



USAID
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UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

POLICY ON LOCALLY LED HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

JULY 2024



COVER (clockwise from the top): With USAID/BHA funding, Shafak Organization, a local Syrian organization, supports women affected by war to start new livelihoods and provide for their families. *Photo courtesy of Shafak Organization* • The Water Committee Chairwoman in Naagan Town, Kenya checks the community-managed water source, which was planned by the community and upgraded with support from the USAID/BHA-funded I-CREATE project. *Photo courtesy of Concern Worldwide US* • USAID/BHA local partner Fedecovera, R.L. engages its network of small producer cooperatives and their communities in Guatemala to reduce disaster risk and recover from crises, including through support to women-led savings and loans groups. *Photo courtesy of Fedecovera, R.L.* • USAID/BHA local partner Vietnam Red Cross Society (VNRC) supports a network of over 60 provincial chapters across Vietnam to enhance their emergency preparedness and response capacities to save lives in disasters. *Photo courtesy of VNRC*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance worldwide is at a historical high due to cascading crises and the effects of global climate change. Each crisis is unique, shaped by local factors, and demands a humanitarian response that is accountable, effective, and efficient—tailored to the unique needs of the affected groups. Based on years of experience working with local groups, USAID knows local organizations and communities closest to the crisis are well placed to identify needs, inform response priorities, and evaluate and adjust programs.

Recognizing the need to increase local actors' leadership of priority setting, project design, implementation, and measuring results, and as a central component of the Agency's strong commitment to advancing localization, in 2021 USAID embarked on an Agency-wide set of internal reforms toward the following goals: 1) channel at least 25 percent of funding directly to local actors by 2025¹ and 2) ensure that at least 50 percent of activities are locally led by 2030.² These commitments have guided USAID in expanding partnerships with local actors, re-envisioning relationships with international organizations, and adapting how it carries out life saving work implemented through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA). These USAID efforts are informed by and contribute to international humanitarian reforms such as the Grand Bargain.³

To make these reforms specific to humanitarian assistance, USAID has prepared this Policy on Locally Led Humanitarian Assistance (LLHA) to address programs along the continuum that includes emergency response, early recovery, resilience, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities. While many of the same tenets guide both USAID's humanitarian assistance and development efforts, USAID has developed this policy with the specific vision of placing local communities at the center of humanitarian work and supporting a humanitarian system centered around local decisions and priorities that represent the voices of affected groups. By doing so, USAID can deliver the most accountable, effective, and efficient humanitarian assistance possible, while also building community resilience and managing disaster risks.

In addition, the dynamic demands of humanitarian operations present both challenges and opportunities, often distinct from development environments. The humanitarian mission itself; the crisis context; the need for rapid, often large-

1 Direct local funding is measured as a percentage of total development and humanitarian funds obligated in a given fiscal year, with the exclusion of partner government assistance, interagency agreements, personal service contracts, and PIO agreements. A significant portion of USAID/BHA funding is directed to PIOs and, per the Agency definition for direct local funding, is not included as part of the direct local funding calculation.

2 The Locally Led Programs Indicator measures the percentage of USAID-funded activities in which local partners and/or local communities lead development or humanitarian efforts, including through priority setting, design, partnership formation, implementation, and defining and measuring results, in a given fiscal year. The Locally Led Programs Indicator pertains to all USAID-funded programming, including funding directed to PIOs.

3 The [Grand Bargain](#) is an agreement, launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, between many donors and humanitarian organizations to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of humanitarian action, including by promoting local leadership; the U.S. government is a co-signatory.

scale responses; the unique and quickly deployable capacities necessary; and the structure of national and international humanitarian coordination mechanisms require discrete approaches for advancing local leadership, expanding local partnerships, and supporting local capacities. Furthermore, power dynamics, the use of international organizations as implementing partners who work with and through local organizations, and the need to share risk mitigation and management efforts among stakeholders within humanitarian operating environments are important considerations in these contexts.

The LLHA Policy is guided by four sets of principles. First and foremost, the LLHA Policy reaffirms the Agency's commitment to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Second, the principles of equity, inclusion, and accessibility mean that all parties to a partnership, including organizations representing new and nontraditional partners, contribute to and receive benefits from this partnership, as outlined in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy. Third, the principles of flexibility and context specificity mean that efforts to elevate and support local leadership will proceed differently according to numerous contextual factors. Finally, the Do No Harm principle means that USAID will seek to prevent and mitigate potential negative impacts of its actions on local partners and groups, including populations in vulnerable situations due to humanitarian emergencies.

The LLHA Policy identifies five goals in support of its vision. These goals include 1) increasing the accessibility and amount of funding to local humanitarian organizations; 2) strengthening USAID's ability to build humanitarian partnerships; 3) increasing capacity strengthening, capacity sharing, and mutual learning in humanitarian partnerships; 4) advocating for local humanitarian leadership; and 5) leveraging humanitarian diplomacy and policy leadership. As the Agency implements these reforms, USAID also commits to continual learning that will further the evidence base for locally led humanitarian assistance. By compiling and analyzing lessons learned across existing and former humanitarian partnerships, the Agency can adapt and improve how it achieves the vision set forth in the LLHA Policy.

As the world's single largest humanitarian donor, USAID seeks to use its position to collaborate with other donors and humanitarian organizations to accelerate these reform efforts. By working with other actors in the humanitarian sector, USAID can advance locally led humanitarian assistance and improve the lives of crisis-affected populations around the world.

INTRODUCTION

The number of complex and concurrent humanitarian crises in the world is consistently high, with climate change increasing the severity and frequency of natural hazards as well as exacerbating conflict due to the impact on resource availability. Funding for the humanitarian sector—as well as operational capacity to respond to these crises—is failing to keep pace. USAID is compelled by the humanitarian imperative—saving lives and alleviating human suffering—to respond to many of these crises, with USAID/BHA serving as the U.S. government (USG) lead federal coordinator for international disaster assistance. USAID’s humanitarian assistance rapidly reaches a diversity of people with unique needs, often at large scale in rapid-onset disasters and complex crisis contexts around the world. In the wake of a disaster or in a complex emergency such as armed conflict, USAID can rapidly deploy expert staff, utilize pre-positioned stockpiles of lifesaving supplies, and provide logistics and transportation services to reach affected areas with lifesaving assistance. USAID also engages and supports national and international humanitarian coordination mechanisms critical to organizing humanitarian action while working with other donors, the United Nations (UN), and other relevant humanitarian organizations to provide assistance based on humanitarian principles to those in need. In this dynamic humanitarian landscape, USAID actively and iteratively seeks new ways of working and collaborating with diverse actors to respond to unprecedented challenges.

