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Local Capacity Strengthening Policy

UKRAINE CASE STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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

The Ukraine National Initiatives to Enhance Reforms (UNITER) sponsored by USAID and managed by Pact with local actors initiated an inclusive, market-driven approach to the provision of capacity strengthening in Ukraine, benefiting hundreds of local civil society organizations (CSOs) while positioning a local organization, ISAR Ednannia, to assume ongoing management of a capacity strengthening marketplace that has continued to service the CSO sector for nearly a decade.



Photo: Pact/UNITER

Key to Success: USAID/Ukraine approached capacity strengthening with a focus on prioritizing the needs and preferences of local actors for capacity strengthening, while connecting them with local and international service providers. This included creating a Capacity Development Marketplace, providing targeted sub-grants to enhance the capacity of CSOs and local providers, and including local stakeholders in the measurement process.

Local Capacity Strengthening Principles Exemplified in the Case Study



Start with the local system

The project was designed around an understanding of Ukraine's complex and dynamic government and civil society systems and their capacities and challenges. UNITER and subsequent awards to the local organization ISAR Ednannia focused on building relationships with local CSOs, sharing information, coordinating strategies, identifying common interests, and aligning capacity strengthening efforts towards achieving goals.



Align capacity strengthening with local priorities

UNITER created the Capacity Development Marketplace, an example of how critical programming decisions can be grounded in the aspirations and goals of local actors. USAID/Ukraine listened to the voices of a broad range of individuals, including traditionally underrepresented groups, and strengthened diverse coalitions around common areas of interest.



Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches

UNITER's small grants provided technical assistance and financial support that enabled CSOs to receive highly technical resources to try new approaches to advocacy on national and local issues, and access new forms of CSO capacity strengthening training, including new media skills, to carry out and sustain advocacy campaigns.



Appreciate and build on existing capacities

During program planning, implementation, and engagement, UNITER prompted local stakeholders to envision ways to address their own organizational challenges and collectively designed customized resources and solutions.



Plan for and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners

UNITER engaged local stakeholders in the design and implementation with diagnostic surveys. This allowed local networks to achieve the results they defined for themselves. Also, the process created and reinforced buy-in and local ownership.



Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our capacity strengthening

Through stakeholder and partner CSOs surveys, UNITER identified and acknowledged the risk of exacerbating cross-regional social, political, and cultural differences. These actions helped mitigate regional tensions and build partnerships based on trust and mutuality.

For more information on incorporating the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy into your work, visit pages.usaid.gov/localcapacitystrengthening for more resources or contact lcspolicycomments@usaid.gov.



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Case Study: Ukraine National Initiatives to Enhance Reforms (UNITER) Embodied the Approach and Principles of USAID's New Local Capacity Strengthening Policy



Photo: ISAR Ednannia

A program in Ukraine demonstrated how an inclusive, flexible approach to Local Capacity Strengthening mobilized local efforts, magnified positive impact, and created a framework for sustainable progress.

In the turbulent years before the current war in Ukraine, USAID issued an award to Pact and local actors to enhance civil society development. The program, Ukraine National Initiatives to Enhance Reforms (UNITER), embraced a unique approach that recognized the importance of connections, communication, social capital, and best-fit approaches. This included:

- **Establishing the Capacity Development Marketplace.** The marketplace enabled CSOs and other entities to sell and purchase capacity-related services or products and continues to operate as an ongoing model for innovative approaches to capacity strengthening.
- **Providing support for sub-grantee partners.** UNITER supported sub-grantee partners' individual capacity development plans by awarding additional funds to their current grants or by providing vouchers to use through the Capacity Development Marketplace.
- **Providing sub-grants for local advocacy.** UNITER issued sub-grants to local organizations, bolstering grassroots efforts.
- **Providing sub-grants for national advocacy.** UNITER also boosted the efficacy of coalition efforts from national and local level organizations to achieve results on the national level, including affecting regulatory and public policy.
- **Designing customized technical resources for partners.** UNITER supported Graduation Roadmaps for two of its key partners, Ukrainian Centre for Independent Political Research (UCIPR) and Initiative for Social Action and Renewal (ISAR) Ednannia. These helped the organizations become audit-ready, which helped the NGOs better understand needs, create strategies for sustainable change, and address critical challenges. Ultimately, ISAR Ednannia took over management of the Capacity Development Marketplace, and continues to run it today.
- **Mentoring sub-grantee partners.** UNITER staff formed mentoring teams and provided tailor-made coaching and mentoring to sub-grantee partners. Mentoring contributed to improved capacity to advocate, engage with government officials, informed Civil Society Organizations' requests for applications for funding, and increased buy-in from partners and stakeholders.

- **Leveraging Pact’s Diagnostic Tool, Organizational Network Analysis (ONA).** This tool was designed to “expand possibilities and empower a network to become stronger, as opposed to a prescriptive intervention with a set of uniform, predictable outcomes,” and to improve program impact and sustainability. The results of ONA (including maps and network metrics) enabled network members to visualize, analyze, monitor, and better understand patterns of collaboration and resource and information flows between individuals and organizations.

Since local actors were partners in identifying the priorities, and valuing and owning the change process, UNITER helped to ensure that USAID’s investments were more likely to result in sustainable outcomes.



Photo: ISAR Ednannia

UNITER’s overall approach aligns with the spirit of USAID’s new Local Capacity Strengthening Policy. In particular, it demonstrates Principle 1: Start with the local system, Principle 2: Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches, Principle 3: Plan and measure performance improvement in collaboration with local partners, Principle 4: Align capacity strengthening with local priorities, Principle 5: Appreciate and build on existing capacities, and Principle 6: Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our capacity strengthening.

