



Lessons for Promoting Locally Led Development

Capacity 2.0 Consortium: Root Change, Keystone Accountability, and Youth and Society (YAS)

From 2017-2019, the Capacity 2.0 consortium supported two district level [social labs](#) in Malawi with a grant from [USAID Local Works](#) which brought together over 60 representatives from district government, civil society, and citizen groups. Participants diagnosed systemic problems with how development was conducted in their district and co-designed solutions tested through rapid experimentation cycles. Ideas tested include youth advocacy networks, citizen-led accountability charters, and district committee feedback forums. Below is a summary of six valuable lessons for international organizations and funders looking to support locally led development:

1. Local capacity can be hard to see but is ever present.

As social change practitioners, we need to learn how to “see” local capacity by detecting it through inclusive participant-led processes

As we observed how teams worked together and solved problems with their own understanding of the challenge and what might work in their district, capacity became easier to see. When practitioners hold off on the temptation to offer the “right” approach or solution to a problem and to control outcomes, local capacity has an opportunity to shine. If we get out of the way, and put in place the right kinds of processes, capacity is there and it will emerge.

2. Working in diverse teams leverages collective capacity.

Approaches that let local actors work together in teams help them to leverage their collective capacity.

The social lab allowed local actors from various backgrounds and roles within society to work together. For many, this was the first time they had actually worked hand-in-hand with someone of a very different social standing or position of power. This diversity made possible a rich mixture of knowledge and skills, which contributed to everyone’s learning and made it possible for teams to take risks and try out new solutions. Learning by doing enabled teams to leverage their collective capacity and to build increased confidence, trust, and new ways of working - some of the most frequently cited stories of personal change we documented from lab members.

3. Observe, listen, and elevate the “deep story” of how aid affects local systems.

Listening for what Arlie Hochschild calls the “deep story” changes the nature of the “helper” and “doer” paradigm of foreign assistance. Asking local actors, “what it feels like to be on the receiving end of aid?” elicits a very different set of responses than questions we normally ask about local needs and problems.

When you listen for the deep story, you hear about emotional needs (hopes, fears, pride, anxieties) versus material needs. This focus on how people feel about and experience the “aid system” helps shift the emphasis away from the “heroic outsiders” there to help address needs, to conversations about how the system must change to be truly locally led. Focusing on what the system feels like helps practitioners design programs that are truly locally led and allows local actors to reflect on a “mutual aid system” they truly desire.





4. Make room for mutual accountability to organically emerge.

Let accountability structures emerge naturally, rather than imposing them from the top down.

Lab teams received \$500 to test their solutions every two months. Funds were disbursed and no written reports or receipts were required. Rather, each team was accountable to others in the lab, and shared how they used the resources provided and what they learned during each two-month reflection cycle. Resources were intentionally small, as participants were not implementing projects. Anonymous feedback surveys were used to help lab members reflect on how their team was using its funds. The results of the surveys were discussed openly with everyone, helping to significantly increase participant accountability. After some inevitable mistakes were made and grievances openly shared, labs decided on their own to elect new leadership structures and try out new processes to support mutual accountability. Through this process, social labs over time become more locally owned.

5. Focus on the health of relationships.

Social labs taught us that we need to design programs that strengthen relationships and trust between local actors, which in turn strengthens a district's capacity to tackle development challenges.

When starting the social labs, we asked district-level participants (citizens, youth leaders, Chiefs, CBOs, NGOs, government representatives) to consider the “health” of their relationships with each other. In almost every case, relationships were in critical condition. How do you spark a virtuous cycle of trust when the development value chain in the district is broken? First, be mindful that every link in the chain matters. Second, design a process that includes *all actors along the value chain*, encourages the formation of mixed teams, and makes trust and relationship building an explicit objective of your work. Third, make “radical equality” a founding principle so that everyone has a chance to be a leader. Fourth, measure trust through regular feedback loops.

6. Randomness, disorder, and volatility are essential ingredients of successful locally led initiatives.

Our challenge as practitioners is to design light touch processes that encourage controlled levels of randomness, disorder, and stress.

One of the most counter-intuitive findings from the Malawi social labs, was how essential micro-shocks and stressors are to local capacity development and autonomous local development. In a social lab, no time is wasted between the experimentation team design and field experience. Lab participants quickly learn about the consequences of their actions, embrace failure and try again, integrating lessons learned. Contrast this with a USAID Request for Proposal (RFP) process where international agencies lead bids, identify local partners, map, observe, and listen to communities, and then design a technical approach. This process is inherently extractive. When we bring pre-defined program solutions to local actors and communities, we deprive them the opportunity to experience volatility, randomness, and stressors of designing and testing solutions for complex systems, and the new skills and knowledge groups can acquire from learning how to adapt and respond to these situations on their own.