Partnerships with local actors are vital to providing accountable, effective, and efficient humanitarian assistance, along with supporting early recovery, risk reduction, and community resilience. Local actors, including community groups and private sector entities, are often the first to respond to humanitarian crises and will likely remain in their communities during and after emergencies. Local actors have the knowledge, relationships, and cultural and political awareness to tailor and prioritize assistance on the ground. Local actors can often access affected populations faster than external groups and rely on pre-existing relationships that enable access to contested areas and hard-to-reach communities. Engaging diverse actors such as local producers, suppliers, and service providers to source goods and services to address humanitarian needs can create significant positive impact, both for affected populations and for local markets. Finally, based on years of experience, USAID recognizes that respecting self-determination and supporting the full participation of local actors—including faith-based organizations and those led by historically marginalized⁴ and vulnerable groups—in humanitarian contexts is a best practice that can lead to increased community access to and ownership of response outcomes.

USAID has invested in the leadership, operational, organizational, and technical capacities of local partners around the world for decades. These investments in enhancing local disaster preparedness and response capacities have created sustainable training programs and advanced emergency response systems in many countries. In addition, USAID has

⁴ Historically marginalized and underrepresented populations may include, but are not limited to, poor and ultra-poor households; women and girls, including those pregnant or lactating; persons with disabilities; persons with health conditions; refugees and other displaced persons; migrants; Indigenous Peoples and communities; children and their families; youth; older persons; religious minorities; ethnic and racial groups; people in lower castes; persons with unmet mental health needs; people of diverse economic class and political opinions; and LGBTQI+ people.

participated extensively in international humanitarian reform efforts, including the 2016 UN Secretary-General's World Humanitarian Summit and the resulting Grand Bargain agreement, which ultimately led actors across the international humanitarian system to embrace localization as a critical reform. This long experience now serves as a foundation on which to expand successful programs and initiate new ways of working together.

USAID recognizes the need to change not only how it programs, but also its requirements. This means streamlining and updating our policies, processes, and systems to make funding more accessible, equitable, and manageable, while also reducing administrative burdens. To this end, USAID is cultivating equitable and inclusive local partnerships and working to shift decisions to local leadership and capacities, where appropriate. This long-term but urgently important process of culture change includes identifying and acknowledging power imbalances; adjusting Agency consultative and programming efforts to ensure they target representative local entities; and actively documenting and learning from innovative, locally led humanitarian assistance programming to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of USAID's work.

To accelerate the process of shifting more resources to local communities, USAID is operationalizing locally led development and humanitarian assistance. Since 2021, USAID has issued its first [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#); updated its [Risk Appetite Statement](#); developed a new way of tracking how USAID elevates local leadership of its programming; supported advanced Agency learning to integrate localization into the program cycle; revised and released the Agency's [Acquisition and Assistance Strategy](#) to engage a more diverse set of partners; and launched [WorkWithUSAID.gov](#), an online portal that offers clear and accessible information in multiple languages about partnering with USAID. To make progress toward these aims, USAID initiated a series of internal behavior, policy, process, and system changes—referred to collectively as localization—to expand the Agency's ability to support significantly more locally led development and humanitarian assistance programs. As previously referenced, the Agency also set [targets](#) to channel at least 25 percent of funding directly to local actors by 2025 and take steps to ensure that at least 50 percent of activities are locally led by 2030. The 25 percent target is an Agency-wide goal, and internal targets vary across USAID Missions and Washington Operating Units.

As part of the Agency's approach to localization, USAID has developed this LLHA Policy to articulate discrete approaches for advancing localization in humanitarian contexts. The LLHA Policy vision and goals are the culmination of a two-year consultative process with a broad range of internal and external stakeholders, including intentional engagements with local actors and organizations providing humanitarian assistance.



USAID/BHA local partner East SOS evacuates vulnerable Ukrainians from the frontlines of the war and provides relocation assistance.

Photo courtesy of Charity Foundation East SOS

BACKGROUND

Localization in the Humanitarian Context

The demands of humanitarian operations present for USAID both challenges and opportunities, often distinct from development environments, as the Agency localizes its practices, processes, and systems in support of locally led humanitarian assistance:

- **Humanitarian Mission:** Humanitarian assistance is rooted in the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Principled humanitarian assistance prevents and alleviates suffering without bias or prejudice on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or background. In crisis contexts, adherence to these principles facilitates humanitarian actors' securing access to crisis-affected areas, determining needs, and gaining acceptance from and delivering assistance to the most vulnerable groups, as well as protecting the safety and security of local populations and relief staff. It is imperative that USAID's humanitarian partners, including local and national organizations engaged in humanitarian responses, provide assistance in line with humanitarian principles.
- **Speed and Scale of Response:** Rapid-onset emergencies and evolving needs within ongoing crises require the Agency and its partners to respond rapidly, efficiently, and often at large scale to meet humanitarian needs in a principled manner. While building new funding partnerships during a crisis can be challenging, it is important that USAID integrates local voices and efforts into analyses and engages with local organizations and affected communities in response planning. Investments in disaster preparedness before a crisis occurs can help identify and support a diversity of local actors with whom USAID can partner effectively in future emergency responses.
- **Unique Capacity Needs:** Deploying humanitarian assistance often requires robust logistical and operational capacities to reach affected areas with lifesaving assistance. Many USAID local partners are "dual-hatted," implementing development activities or working across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus

outside of emergency settings. In many instances, local partners must divert staff and resources from their steady-state projects and may have limited pre-positioned stockpiles of humanitarian supplies, logistical capacity, or surge staff to pivot to crisis response. However, given local actors' presence, relationships, and deep understanding of local dynamics, USAID's engagement with local actors is essential for locally led, principled humanitarian assistance. Thus, strengthening logistical, operational, and organizational response capacities is necessary to support the ability of local actors to respond during crises.

