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BUILDING SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN THE LOCAL SYSTEM

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITY MEXICO

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT usaid MEXICO CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITY 3

ABOUT SOCIAL IMPACT 3

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 3

ACRONYMS AND ABREVIATIONS 4

INTRODUCTION 5

OVERVIEW OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITY (csa) 5

DESIGN AND STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT: 8

SECTION 1 9

OVERVIEW OF csa's LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES 9

SECTION 2 15

OVERVIEW: csa's APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITIES 15

SUSTAINABILITY 15

THE PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABILITY: csa's EXPERIENCE 15

DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY 16

SECTION 3 19

6 STEPS TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITY 19

SECTION 4 27

BEST PRACTICES AND RESULTS 27

CONCLUSION 31

ABOUT USAID MEXICO CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITY

Mexico Civil Society Activity (csa) was a 4-year program funded by the U.S.Agency for International Development (usaid). csa aimed to improve the sustainability of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to effectively implement their agendas on violence prevention, human rights protection and justice reform in Mexico.To this end, csa focused on improving CSOs capacity to communicate and work collaboratively, increasing their connections with key stakeholders, strengthening their capacity to develop strategies that respond to their changing environment and to their communities' needs and priorities, and improving CSOs access to knowledge and resources.

The usaid Mexico Civil Society Activity was implemented by Social Impact (SI) Inc. in partnership with Fundación Appleseed.

ABOUT SOCIAL IMPACT

SI is a management consulting firm that provides monitoring, evaluation, strategic planning, performance management and capacity building services to advance development effectiveness. SI's work helps to reduce poverty, improve health and education, promote peace and democratic governance, foster economic growth, and protect the environment. Toachieve this, SI delivers consulting, technical assistance, and training services to government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and foundations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Building Sustainable Learning Communities to strengthen the Local System was a collaborative effort drawing on the experience and knowledge of numerous usaid and Social Impact staff, as well as from csa's partner organizations. Special thanks go to the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization and content of this document, and/or reviewed and provided comments on the document: Leonardo Escobar, Gladys Rivera and Lucila Serrano. Additional thanks go to csa's Capacity Development Team:Anne Largaespada, Brandon Fischer, Mónica Corona,Andrea Sanfeliz and Jessali Zarazua for their insights on the most valuable lessons that the Learning Communities have provided to strengthen the Local System in Mexico.

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ACRONYMS AND ABREVIATIONS

CD 2.0	Capacity Development 2.0
CLA	Collaborating, Learning and
Adapting CSA	Civil Society Activity
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DO	Development Objective
HICD	Human and Institutional Capacity
Development ISO	Intermediate Support Organization
J2SR	Journey to Self-Reliance
NUPAS	Non-U.S. Organization Pre-Award
Survey OCA	Organizational Capacity Assessment
OPI	Organizational Performance Index
SI	Social Impact
TIER 1	28 CSOs that receive Capacity Development and Grants from csa, which contribute to usaid's Development Objectives
TIER 2	12 CSOs that are usaid partners in Mexico and receive Capacity Development
TIER 3	7 CSOs that receive Grants to influence the dimensions of the Civil Society
Index USAID	United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

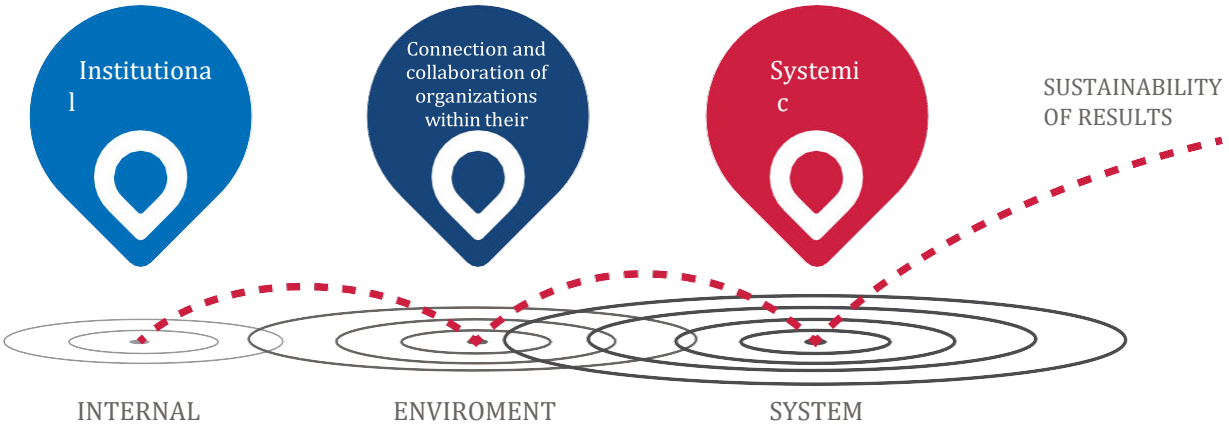
OVERVIEW OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVITY (CSA)

