for criminal justice reform and human rights protection in Mexico and has strengthened civil society. Over time, participating organizations took more interest in defining Learning Communities' agendas and activities and now take the lead to consolidate new collaborations, develop new ways to share ideas and resources, and celebrate the aggregated value of working as a network. CSA's successes with the establishment and growth of the Learning Communities exemplify an approach grounded in the principles of effective local capacity strengthening, as outlined in USAID's new Local Capacity Strengthening Policy.

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