- **Humanitarian Coordination Structures:** Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), humanitarian clusters, national response systems, and other coordination and policy-setting structures guide the international community's response to humanitarian crises, yet local organizations are too often excluded from these formal structures.⁵ Local leaders and organizations can offer the diverse perspectives and community knowledge needed to improve the effectiveness of these fora in meeting the unique needs of different groups and to better understand community-supported mechanisms that can contribute to more resilient response solutions.
- **Humanitarian Funding Streams:** Established humanitarian funding mechanisms, such as country-based pooled funds, the Central Emergency Response Fund, and other rapid-response mechanisms create opportunities for local organizations to access resources quickly. However, accessing traditional forms of donor funding can be complex and time-consuming, particularly for those seeking direct support for the first time.

Power Dynamics Affect and Are Affected by Humanitarian Response

Power imbalances remain in the current humanitarian system between donors, international implementing partners, and local organizations, as well as among and within affected and neighboring populations. Decision making about humanitarian assistance activities often takes place far from the affected populations and communities. Humanitarian coordination structures can also reinforce or alter existing power imbalances, as local actors often cannot participate in decision-making forums due to language barriers or lack of access to coordination meetings. In a humanitarian crisis, the need to mobilize an immediate, lifesaving response can lead donors and international organizations to turn to known organizations with a track record of rapid action at scale. In addition, investment in long-term relationship building and capacity-sharing knowledge, skill-building, and prioritizing mutual learning with local organizations can be hampered by a focus on immediate goals and short project timelines that are aimed at addressing acute, near-term needs. USAID's commitment to supporting locally led humanitarian assistance is an explicit recognition that communities have the right to make critical decisions about their lives and that local context and analysis are key to determining with whom to partner in response settings.

The LLHA Policy promotes decision making at country and regional levels that relies on inputs from local actors, practices, and systems, as well as affected groups, including women and historically marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, religious and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ people, and youth. Power dynamics within local communities can shape humanitarian programming, because communities are not homogeneous and neither are their needs. There are power structures and

⁵ The international humanitarian coordination structure (also referred to as the "humanitarian architecture") is designed to enhance predictability, accountability, and partnership in response settings. The HCT is a decision-making forum of humanitarian organizations (both UN and non-UN) that provides overall strategic and policy guidance on the humanitarian response at the country level; humanitarian clusters are groups of organizations that coordinate sector-specific (i.e., water, health, shelter, etc.) humanitarian action.



With support from USAID/BHA and the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, the North-East Gender Platform (PGNE), a network of Haitian civil society organizations, provides services to survivors of gender-based violence and advocates for an end to violence against women and girls. *Photo courtesy of PGNE.*

social arrangements embedded within all communities, as well as biases and inequitable access to resources and opportunities. For these reasons, Safe Programming,⁶ which is the process of incorporating protection principles across humanitarian programs to promote safety and dignity, meaningful access, accountability, and participation and empowerment, is an essential component for all humanitarian partner activities, operations, and sectors. This ensures that historically marginalized and vulnerable groups within affected communities are also able to meaningfully participate, give voice to their priorities and concerns, and ultimately access safe and dignified assistance.

Additionally, humanitarian assistance can unintentionally exacerbate conflict or create new tensions among local actors when new resources are perceived to favor one group over another. This dynamic can make intended recipients of assistance a target of violence. In response, USAID will support efforts to include a broad diversity of local actors in program design and implementation, including and especially historically marginalized groups, while also advancing changes that elevate diverse local partners to leadership roles within humanitarian coordination structures.

SECTOR HIGHLIGHT: CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE

The use of cash and voucher assistance has been steadily increasing in humanitarian response since 2010, representing a significant proportion of USAID's humanitarian portfolio. For example, between fiscal years 2021-2023, USAID/BHA programmed between \$1.9 billion to \$2.6 billion in cash and voucher assistance per year, representing over 20 percent of the USAID/BHA annual budget. Cash assistance expands opportunities to support the dignity of choice for disaster-affected individuals and families to prioritize their most immediate needs, such as food, shelter, water and other necessities, ultimately allowing for greater local determination in humanitarian response. When local markets are functioning and goods are available, cash and vouchers can provide these individuals with benefits while supporting the recovery of critical local market systems. While targeting individual households, cash transfer programs can have system-wide impacts by increasing local purchasing power and stimulating demand among local enterprises; a [2023 World Bank review](#) found that for every \$1 in transfers distributed, the local economy might grow by as much as \$2.

The delivery and coordination of cash at scale is primarily managed through large UN programs or international nongovernmental organization (INGO)-led consortia, which can enable more efficient award management in terms of donor staff administrative workload, and in some contexts can allow for cost efficiencies, such as in partners' negotiations of favorable fees for financial services and/or software. Efforts to shift towards locally led cash delivery and support for local implementers are underway at both country and global levels, although they face similar challenges as localization efforts in other sectors. For these reasons, USAID/BHA has collaborated with the cash learning partnership CALP Network to convene senior leaders of humanitarian organizations to advocate and advance our shared commitments to people-centered and effective cash and voucher assistance. In some contexts, USAID/BHA has also turned to local actors as direct partners in delivering cash assistance, such as partnering with local organizations to deliver food

⁶ USAID/BHA uses the term Safe Programming in lieu of Protection Mainstreaming, as the Safe Programming term acknowledges the potential for harm that humanitarian aid can create or contribute to and reinforces the need to ensure humanitarian aid is safe and protective. Safe Programming promotes the responsibility to ensure safety and mitigate protection risks by all staff, across all programming.

assistance using cash at scale in Kenya to respond to the historic drought in 2023. Between 2021-2023, local partners RACIDA, Kenya Red Cross, and the Wajir South Development Organization delivered lifesaving assistance in Kenya with USAID/BHA support valued at over \$17.7 million. By putting into practice the five goals outlined in the LLHA Policy, USAID aims to achieve a greater role for local organizations in the coordination and delivery of critical tools which shift power and flexibility to disaster-affected communities.