usaid/Mexico designed the Civil SocietyActivity (csa) to improve institutional capacities and increase the sustainability of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mexico so they can more effectively implement their agendas related to crime and violence prevention, legal justice reform, and human rights. csa supports three of usaid/Mexico's Development Objectives: DO 1 on crime and violence prevention; DO 2 on access to justice; and DO 3 on human rights. Social Impact, a development management consulting firm based in Arlington, VA, is the prime implementer of the csa contract and has designed the approaches described in this Strategy based on close collaboration with our local partner organizations.

csa's Strategic Approach remains firmly rooted in the original capacity-building purpose; upon receiving a contract modification on June 22nd, 2018, csa expanded its intervention to emphasize systems-based strengthening in addition to internal organizational capacity development to sustain development results.[1]

With an emphasis on improved organizational performance, rigorous assessment, the co-creation of solutions, systemic impact, and sustainability, csa's comprehensive approach is well aligned with usaid's Journey to Self-Reliance (J2SR) and focus on measurable, increased local capacity. Thus, csa provides a potential model for other usaid-funded capacity-building activities, as well as other capacity-building work, to enhance development impact and sustainability.

FIGURE 1. CSA'S STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF RESULTS



The Civil Society Activity implemented a systemic approach to capacity development across three primary components:

[1] For more information on csa's approach, please consult the document *Civil Society Activity's Systemic Approach to Capacity Development*, which is also included in csa's Legacy Compendium.

1. **GRANTS:** Administer usaid grants awarded to civil society organizations to help them develop their thematic projects and capacity development initiatives.

2. **LEGAL STRENGTHENING:** Provide technical support to improve legal compliance in areas of corporate, fiscal, and labor law; money laundering; and data privacy, through a network of pro-bono law firms based in Mexico, coordinated by csa.

3. **INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING:** Accompany CSOs in developing their capacities in three ways—by improving internal capacities, strengthening abilities to create and sustain strategic alliances, and solidifying their positions within their Local Systems—based on an integrated methodology that incorporates Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD),[2] Local Systems[3] and Capacity 2.0[4] approaches.

csa implemented capacity development interventions across three groups of civil society organizations (CSOs), categorized in Tiers:

- **TIER 1** was comprised of 28 CSOs that were awarded a usaid grant during the first year of csa implementation.Three of these CSOs are Intermediate Support Organizations (ISOs)iv that replicated grants administration and capacity development with fourteen CSOs who are their subgrantees. Organizations within this Tier received csa's full range of technical assistance to contribute to usaid's Development Objectives.

- **TIER 2** was comprised of twelve CSOs that were introduced to csa by usaid/Mexico and its implementing partners.Tier 2 organizations took part in a modular assessment of organizational performance based in usaid's Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA), the Organizational Performance Index (OPI), Social Network Analysis (SNA), and Stakeholder Mapping.Tier 2 organizations then received technical assistance to improve their legal status,as well as performance solutions to address performance gaps identified during the assessment process.