Principle 1: Start with the local system

Working within the local system was ingrained in UNITER's original objectives. The project was designed with an understanding of Ukraine's complex and dynamic government and civil society systems and their capacities and challenges. UNITER's systems methods were based on building relationships, information sharing, coordinating strategies, identification of common collaborative agendas, and the alignment of efforts towards achieving social change goals. This approach informed a course of action and, ultimately, was instrumental in its success in creating a framework for sustainable progress.

Principle 2: Strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches

USAID/Ukraine recognized that capacity strengthening can come in many different forms. For instance, UNITER's small grants provided technical assistance and financial support that enabled CSOs to receive highly technical resources to try new approaches to advocacy on national and local issues, and access new forms of CSO capacity strengthening training, including new media skills to carry out and sustain advocacy campaigns.

UNITER also helped identify and verify service providers and provided vouchers to CSOs and then allowed CSOs to purchase services from the providers. This process bolstered the capacity of both the CSOs and service providers while also supporting and safeguarding the overall program objectives.

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

The participatory nature of Pact's ONA tool contributed to its success. Preliminary engagement in the design and implementation of surveys meant that when the network maps were generated, local stakeholders were more interested, inquisitive, and involved in devising ways to improve the network. The discussion among network members that happened during participatory feedback and action planning helped to draw out valuable qualitative observations about the networks and formed the basis of action plans that increased the network's effectiveness and strength.

Using ONA, UNITER was able to facilitate the local networks' abilities to achieve the results they defined for themselves. And, because UNITER included early engagement of all network members in designing and implementing the survey used to gather data for ONA, the process created and reinforced buy-in and local ownership.

Principle 4: Align capacity strengthening with local priorities

The Capacity Development Marketplace is a strong example of alignment with the LCS Policy's Principle 4, which says that decisions about which capacities to strengthen, which approaches can be most effective, and what performance improvement targets to set must be grounded in the aspirations and goals of local actors.

As noted by one of the partners in this coalition, "for the first-time key organizations on the national level decided to collaborate to reach common goals without additional financial incentives from donors."

Principle 4 also emphasizes that no programming decisions about capacity strengthening should be decided without the active participation of members of the group, including those from vulnerable groups who will be affected by the programming. UNITER listened to the voices of a broad range of CSOs, including traditionally underrepresented groups such as internally displaced persons, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ individuals and supporting CSOs—as well as individuals not affiliated with CSOs. UNITER strengthened diverse coalitions around common areas of interest to scale up collective action.

One outcome was that in 2010 UNITER added HIV technical capacity strengthening resources to existing organizational development services in the Marketplace, which were also open to public sector institutions and facilities at national and district levels.

Principle 5: Appreciate and build on existing capacities

During program planning, implementation, and engagement, UNITER embraced an asset-based approach that supported local CSOs and individual stakeholders in identifying their own strengths and deficiencies and envisioning ways to address their organizational challenges. Based on leadership, management, advocacy capacity, financing, etc., CSOs created individual capacity strengthening plans and applied for sub-grant funds through the Marketplace to contract for Ukrainian capacity strengthening expertise. Each capacity strengthening plan was tailored to the strengths and needs identified by each CSO.

Notably, UNITER strengthened the capacity of a national CSO, ISAR Ednannia, which USAID supported to take over management of the Marketplace. The Marketplace has operated independently since 2012 with more than 1,000 service providers and 2,000 CSOs regularly using it as a platform for capacity strengthening services. On May 13, 2022, for example, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, ISAR Ednannia conducted a refresher webinar on the sub-grant program on organizational capacity strengthening, which brought together more than 130 participants. ISAR Ednannia has expanded its technical activities and reach, and now works directly with foreign donors. Currently, ISAR Ednannia is a direct recipient of a USAID award which funds the Capacity Development Marketplace, along with other donor support.

Principle 6: Be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our capacity strengthening

UNITER demonstrated Principle 6 by incorporating mindfulness of potential unintended consequences into the program's early design and implementation. Through stakeholder and partner CSOs surveys, implementors heard that sub-national grant giving needed to acknowledge cross-regional, social, political, and cultural differences. These deliberations informed actions—such as helping to balance power asymmetries in local capacity strengthening programming, primarily among Ukrainian government officials and CSOs—which helped build partnerships based on trust and mutuality.

The resulting coalition building has had a large influence on civil society activities and focused attention on legislative change. New laws have addressed several previous problems for civil society actors, such as burdensome CSO registration and a ban on CSO financial activity.

Conclusion

USAID/Ukraine’s approach through UNITER and follow-on awards with ISAR Ednannia contributed significantly to the enhanced advocacy capacity of Ukrainian partner CSOs, enabling them to work together to influence government policy and legislative development. Acknowledging that efforts to improve local capacities depend on local strengths and needs, and are practiced in distinct ways across sectors, contexts, and regions, UNITER fulfilled its objectives and created a sustainable model that local actors benefit from today. This case study can serve as an example to USAID staff, partners, and other stakeholders of an intentional and strategic approach to designing, resourcing, implementing, and adaptively managing effective capacity strengthening programming.

References

- [Performance Evaluation of the Ukraine National Initiatives to Enhance Reforms \(UNITER\) \(2014\)](#)
- [Ukraine National Initiatives to Enhance Reforms \(UNITER\) Final Performance Report \(2016\)](#)
- [Pact’s Network Strengthening Toolkit, Module 3, Network Analysis, Part II \(2019\)](#)
- [ISAR Ednannia Annual Report 2019](#)
- USAID Local Capacity Strengthening Policy (2022)



Photo: ISAR Ednannia