International Partners Play a Critical Role in Humanitarian Response

The LLHA Policy highlights a range of partnership and engagement models between local actors and USAID's international implementing partners, often referred to as intermediaries in the humanitarian system.⁷ These models prioritize mutual learning and sharing of knowledge and skills, as well as local leadership across the humanitarian program cycle. INGOs and public international organizations (PIOs) act as the primary channels through which USAID funds the work of local humanitarian organizations and play a critical engagement and support role with local partners. However, these relationships can encounter challenges. International implementing partners may engage local partners late in the humanitarian program cycle to serve primarily in implementation roles without prior engagement in decision making, program planning, or strategy planning, which can be a missed opportunity to integrate local knowledge and capacities. Alternatively, international implementing partners can advance local ownership by prioritizing the local expertise, leadership, networks, and assets of local and national actors through early and meaningful engagement, collaborative program design, targeted capacity strengthening, mentorship, and consistent and high-quality funding approaches among other critical forms of support. Often, international organizations can also play a critical role in providing protection through presence, with their physical presence and enforcement of safety and protection protocols deterring abuse or targeting of civilians by potential perpetrators or violent actors. INGOs can also serve important advocacy roles to elevate critical issues for principled humanitarian action through their platforms, possibly with less risk than local organizations may experience.

RISK SHARING

A range of USG requirements—statutes, regulations, and policies—continue to affect the speed and scope of USAID's localization efforts. These measures and safeguards are designed to increase the transparency and efficiency of USG resources and prevent fraud, waste, and abuse. Complex compliance requirements can present challenges for small or local implementing partners, some of whom have limited or no dedicated risk management staff, internal controls, and other compliance measures to respond to requirements about fiduciary risks. USAID is evaluating areas in which procedural adjustments could increase funding accessibility while still maintaining necessary safeguards. Further, both INGOs and local NGOs assume other risks, such as safety, security, fiduciary, and reputational risks, when implementing USAID- and other donor-funded programs.⁸ The LLHA Policy champions adoption of a risk sharing approach, in line with the [Grand Bargain's 2023 Risk Sharing Framework](#). The risk sharing approach involves collaboration across humanitarian actors to identify, mitigate, and manage risks, ensuring that no actor bears disproportionate responsibility for the risks associated with humanitarian response.

⁷ According to the Grand Bargain, intermediaries are defined as organizations, networks, or mechanisms (such as pooled funds) that act as an intermediary between donors and local organizations through the provision of funding or other support.

⁸ Source: USAID-funded NGOs & Risk study, Humanitarian Outcomes and InterAction, 2019, https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/riskii_partnerships_global_study.pdf



The USAID/BHA-funded Nawiri project advances locally determined and sustainable solutions to persistent acute malnutrition in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands. *Photo courtesy of Mercy Corp*

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles underpin this Policy and its aims. Some of these are specific to the humanitarian sector, while others overlap with USAID's broader localization efforts.



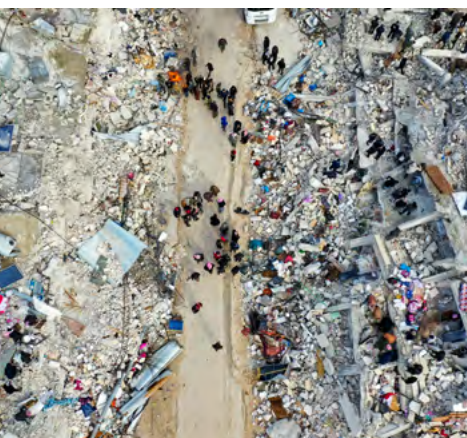
- **Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, and Independence:** As noted above, these globally recognized principles underpin all humanitarian action and are derived from international humanitarian law. They guide USAID’s humanitarian assistance activities as well as the activities of our humanitarian partners. Efforts to advance locally led humanitarian assistance must preserve these principles so that assistance reaches populations most in need, without bias or prejudice, while adhering to the highest standards of human rights, respect, and dignity.
- **Equitable and Inclusive Partnerships:** The principles of equity and inclusion, in which all parties to a partnership, including new and nontraditional partners, as well as representatives of historically marginalized communities, contribute and receive benefit from it, undergirds all aspects of USAID’s localization efforts. Equitable and inclusive partnerships are collaborative and transparent, based on mutual responsibility, and require accountability from all stakeholders. In addition, this Policy aligns with the principles outlined in USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, which guide USAID’s approach to meeting policy imperatives through capacity strengthening.
- **Flexibility and Context Specificity:** Response metrics, objectives, and strategies are defined by the context, disaster type, humanitarian needs, geographic location, displacement patterns, partner landscape, conflict dynamics, risk and security considerations, and cultural and linguistic characteristics. This Policy aims to be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to a range of dynamic and complex environments, while empowering local actors and meeting the unique needs of diverse groups.
- **Do No Harm:** USAID and international implementing partner actions can inadvertently put local partners at risk or shift a disproportionate burden of risk to them, exacerbate community tensions, or disenfranchise certain populations. The Do No Harm principle means USAID seeks to prevent and mitigate potential negative impact of its actions on affected populations. This Policy champions the application of the Do No Harm principle in USAID’s local humanitarian partnerships.

ENGAGING ACROSS THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

USAID acknowledges that advancing locally led humanitarian assistance starts with recognition that it is not only the landscape of actors, but also the relationships between actors—local, national, and international—that determine the extent of locally led action. The humanitarian system comprises a wide range of organizations, agencies, and networks that enable the provision of humanitarian assistance. USAID’s approach to locally led humanitarian assistance will leverage opportunities beyond its direct partnerships and funding relationships to advocate for local leadership at the national and international levels, while also anticipating and preventing unintended consequences.

POLICY SCOPE

The LLHA Policy is one piece of the Agency’s overall approach to localization, aimed at humanitarian assistance along the continuum that includes emergency response, early recovery, resilience, and DRR activities.