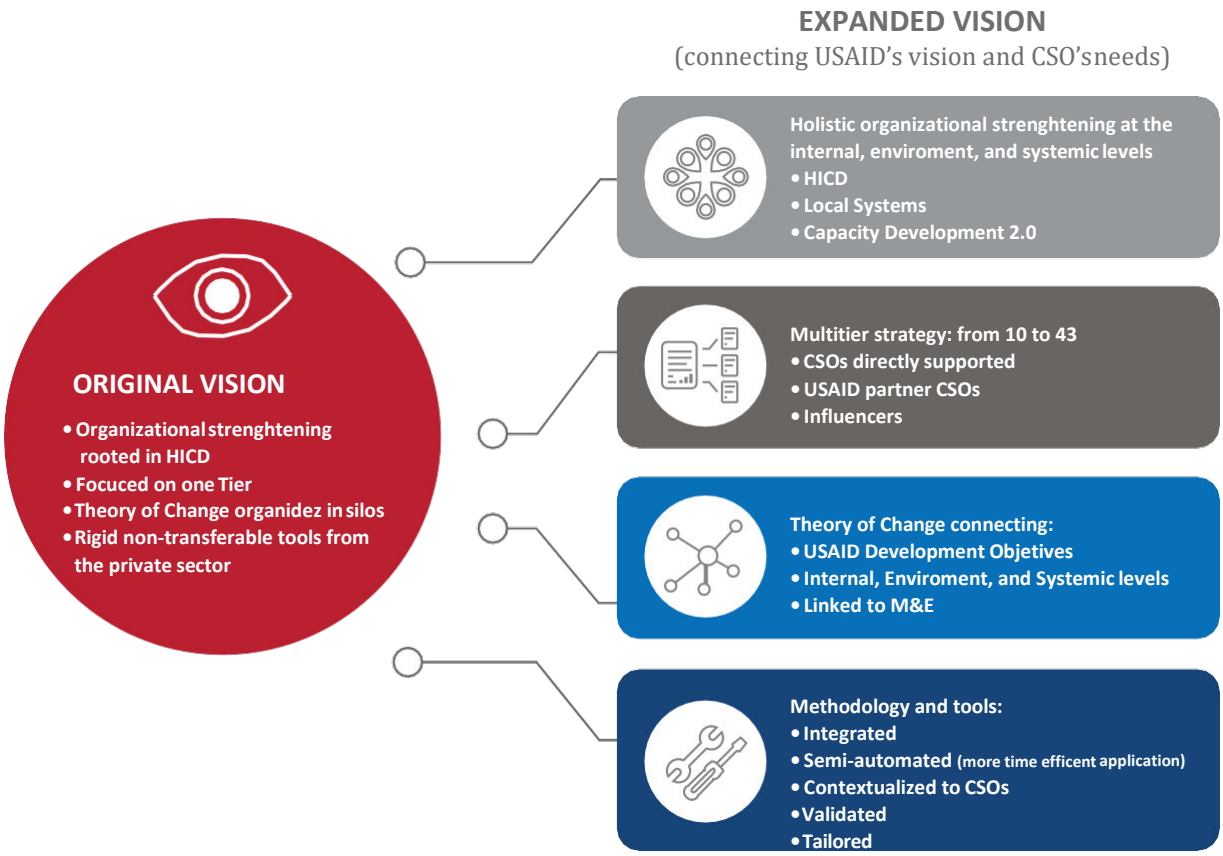
- **TIER 3** was comprised of seven CSOs and key actors who served as influencers in the civil society sector who will sustain csa's legacy in system strengthening by leveraging their own areas of expertise to benefit civil society actors and their ability to collaborate within the system.These key influencers include actors that are innovators, whether they be leaders of change, intermediaries across sectors, and/or key sources of information for the civil society sector.

[2] usaid n.d. "HICD Handbook". Accessed July 27, 2020. https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/ HICD%20Handbook%202011%20-%2008.pdf.

[3] usaid "Local Systems Framework", 2014. Accessed July 27, 2020. https://www.usaid.gov/policy/local-systems-fra- mework.

[4] usaid n.d. "Capacity 2.0".Accessed July 27, 2020. https://usaidlearninglab.org/library/capacity-20#:~:text=Capacity%202.0%20focuses%20on%20adaptive,just%20at%20the%20organizational%20ones.

FIGURE 2. EVOLUTION OF CSA



Social Impact (SI) based csa's original program design on the HICD model. However, as csa became familiar with Capacity 2.0 at usaid and took time to pause and reflect with partner organizations, csa identified the need to expand its capacity development approach. Consistent with Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA),[5] the csa team began to propose additional components to the theory of change that would complement the original vision rooted in HICD, while also drawing upon the latest best practices in the field. Inspired by the Local Systems and Capacity Development 2.0 approaches, the team began to view organizational strengthening in three dimensions: strengthening internal capacities, strengthening relationships and networks in which organizations participate, and strengthening organizations' positions within their Local Systems.

