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On the 10th Anniversary of the Local Systems Framework

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It's been 10 years since USAID published the Local Systems Framework (LSF), and we are now preparing to create a new Local Systems Position Paper to revisit and refresh our position on the importance of systems practice for building resilience and unlocking locally led change. As one of the core drafters of the original LSF, I've been fortunate enough to not only work on generating it, but also having the opportunity to observe the rollout of the Framework and associated tools. I wanted to share my thoughts on why it was created, how it has connected with development work in the years since, and where (in my personal opinion) we still have work to do.

Why We Needed the Framework

At the time the LSF was published, one of the common critiques of international development efforts was that it was stuck in linear thinking - efforts to find single, transformative solutions that could radically change development trajectories. As part of this way of thinking, we tended to view ourselves as actors who floated above the contexts we worked in, and could manipulate them toward better arrangements, not reckoning with our own positions in them - for better and for worse. Of

course, there have been "game-changers" discovered in many development sectors, and we should strive for them, but this aim to leap forward and solve massive problems all at once tends to downplay the complexity of challenges and the history in which every present problem is embedded. It reinforced the idea that if we were clever enough designers and thinkers, we could solve problems before they began (and irrespective of where they arose), with the implementation of projects being the "easy part" after the hard thinking of design. There was also a widespread perception that much development work was not sustainable, that it achieved results while projects were ongoing only to return to roughly the original state once projects ended. Many critiques of aid instead emphasized systems thinking, or echoed some of its themes as means to improve development assistance (to be "searchers not planners" and muddle through with answers that were "good enough" while listening to those closest to the situation being addressed).

Standout Aspects of the LSF

The LSF benefited from a huge array of perspectives and inputs. These included inputs from people who both had spent years working in development and also were huge proponents of systems thinking and felt the need for systems and complexity science to inform USAID's work. In Tjip Walker, a USAID policy, design, and planning expert who led the drafting process, it also found a lead author who personally embodied all of those perspectives and had the clarity of thought and economy of language to describe that vision. Different parts of the LSF speak to different people, but I want to highlight a few of the elements that I think are most noteworthy about it:

- It has a clear and simple definition of a system, "those interconnected sets of actors that jointly produce a development outcome," with flexible boundaries set around whatever result is defined. It therefore forces conversation around who matters to which issue.

- It clearly articulates co-production of results, or that no single actor can be responsible for achieving or sustaining development outcomes of the kinds we strive to achieve. This really helps me to center the idea of sustainability on the array of actors who have to maintain an outcome over time, and is quite different from "handing over" a project to a host government - it forces earlier consideration of what sort of project would be sustained.
- I highly value the LSF's emphasis on relationships and ways of working. Relationships is one of the "5 Rs" described in the Local Systems technical guidance note, and underpins others such as rules (which structure how actors work together). Looking at how different actors relate opens up tremendous space for more innovative and collective efforts.
- It was novel to have a principles-based policy, one which didn't just say what to do but defined a set of principles that should guide how staff and partners took it on board. Indeed, at the time it was also novel to have the LSF articulate where current practice was as part of outlining what future practice should be. I think the principles are themselves clear and straightforward, and the idea of a policy centered on principles has become widespread since. It makes it memorable and easier to digest.

Where We've Gone

In the years since its publication, the LSF has contributed to an evolution of development work toward a more sophisticated approach, one that formally incorporates systems thinking more frequently and more robustly. The 10 principles of the LSF and its definitions of local and local system have been incorporated into lots of approaches and tools of many partners, as well as reflected in many other USAID policy documents. These concepts have certainly influenced how we think about local engagement, interrelationships across actors, and about sustainability.

Key aspects of systems thinking underpin our approaches to local capacity strengthening, collective action, locally-led development, and adaptive management. Indeed, the LSF was supported by and reinforced a shift in emphasis toward adapting to dynamic circumstances, central to our CLA model for adaptive management. In my own work on applied political economy thinking, the notion of a local system and the approaches outlined there have been very helpful in structuring and informing our ideas of how to more deeply appreciate, and work within the scope of, local context and different local systems. In short, much of what the LSF outlined has become simply part of how we discuss development.

What Remains to Put into Practice

Although we've come a long way in 10 years, I think there are still some aspects of the LSF that have appeared less robustly in development efforts, where the approaches of the Framework can be taken further. My personal list includes:

1. **Influencing systems as more powerful activities than delivering direct results**. While we are better at seeing local systems co-produce results, we still tend to want to focus our work on delivering results, sometimes through local system actors, and then stepping back. We like strengthening local systems, but replacing "we juiced the system today to work for a while" with "we invested strategically into system actors who can matter today and tomorrow" remains hard to grasp. We still want to cleverly solve everything today rather than shift systems to thrive tomorrow. 🗣
2. **Value learning and engagement.** Working in complex space makes adaptive management necessary, and we do deeply understand that. However, it also means that producing learning with and through a local system, and weaving connections of actors (including us and our partners) within that system, are important accomplishments. Yet while we do invest in learning, and have

robust approaches to reflect on programming, we still see those aspects as scaffolding for the "real work" of doing something else, making it hard to allocate sufficient resourcing - especially time - or to have real clarity on who should be forging which connections. Until learning and engagement are seen as outcomes, not precursors or adjusters, we will struggle to internalize this part of systems thinking.

3. **Accepting limits on our control.** The ramifications of emergence remain scary. In complex systems, we can't anticipate everything that will happen as the system evolves, nor can we ever expect to be nimble enough to respond adaptively to every dynamic in a command-and-control process. We will need to have the humility and honesty to let go of this idea, supporting local system actors to innovate and discover new structures and ways of working to grapple with new problems. We will need to stay the course with those partners, rather than abandon them at key moments in their story because we can no longer claim primary credit for what they do. Our paradigm needs to shift from "How do we get people to do a thing?" to "How do we equip people to become the kind of people who do what needs to be done?"