Local residents and organizations were able to access impacted locations in Syria’s northwestern Idlib province following the 2023 earthquake, searching for victims in collapsed buildings and assessing road condition. *Photo by Omar Haj Kadour/AFP*

Rapid-Onset Emergencies

In rapid-onset emergencies, relationships with and knowledge of local communities, proximity to affected areas, and rapid access to supplies are crucial to quickly meeting acute needs. Local organizations are frequently best positioned to navigate these realities and address these issues, though may themselves be directly affected by crises. For these reasons, partnerships pairing local actors with larger international organizations with ready access to supplies, logistical capabilities, and technical resources can be particularly effective. However, rapid-response scenarios may not be conducive to USAID’s efforts to identify and develop new local humanitarian partnerships, as developing these partnerships takes time and resources on both sides. USAID is expanding investments in humanitarian partner landscape mapping with a focus on local and nontraditional organizations, while establishing mechanisms for the rapid release of funding—before disaster strikes—that can help facilitate locally led responses in times of crisis.⁹ Locally led humanitarian assistance in rapid-onset emergencies—including those activities augmented by international partners—can be faster, more informed by specific local contexts, and more responsive to community needs than those that exclude local partners.



USAID/BHA local partner ABCOM reaches internally displaced people in North Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with assistance to address their urgent food and other basic needs. *Photo courtesy of Grethe Rosseaux/ABCOM*

Protracted Conflict and Other Complex Emergencies

During protracted conflicts and other complex emergencies, the operations of both local and international humanitarian actors are often constrained by access limitations and safety and security risks. These risks are compounded by fiduciary, legal, and reputational risks, as well as possible host-government restrictions targeting international organizations and staff. While local organizations encounter similar barriers, their sustained presence, community networks, relationships with local authorities, and understanding of conflict dynamics often facilitate access to affected areas and the provision of humanitarian assistance. However, local actors’ access and proximity to affected areas that are often unsafe can also result in safety and security risks to local partners and the local staff of international organizations. Over and above this, humanitarian assistance by definition injects significant resources and international attention into the power

⁹ USAID’s approach to identifying local actors through [partner landscape analysis](#) has been outlined by USAID’s New Partnerships Initiative.

struggles of areas experiencing instability, which can change the direction and dynamics of a conflict by empowering some actors and disempowering others. In light of these consequences, USAID’s provision of humanitarian assistance directly or indirectly through local partners in conflict settings must be underpinned by internationally recognized humanitarian, duty-of-care, Do No Harm, and conflict-sensitive principles, along with sound analysis of conflict and political economy. Assistance should also be designed with the flexibility necessary to adapt within changing conditions when necessary. If USAID, alongside its partners, effectively mitigate these risks, protracted emergencies can also serve as incubators for longer-term investments in local partnerships, local network-building, targeted capacity strengthening, advocacy in support of local leadership, and strengthening resilience and peace dynamics.

Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience (ER4)

Early recovery, DRR, and some resilience programming offer more opportunities to augment existing and new local partnerships. With less pressure to mount an immediate on-the-ground response, USAID and local partners have opportunities to engage in deliberate discussions around building strategic, long-term partnerships, as well as adopting co-creation and “Refine and Implement” models.¹⁰ Local knowledge of diverse community risks and relationships is invaluable to designing, leading, and implementing solutions. In addition, effective and innovative DRR and resilience programs benefit from multiyear investments that depend on the sustained presence and long-term commitment that local partners can provide. These ER4 investments can enable local partners to lead and deliver high-quality responses without international assistance being required.



With USAID/BHA support, youth in Dominica prepare to lead disaster response in their communities as part of Youth Emergency Action Committees (YEAC), including by participating in emergency response simulation exercises. *Photo courtesy of YEAC Dominica*

ER4	Rapid Response	Protracted Crises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term partnerships • Co-creation/Refine and Implement processes • Multi-year Investments • Creative funding models • Capacity strengthening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermediary rapid support systems • Leverage existing partnerships • Partner pivots • Simplified funding requirements • Rapid Response Funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local network access • Systems-strengthen approaches • Community-based program design, budgeting, evaluations • Local engagement in humanitarian coordination structures
<p>Equitable local partnership that meet humanitarian needs in a given context</p>		

¹⁰ Refine and Implement is an approach for resilience-oriented food security activities supported by USAID/BHA. The approach utilizes a refinement period prior to full implementation of an award, during which implementing partners refine the activity design based on evidence and stakeholder input, invest in staff development, and tailor implementation strategies to the local norms and context.

HDP Nexus

While the LLHA Policy will apply to most humanitarian settings, the implementation will vary according to regional and country contexts, particularly across the HDP Nexus. HDP coherence aims to maximize the impact and sustainability of programs by fostering communication, coordination, and, where possible, collaboration across the spectrum of humanitarian, development, and peace assistance to build the kind of secure, peaceful conditions that reduce the need for humanitarian assistance over time. As such, local actors connected to resource networks, prepared to anticipate and respond to crises, and resilient in the face of complex challenges are critical to an HDP Nexus approach. Ultimately, this Policy aims to recognize the agency of local actors and disaster-affected communities to define and assert their roles in humanitarian response.

Local Engagement is a Process

Recognizing the incremental and context-driven nature of localization, USAID references the Locally Led Development Spectrum to describe the range of approaches that the Agency, its partners, and communities can work together to shift agenda-setting and decision-making power into the hands of local actors.¹¹ To fully operationalize the LLHA Policy, USAID will increasingly shift partnership in humanitarian contexts towards the right of the spectrum, ensuring that engagement with local actors moves beyond information sharing and consultation and towards greater delegation of power and ultimately local leadership, as noted in the figure below. This transformation can include more direct funding as well as enhanced partnership models.



LOCALLY LED HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND CLIMATE

Across the globe, climate-related hazards disproportionately affect the poorest and most historically marginalized communities. The people living in these locations are often best positioned to design and direct the interventions most suitable to meet their needs. USAID strives to support communities to prepare for and adapt to the impacts of climate hazards through locally led solutions in disaster risk reduction, including early warning, preparedness, and mitigation activities. USAID's efforts reflect the USG's endorsement of the [Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations](#), which includes embracing the leadership of local actors and communities as one of the Charter's seven commitments.

¹¹ The [Locally Led Development Spectrum](#) is an instrument developed by USAID's Locally Led Development Initiative to help USAID and partners think about what locally led development means in practice. USAID adapted the spectrum from Oxfam America and Save the Children's Local Engagement Assessment Framework.