In a major conceptual and methodological shift, csa expanded its understanding of organizational capacities beyond those that are internal to an organization by adopting usaid's Local Systems framework. Based on this framework, csa views each CSO as one of many actors within a system working around a given social issue. For individual CSOs and the CSO sector as a whole to have sustainable impact, it is crucial to develop their organizational capacities to interact, communicate,

[5] usaid. n.d. "Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting" Accessed July 27, 2020. https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-toolkit.

and collaborate, including with other diverse actors operating in the same system. In this way, csa could more effectively support organizations as they tackled complex challenges in their environments.

csa designed and convened the **Learning Communities** within this framework as a strategy to promote both the relationships between allied CSOs and their connections with other key sectors.This paper describes csa's experience promoting and convening the consolidation of three Learning Community groups and highlights key outcomes obtained through this initiative.

DESIGN AND STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT:

This document is designed to serve two related purposes: 1) To be an accessible knowledge resource to help readers understand the value and systemic impact of Learning Communities, based on the experience and assets csa has cultivated and the results CSOs have achieved through Learning Community participation; and 2) to serve as a practical guide to help CSOs and other strategic actors utilize and adapt these lessons in order to replicate, scale and sustain results- oriented Learning Communities over the long term.

Figure 3 below summarizes the main content of the document's three Sections. Text boxes throughout help illustrate key events, results achieved, and lessons learned for potential replication and scaling.

WHO IS THIS DOCUMENT FOR?

- **For Civil Society Organizations** that seek to establish and sustain Learning Communities.
- **For USAID/México and other funders** to support, promote and scale the use of Learning Communities to strengthen the Local System.

FIGURE 3: CONTENT BY SECTION

SECTION 1	SECTION 2	SECTION 3	SECTION 4
• Overview of CSA's three Learning Communities	• Overview of CSA's approach to Sustainable Learning Communities	• 6 practical steps to build a sustainable Learning Community	• Best Practices and Results
• Key outcomes by Learning Community group		• USAID promotion of Learning Communities	• Lessons Learned

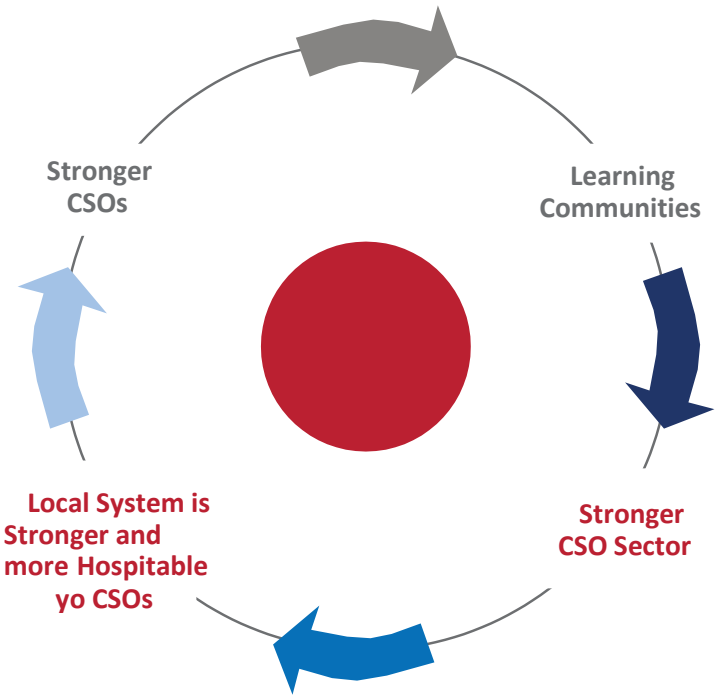
RESULTS AT ASYSTEM LEVEL

OVERVIEW OF CSA'S LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES

csa established three Learning Community groups as a key Systems-focused intervention based on CLA. Each Learning Community group is composed of partner organizations and local leaders who collaborate and learn from each other through discussing topics of common interest; examine and clarify operational and programmatic questions; and share lessons learned on capacity building and other topics. In addition to informing member organizations' work and helping to improve their internal performance, the Learning Communities strengthen the broader system by reinforcing existing relationships, establishing new linkages among member organizations, and pointing to new alliances and opportunities for collaboration in the Local System.

