

USAID Southern Africa: Local Systems Experience Summit Pretoria, South Africa November 18-21, 2014

Lessons Learned Summary

From November 18-21, 2014, USAID Southern Africa hosted an Africa focused Local Systems Experience Summit in Pretoria, South Africa. The summit brought together over 140 USAID and interagency professionals from 35 missions, offices and bureaus to discuss their successes and challenges of partnering with local actors to achieve development objectives.

The summit was organized around the project design cycle with specific emphasis on the key themes of partnership, integration and sustainability. Sessions were designed to demonstrate how Missions have systematically incorporated these key themes of partnership, integration, and sustainability along with M&E into their capacity building efforts.



Below is a summary of the key takeaway lessons and action items that came up during the summit. A more detailed report is being prepared and is expected to be released Agency-wide in the coming weeks.

Top Lessons and Recommendations

- There is always a system – even if we do not recognize it or work with it.
- USAID should focus on sustainable development outcomes/results within local systems rather than the sustainability of individual actors within those systems.
- Sustainable development requires flexible and adaptable approaches from design to implementation. Self-imposed rigidity poses unnecessary obstacles.
- The current plethora of indicators, particularly in the PEPFAR context, does not create an enabling development environment for either USAID or implementing partners. The number of indicators should be reduced and the remaining indicators should be sufficiently flexible to allow for local context.

Other Lessons and Recommendations by Theme

Partnership

- Developing capacity within local systems requires a substantial time investment. Many internal processes are not in sync with these time requirements, e.g. CDCS timelines, pipeline management guidelines, PER/AEF cycles, etc.
- Locally engaged staff are critical to the successful utilization and development of local systems because of their local knowledge and continuity in approach.
- Sustainable development is more likely to occur when we have a better understanding of and engage with existing systems. Actors within those systems may include traditional development partners, the private sector, civil society, partner governments and regional institutions.
- Development targets originating in Washington should be at a high level and aspirational. Missions should be given the flexibility to determine how to attain the aspirational targets based on the local context.
- Each mission should consider hosting periodic discussions between local partners and USAID staff to gain perspectives on capacity development efforts.

Integration

- Integration must begin with the project design process. The Agency should provide greater flexibility with funding restrictions and allow adequate time to achieve results.
- Strong leadership is required for integration to be effective. Mission leadership should encourage innovative management structures such as having alternate CORs/AORs from different back stops or creating matrix management structures between technical teams and DO teams.
- The Global Development Lab should coordinate the collection and cataloguing of mobile technology applications that currently exist and share that list with missions along with case studies or ideas of how the technology has been or could be integrated into project designs.

Sustainability

- Sustainability should be an ongoing consideration throughout the project lifecycle.
- M&E should be incorporated at the initial stages of the project lifecycle to allow projects to adapt based on what is learned through the M&E process. Missions should conduct a M&E skills audit and then train/hire to address the identified gaps.
- USAID should develop more comprehensive, flexible and timely risk assessment tools for working with host governments as compared to the current PFMRAF tool. The new tool(s) should rely more upon other donor assessments.
- Lessons learned from Ghana, Tanzania and other Missions in working directly with and funding sub-national government to achieve development outcomes should be documented and shared broadly with the Agency.
- USAID policymakers need to revise existing ADS guidance to clarify options to facilitate closer partnerships with regional intergovernmental organizations.

Summary

The summit highlighted that working with local systems will lead to sustainable development outcomes. However working with local systems is very time consuming and requires a deep knowledge of the local systems and their context. The Agency needs to ensure that Missions have the correct mix of staff with the right technical and soft skills and who are empowered to develop and adapt projects based on changing local dynamics.

The summit was successful at bringing together development professionals to discuss their experiences of working with local systems. Eighty-six percent of summit participants felt that what they discussed and learned during the summit was relevant to their work. Most participants felt that these issues would benefit from further focus and discussion.

Next Steps

The summit generated a number of specific action items for the Agency to consider regarding Local Systems. Participants self-organized into 15 working groups to lead the effort to fully develop the action items including work group objectives, timelines, and needed resources. USAID/Southern Africa will ensure that these working groups are connected to and become active participants in the Agency's three [Local Systems Work Streams](#). To assist the Agency and the working groups, all summit presentations and notes have been posted on the summit's [myUSAID subject page](#).