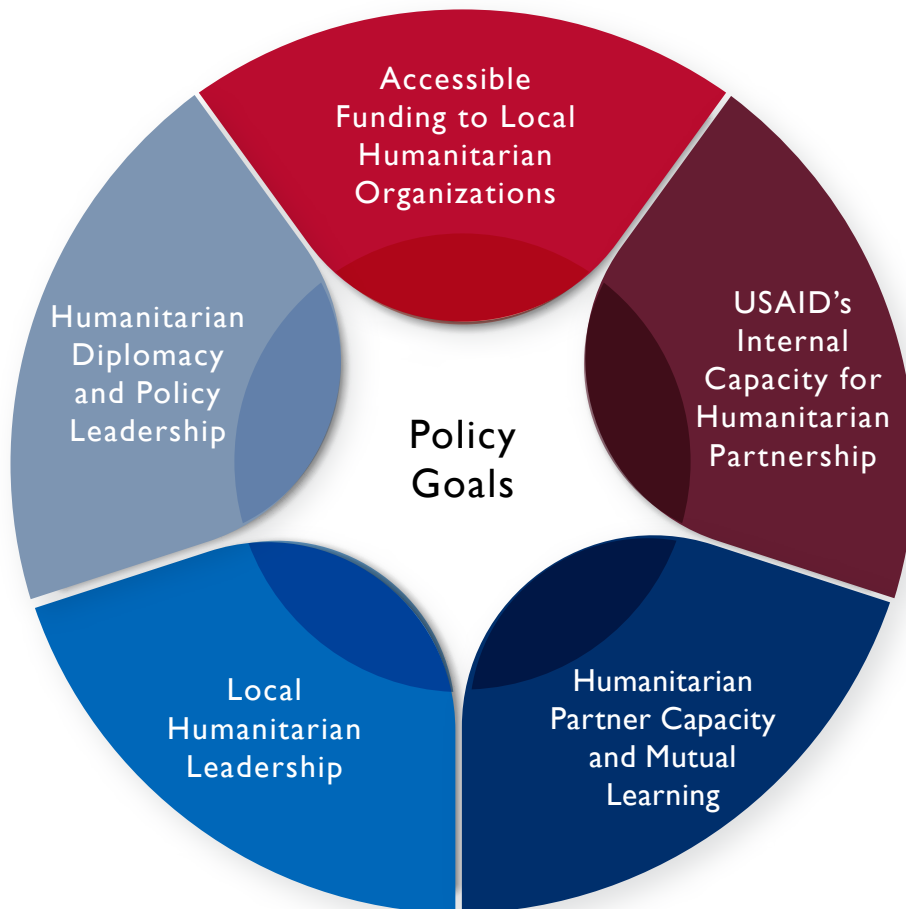
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

All foreign assistance alters the conditions and power balances within which it operates. USAID mitigates these risks by analyzing the conflict dynamics and relationships among local actors and how humanitarian assistance interacts with and affects resident populations, including underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. USAID uses this knowledge in all phases of a response to deliver assistance that avoids exacerbating conflict dynamics and takes every opportunity to strengthen positive, resilient interactions that foster a more secure environment.

POLICY INTO PRACTICE

Policy Vision

USAID places local communities at the center of humanitarian work and supports a humanitarian system that operates on the basis of local decisions and priorities, reflecting the needs and preferences of affected groups. Success in USAID's efforts to advance locally led humanitarian assistance is not defined by a single funding target, the launch of new processes, or a specific number of local partners. Instead, success is achieved when USAID's ways of working meaningfully engage local partners to lead effective humanitarian planning and response.



INCREASE AMOUNT AND ACCESSIBILITY OF FUNDING FOR LOCAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Reducing barriers to funding local actors is achieved in part by using flexible partnership models to meet the needs of a wide range of humanitarian partners in dynamic response contexts.

USAID uses funding to support the humanitarian community to meet critical needs around the world. USAID strongly believes that the most effective funding decisions require intentionality, formal accountability networks, measured risk-taking, and sufficient financial and staffing resources. USAID has committed to channeling 25 percent of funding directly to local actors by 2025 and ensuring that 50 percent of our activities are locally led by 2030. At the same time, local organizations consistently cite a range of barriers to direct partnership, including complex application guidance, English language and pre-award requirements, reporting expectations, insufficient cost recovery, lack of access to USAID staff, unsustainably short project timelines, and inadequate training or support to balance donor requirements with programming demands.

In seeking new local humanitarian partnerships, USAID will apply a wider lens to available partnership structures and expand on best practices for nimble, adaptable award making. This includes utilizing collaborative and innovative approaches for response design, evaluation, and learning driven by locally-determined definitions of program success, and maximizing opportunities for capacity strengthening and flexibilities to pivot and reprioritize as humanitarian needs change. In addition to USAID's ongoing efforts to lower barriers to entry for local organizations, USAID is re-examining its internal humanitarian assistance programming cycle with an eye toward broadening its partner base and facilitating expedient and effective humanitarian action. This effort will inform measures to streamline humanitarian award making processes, such as simplified application guidance, and to conduct outreach and training on these processes so that USAID is a more effective humanitarian leader and partner, including for local actors.

CRITICAL ACTIONS:

- **Build humanitarian partnerships with local organizations, including through direct funding**, informed by partner landscape mapping, early and expanded outreach to a diversity of local humanitarian actors, and consideration of the resources needed to mitigate and manage risk.
- **Leverage USAID and the USG's resources, relationships, expertise, and humanitarian diplomacy to encourage PIO and INGO humanitarian partners to form more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable relationships with local organizations**, which incorporate capacity and knowledge sharing and include full-cost recovery for subawardees.

STRENGTHEN USAID'S ABILITY TO BUILD HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIPS

Increasing high-quality local humanitarian partnerships will require further assessment of USAID's human and operational resources.