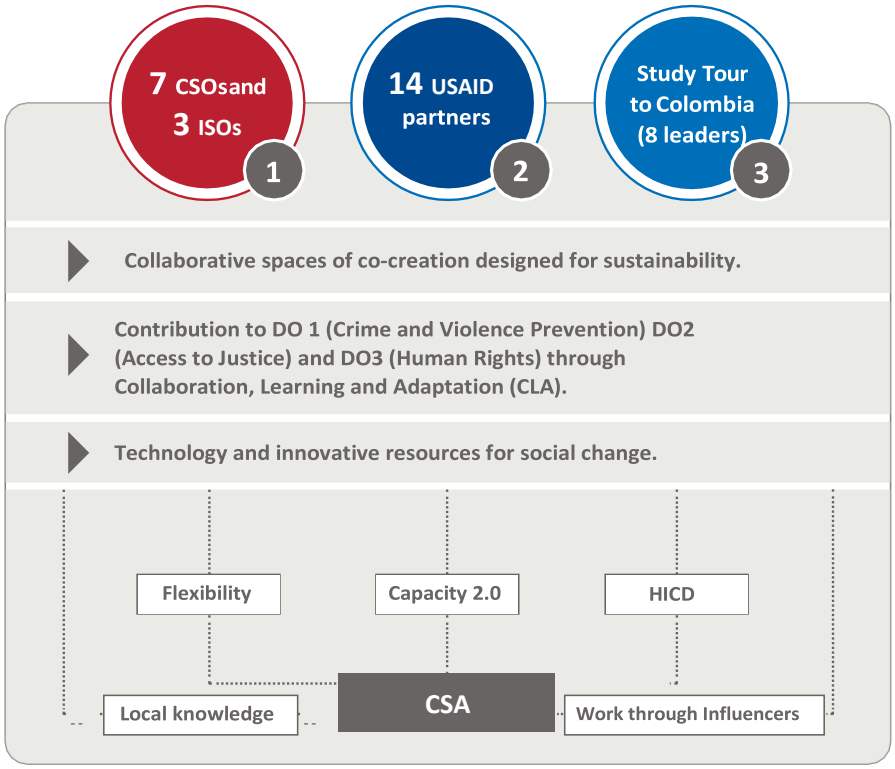
By design, the goal of the Learning Community initiative is for organizations to strategize together and collaborate, integrating the capacity development assets and Local Systems approach that csa has facilitated during the 4-year usaid contract. Figure 4 illustrates csa's experience consolidating three Learning Community groups as an important part of a "strengthening cycle." csa's strategy posits that when both the civil society sector and the broader Local System in which CSOs operate are strengthened, CSOs can reach their objectives and implement their agendas more effectively. Participatory Learning Communities are a foundational element in this process.

FIGURE 4. CSA'S STRENGTHENING CYCLE



The knowledge, best practices and results reflected in this document are based on csa's experience in consolidating the three Learning Community groups. Figure 5 illustrates these three groups, and some of their shared characteristics in applying CLA principles while integrating the HICD, Capacity 2.0 and Local Systems approaches:

FIGURE 5. CSAS LEARNING COMMUNITY GROUPS



Group 1: This was the first group to pioneer csa's Learning Community initiative. It was comprised of 7 allied CSOs and 3 ISOs that csa partnered with for capacity building and grant management.

This Learning Community transitioned from a discussion forum on capacity development issues, to a participatory space for learning and intentional collaboration. At the same time, the capacity development focus expanded from internal organizational capacities only, to the external relationships and systemic conditions affecting CSOs' ability to implement their agendas.This shift occurred as csa gradually introduced the Local Systems approach and encouraged the allied CSOs to identify, analyze and consolidate more connections and alliances in their system.

Group 1 has met in five Learning Community events convened by csa and structured through participatory design processes. These events took place inTijuana, Mexico City and Sonora from 2018 to March 2020.