Advancing locally led humanitarian assistance requires intentionality and ownership across the Agency. Increasing the number and quality of local partnerships, processing a larger number of direct awards to new partners, investing in capacity-strengthening mechanisms appropriate for dynamic humanitarian contexts, and advocating for processes and structures that prioritize local actors and communities require significant investments of time and human and operational resources. As part of the Agency's broader localization efforts, USAID is promoting locally led development and humanitarian assistance through targeted guidance, training, and resources. This will provide staff with the information and skills necessary to operationalize localization objectives throughout all stages of award making and program management, as well as integrate key principles and advocacy messaging into policy and global public advocacy efforts. Technical guidance and consistent messaging of key localization objectives and priority actions across sectors, geographic regions, and response contexts will support greater coherency of localization efforts and support increased awareness of practical tools and approaches for advancing local partnerships. USAID will also assess the need for additional staff to support locally led humanitarian action.

USAID's review of its internal humanitarian assistance programming cycle will produce a redesign of its processes and systems for strategic planning, award making, program monitoring, evaluation, and learning. The redesign will enable USAID to be a better humanitarian partner, including to local actors, beginning with an internal portfolio planning process that incorporates localization considerations early on in strategic planning. Deepening the knowledge and proficiency of USAID's humanitarian workforce on the redesigned, streamlined, and simplified award making processes will be critical to our ability to build local humanitarian partnerships. To effect these changes, USAID will assess any adjustments that may be needed to current capacities, staffing, and infrastructure.

CRITICAL ACTIONS:

- **Empower the USAID workforce to become champions of locally led humanitarian assistance** by supporting coherent messaging, dedicated staffing, and necessary technical resources across offices, programs, and workstreams.
- **Prioritize knowledge management to promote learning from locally led humanitarian response approaches**, including synthesis of key lessons learned across sectors, geographic areas, and partnership structures, and systematic adaptation and iteration rooted in the growing evidence base for locally led humanitarian assistance.

INCREASE CAPACITY SHARING AND STRENGTHENING, AS WELL AS MUTUAL LEARNING IN HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIPS

Humanitarian capacity strengthening and sharing activities strive to understand existing community capacities, identify opportunities to invest in system improvements, and develop processes to incorporate dedicated capacity sharing into humanitarian assistance delivery.

Strengthening local capacity to respond to shocks is a core component of USAID's approach to humanitarian assistance, in which communities most affected by crises play a leading role in defining priorities for readiness, response, relief, recovery, and resilience-building. At the same time, capacity-strengthening activities targeting humanitarian actors currently vary widely in their approach, resourcing, and impact; in some cases, capacity-strengthening approaches can reinforce existing power imbalances, particularly when critical capacities are defined exclusively by donor agencies. More collaborative efforts are needed to support all local organizations to define and reach their goals.

This Policy supports alignment of humanitarian capacity-strengthening efforts with the key capacity principles outlined in USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, including the broader shift toward an assets-based approach to capacity strengthening, based on the recognition that all partners have significant existing capacities. These typically include deep knowledge of local systems; real-time information on supply and logistics requirements; the ability to define and assess humanitarian needs among local populations; access to difficult-to-reach populations; an awareness of historical, political, and conflict dynamics; and technical expertise relevant to the local context. Frequently, donors and international organizations lack these critical capacities and may fail to recognize them as such. For this reason, in pursuit of more equitable forms of partnership and locally led humanitarian response, this Policy promotes an assets-based approach premised on capacity sharing, a process of strengthening individual and system effectiveness through investments in knowledge sharing and skill-building that prioritize mutual learning and reciprocity between actors, based on recognition of existing capacities.

CRITICAL ACTIONS:

- **Invest in innovative capacity-strengthening and -sharing humanitarian partnership models**, in particular capacity-focused programming supporting local expertise, existing community capacities, and mutual learning.
- **Center local knowledge in all elements of humanitarian response and assistance**, through dedicated support for Global South researchers, research institutions, and subject-matter experts in program design, implementation, and evaluation.

ADVOCATE FOR LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Local leadership is a critical component of effective and sustainable humanitarian assistance and requires local, national, and international actors to recognize the diverse forms of knowledge and experience that equip local actors to play decision-making roles.

Based on the guiding principle of equitable and inclusive partnerships, USAID aims to support humanitarian approaches that place a diversity of local actors and communities at the center of decision-making and program design, while also advocating changes that elevate diverse local partners to leadership roles within nationally led and country-based coordination structures. USAID has committed to ensuring that 50 percent of our activities are locally led by 2030, as defined by the Locally Led Programs Indicator. Local leadership encompasses the ability of local actors to set their own agendas, develop solutions, and utilize their capacities, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality. In advocating for leadership by local actors, USAID emphasizes the importance of empowering representatives of diverse social groups, rather than only elevating those who may already be in positions of power at the local level.

A critical aspect of local ownership and leadership is the ability of local actors to define and influence on-the-ground humanitarian assistance strategies across a range of operating contexts, which are grounded in priorities identified by a diversity of members in local communities. USAID seeks opportunities to embed diverse local actors more systematically, including those who have been historically marginalized, into planning and decision-making processes, including through co-creation, [Accountability to Affected Populations \(AAP\)](#) platforms, and direct support for locally led humanitarian assistance. In alignment with the Agency's commitment to AAP, USAID adopts participatory processes that include local voices in shaping context-specific strategies and plans.

CRITICAL ACTIONS:

- **Advance good practices for local leadership in all aspects of humanitarian assistance;** this includes active engagement of a diversity of local organizations in response-specific Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans, as well as prominent advisory and decision-making roles for local actors within HCTs, clusters, and intercluster platforms, all of which contribute to response planning, prioritization, coordination, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.¹²
- **Enhance humanitarian program co-creation in program design, expand risk sharing techniques, develop mechanisms to support mutual accountability and learning standards, and commit to direct and transparent communication channels,** all of which local organizations consistently identify as missing but clearly needed in the current humanitarian system.

¹² A humanitarian needs overview (HNO) is produced to support the HCT in understanding the impact and evolution of a crisis and to inform response planning; the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) articulates the shared vision of how to respond to the assessed and expressed needs of the affected population.

LEVERAGE HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY AND POLICY LEADERSHIP

While locally led humanitarian assistance requires national- and community-level engagement, global-level action is required to change the international humanitarian system in ways that create space for authentic local participation and leadership on the ground.

As the world's single largest humanitarian donor, USAID has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to serve as a global advocate and thought leader, using our convening power, partnerships, voice, and other tools of humanitarian diplomacy to catalyze a broader shift toward locally led humanitarian assistance.

Global-level policy action to advance locally led development and humanitarian assistance is as important as local-level action to change the culture, behaviors, and systems to create space for authentic local participation and leadership.

USAID will continue to use bilateral engagements and global platforms to advocate for and harmonize results-oriented approaches by donors and implementing partners alike to close the gap between locally led humanitarian assistance policy and practice. The Agency regularly seeks feedback from local partners and other national actors to ensure that local voices directly inform global advocacy messaging. In addition, the Agency will continue to explore opportunities to further leverage multi-donor humanitarian financing mechanisms, including humanitarian pooled funds, and other innovative mechanisms to channel more resources to local and national actors.

CRITICAL ACTIONS:

- **Collaborate with the humanitarian donor community collectively to reduce barriers to local partnership** by leveraging shared platforms and risk-management systems to streamline due diligence, partner reporting, and other processes.
- **Advocate for equitable and inclusive local partnership models among INGO and PIO leadership and in high-level humanitarian forums**, building on lessons from the Agency's humanitarian portfolio, among them program co-creation, technical assistance and capacity-strengthening support to local actors and national disaster management agencies, while also seeking greater opportunities to enable local organizations and community groups to lead disaster preparedness and emergency response.
- **Leverage institutional convening power in humanitarian forums to support working- and policy-level locally led humanitarian assistance efforts that incorporate HDP coherence**, to develop and sustain a common approach and roadmap among donors, partners, and local organizations across the HDP Nexus.

LEARNING

Effective humanitarian assistance is based on continual learning, evidence-based practice, accountability, and adaptation. USAID invests heavily in learning and building the evidence base to improve operational emergency responses and technical program quality to provide timely, context-appropriate, and effective assistance. Localization efforts demand that this same level of rigor apply to addressing the challenges of local partnership, including through compilation and analysis of lessons learned across former and existing partnerships. Incorporating and communicating learning and feedback loops into localization processes will incorporate local voices and highlight and celebrate current successes. They will also facilitate accountability to local partners and the constituents they serve and identify opportunities for improvement, encouraging replication of good practices, broad dialogue about potential missteps, and collaborative troubleshooting and resource sharing. These steps support the LLHA Policy goal on strengthening USAID's internal capacity as well as [USAID's 2022-2026 Learning Agenda](#). USAID will continue to involve affected populations in monitoring and evaluating interventions, including through the use of common and contextualized indicators to help measure impact.

CONCLUSION

USAID will use the LLHA Policy to guide both how it programs humanitarian assistance and how the Agency operates in the years to come. USAID Bureaus, Independent Offices, and Missions, as well as humanitarian implementing partners, have important roles to play in elevating and enhancing the voices, representation, and leadership of local actors and organizations to build the humanitarian response structure that we seek to support. Together, these changes made to the system have the potential to improve the lives of crisis-affected people around the world and to realize a shared vision of inclusive and locally led humanitarian assistance.

As the world's single largest humanitarian donor, USAID plans to use its position to collaborate with other donors and humanitarian organizations to accelerate locally led humanitarian assistance. With the growing numbers of people in harm's way, whether due to the effects of climate change or complex, protracted emergencies, USAID remains steadfastly committed to confronting the humanitarian challenges of the future while seizing opportunities to foster and support locally led solutions whenever and wherever possible.

Key Definitions

Capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, and motivations, as well as the relationships that enable an actor—an individual, an organization, or a network—to take action to design and implement solutions to local development and humanitarian challenges, learn and adapt from that action, and innovate and transform over time.

Capacity sharing is a process of strengthening individual and system effectiveness through investments in knowledge sharing and skill-building that prioritize mutual learning and reciprocity between actors, based on recognition of existing capacities.

Capacity strengthening is a strategic and intentional investment in the process of partnering with local actors—individuals, organizations, and networks—to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable humanitarian and development outcomes.

Conflict sensitivity is a practice and approach that focuses on understanding explicit and implicit context dynamics in order to better adapt and respond to complex operating environments. Conflict sensitivity acknowledges that even the best-intentioned development interventions can have negative impacts and exacerbate problems, but builds on Do No Harm principles and consciously seeks to build societal connections, looking for opportunities that build peace and negate tensions or conflict.

Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience (ER4) describes the work of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance to improve the well-being of people living in vulnerable situations—from the individual to country level—by strengthening their capacities to manage risk; anticipate, withstand, recover from, and adapt to shocks and stresses; and support positive, transformative change.

Historically marginalized groups may include, but are not limited to, women; youth; children in adversity and their families; older persons; persons with disabilities; LGBTQI+ people; displaced persons; migrants; Indigenous Peoples and communities; non-dominant religious, racial, and ethnic groups; people of castes traditionally considered low; people of low socioeconomic status; and people with unmet mental health needs.

Humanitarian action is collective work to save lives, alleviate suffering, and assist and protect populations living in vulnerable situations during and after crises.

Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus is an approach that refers to the interlinkages among humanitarian, development, and peace actions with the aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence, and complementarity. The HDP Nexus approach seeks to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each pillar—to the extent of their relevance in the specific context—in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities, and address root causes of conflict.

Local Actors are individuals, organizations, and networks that originate from and are led by people within a given country or region that is their principal place of business or operations, inclusive of government at national and subnational levels.

Local Partners, as used in this Policy, refers to both local and regional partners, as defined within USAID systems as those partners incorporated and located in the country or region of their place of performance, provided that the country of the partner's location and incorporation is not a high-income country per the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's income distribution database.

Localization is the set of internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes USAID is undertaking to ensure the Agency's work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities.

Locally led humanitarian assistance occurs when local and national actors lead in one or more stages of humanitarian action and/or ER4 response: immediate medical and emergency supply provision, community needs assessments, decision making, planning, coordination, resource allocation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Underrepresented groups are those that are disproportionately excluded from opportunities and systems (e.g., employment, political representation, education, basic services), often due to structural and societal obstacles and historical marginalization.

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