This first Learning Community group produced new alliances and collaborative activities among the members themselves and with other key stakeholders. Table 1 highlights the most significant outcomes of this Learning Community:

TABLE 1. SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES OF GROUP 1

	Innovation in the Criminal Justice System: Seven CSOs have shared methodologies and ideas to better understand the Criminal Justice System in Mexico and have shared resources, such as key contact information, international best practices and Human Rights guidelinesto work with local authorities.
	Secondary and Tertiary Violence Prevention:[6] Four CSOs have worked together to improve their methodologies in the prevention of secondary and tertiary violence in Mexico, with a specific focus on youth.
	Technology for Social Change: Three organizations have designed programs that use technology to prevent violence or to promote social change. The CSO are improving their use of technology such as Apps or websites and are sharing best practices with each other to be more effective.
	Mediation for Conflict Resolution: Four CSOs have shared and integrated conflict mediation methodologies to improve their work with youth or other vulnerable groups. Conflict resolution is a proven approach to violence prevention; the civil society sector in Mexico has become the main promoter of this approach with local authorities.

[6] Primary Prevention: Activities that take place before violence has occurred to prevent initial perpetration or victimization.
Secondary Prevention: Immediate responses after violence has occurred to deal with short-term consequences and prevent future perpetration or victimization.
Tertiary Prevention: Long-term responses after violence has occurred to deal with the lasting consequences of violence and offender treatment interventions.

Group 2: The second group to form a Learning Community was comprised of 10 other usaid partner CSOs[7] and 4 CSOs that received a Fixed Amount Award and a modular version of institutional strengthening from csa. csa was able to convene this Learning Community group more efficiently by applying the experience and lessons learned in working with Group 1.

The Group 2 Learning Community has met three times in events convened by csa in Tijuana and Mexico City that were structured with the participation of the allied CSOs themselves. From June 2019 to January 2020, this Learning Community consolidated alliances and shared best practices from a cross-sector perspective.The following are the most significant outcomes achieved bythis Learning Community group:

TABLE 2. SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES OF GROUP 2

	Innovation in the Criminal Justice System: Participating CSOs that work to protect Human Rights are sharing data on sensitive issues, which enables them to compare and contrast figures, identify inconsistencies in national and regional data, and develop stronger arguments to promote change in the criminal justice system.
	Secondary and Tertiary Violence Prevention: Organizational members of this Learning Community have identified common issues and challenges they face as they work on the promotion and protection of Human Rights. Even though they have different agendas, the member CSOs developed a shared understanding of these challenges and have opened new communication channels to promote collaboration, such as online forums and digital platforms. These new virtual communications opportunities, in turn, will help sustain and potentially increase participation in the Learning Community.

Group 3: The third Learning Community Group is comprised of eight local leaders from the states of Sonora and Coahuila who were selected to participate in csa's Colombia Study Tour initiative.[8] csa selected this group of local leaders to travel to Colombia in October 2019 to learn from the Colombian peace-building experience so that upon their return, they could implement two projects focused on systemic impact in the states of Coahuila and Sonora.

[7] This group was comprised of fourteen CSOs that were introduced to csa by usaid and its implementing partners. Organizations in Tier 2 took part in a modular assessment of organizational performance based in OCA, OPI, SNA, and Stakeholder Mapping, and technical assistance to improve legal status, as well as performance solutions to ad- dress a performance gaps identified during the assessment process.

[8] The Colombia Study Tour was a usaid funded initiative that csa organized, to consolidate a group of outstanding citizens who traveled to Colombia and collected the most important peace building experiences from the local CSO sector.The group returned from the study tour in October 2019 and will build a strategy to incorporate learnings into a local project in Sonora and Coahuila.

This Learning Community began to develop joint project ideas while they were in Colombia; upon their return to Mexico, they have worked to consolidate two collaborative projects on violence prevention. The group has met over five times (in person and remotely) to structure both projects. csa has convened these meetings and assisted the Learning Community in adopting a Local Systems approach to their project design process. Table 3 presents the most significant outcomes this Learning Community has achieved between November 2019 and June 2020:

TABLE 3. SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES OF GROUP 3

	Innovation in the Criminal Justice System: Members of the Learning Community who work in the Criminal Justice system have facilitated new communication channels between public authorities and the civil society sector. This unprecedented communication by groups that have rarely collaborated in the past has allowed government authorities to consider and use relevant information produced by CSOs so that they can work more effectively with the target population.
	Secondary and Tertiary Violence Prevention: Three members of the Learning Community have consolidated a group to prevent violence against woman in the state of Sonora. Their project aims to socialize how violence affects women and how to involve the public and private sectors within the Local System to prevent it. Similarly, four members of the Learning Community have structured a project in Coahuila that contributes to peacebuilding through alliances between public institutions and the civil society sector.

To date, all three Learning Community Groups have focused primarily on face-to-face meetings and events. Going forward, there will likely be a combination of face-to-face events and virtual activities, to sustain the Learning Communities. Over time, building in virtual collaboration is a potential example of the adaptive management that csa has promoted, understanding that for the Learning Communities to continue without csa as convener, participating organizations will explore different ways of interacting.

Figure 6 synthesizes the methodological approach that csa recommends. The concentric circles describe csa's partner organizations, other CSOs in the system that work towards the promotion and protection of Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and the entire Local System.[9] This systemic approach is based on usaid's vision that effective development outcomes emanate from increasing and reinforcing the performance of multiple actors in the same system and increasing the effectiveness of their interactions. The arrows that cut through the concentric circles highlight a set of operating principles for engaging the local system. The intent is that the Learning Communities will model these principles not only in their own governance and technical activities, but also through the

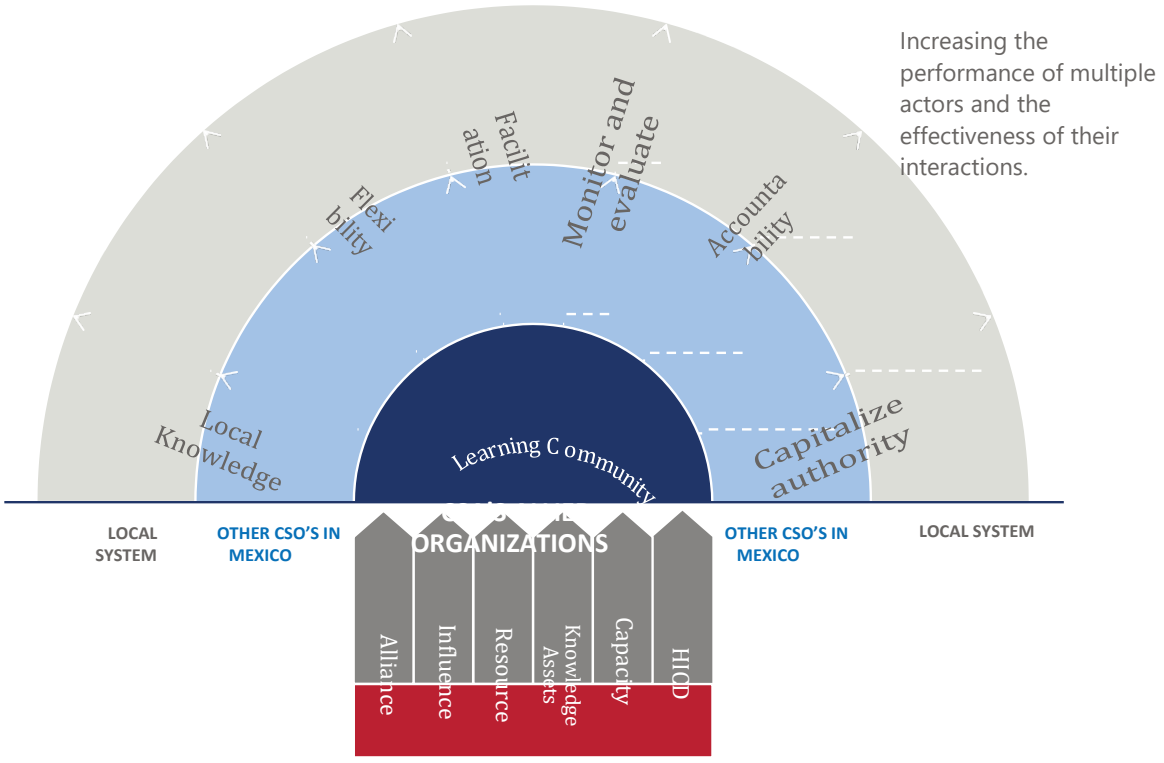
[9] usaid. n.d. "Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development." Accessed July 27, 2020. https:// www.usaid.gov/policy/local-systems-framework

processes they are helping to disseminate to the Local System in which they operate. At the bottom of the graphic are the contributions that CSA has made over the life of the contract, leading to lessons learned that CSA has systematized to promote the sustainability of Learning Communities.

What has motivated the CSA team to document and systematize the Learning Community model?

CSA´s three Learning Communities have demonstrated how organizations that work together and take ownership of collaborative processes have achieved results in areas where they would not have had impact acting alone. These results and associated lessons learned have motivated the CSA team to document and systematize the Learning Community experience, so that it can be successfully replicated and scaled to benefit the civil society sector in Mexico and other countries.

FIGURE 6: LEARNING COMMUNITY IMPACT ON THE LOCAL SYSTEM



SECTIO N 2

OVERVIEW: CSAS APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

LEARNING COMMUNITY

As described above, the csa Learning Communities use CLA to strengthen their own capacities, the CSO sector, and their Local System. Within csa, three groups of allied CSOs have formed Learning Communities to discuss topics of common interest, examine and clarify operational and programmatic questions, share lessons learned and promote a better understanding about the CSO sector

Each Learning Community helps ensure that knowledge is exchanged and disseminated effectively across partner organizations, their alliances and collaborators, promoting both the impact and sustainability of the partner organizations' achievements and csa's contribution to capacity development in Mexico's civil society sector. The goal of the Learning Community initiative is for organizations ultimately to strategize and collaborate on their own, integrating and **sustaining** the capacity development assets and lessons learned that csa has facilitated, in order to increase CSOs' individual and collective impact.

SUSTAINABILITY

For csa,sustainability is achieved when partner organizations and their local alliances are empowered to take ownership of development processes, including financing, capacity development practices, strategic alliances, and Learning Community consolidation, and to maintain project results and impacts beyond the life of csa (Project Design Sustainability Analysis Tool, usaid). For csa, sustainability is more than an end-goal; it is an on-going focus of the work with partner CSOs. Accordingly, csa has encouraged partner organizations to be strategic and intentional about how they integrate sustainability as a cross-cutting principle in all their activities.

THE PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABILITY: CSA'S EXPERIENCE

Initially, csa organized and convened events to support the formation and interaction of the Learning Community groups. This required building trust among members and facilitating their efforts to define an agenda of shared priorities; identify methodologies; facilitate sessions; and promote equal participation of different members. Over time, csa assumed a less direct role, encouraging the organizations' collaboration and preliminary planning while designing a space for CSOs to take ownership of the agenda, and to organize and facilitate sessions on their own.

In the process, csa incorporated usaid's Journey to Self-Reliance (J2SR),[10] where civil society organizations (as well as other key actors, such as government and the private sector) have two mutually reinforcing mandates: to increase their commitment and capacity to manage and sustain their own development. Both **commitment** and **capacity** are essential in building a Learning Community, as described below in the Dimensions of Sustainability section, and for sustaining this type of CSO initiative.

RESULT:
Local Ownership.

Assuming local ownership of the Learning Communities was not an organic nor challenge-free process. To achieve local ownership, both CSA and partner CSOs had to agree upon topics to be included in Learning Community events that were not only interesting, but also generated value for each participant. This was challenging because CSOs are different by nature, have individual mandates and missions, and face different programming constraints. However, the value of encouraging local ownership – and leadership – of this model is to create a space where CSOs can identify common interests and derive value from their differences and

DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

csa's theory of change assumes that organizations exist and co-exist within a system. This system affects their performance just as CSOs impact the broader system. For this reason, csa has focused on both the internal and external factors that contribute to performance improvement and the sustainability of results. csa's systems-based approach is reflected in the creation of Learning Communities that actively foster strategic alliances.

Figure 7 illustrates the dimensions of sustainability that csa has emphasized during the 4-year contract. The dimensions amplify csa's definition of sustainability and emanate from two key usaid processes: 1) the CLA[11] framework, the right-hand side of which focuses on whether an organization's culture, business processes, and resource allocation support an enabling environment for collaboration, learning and adapting; and 2) NUPAS (the Non-US organization pre-award survey),[12] a due diligence process that csa has used primarily for its small grant activity and that also includes sustainability questions that are relevant to, and have great value for, LearningCommunities.

[10] USAID. n.d. "The Journey to Self-Reliance." Accessed July 27, 2020. https://www.usaid.gov/selfreliance
[11] USAID. n.d. "CLA Toolkit." Accessed July 27, 2020. https://usaidlearninglab.org/cla-toolkit
[12] USAID. n.d. "Non-US Pre-Award Survey" Accessed July 27, 2020. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1868/303sam.pdf

FIGURE 7: SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSIONS OBTAINED FROM NUPAS AND CLA

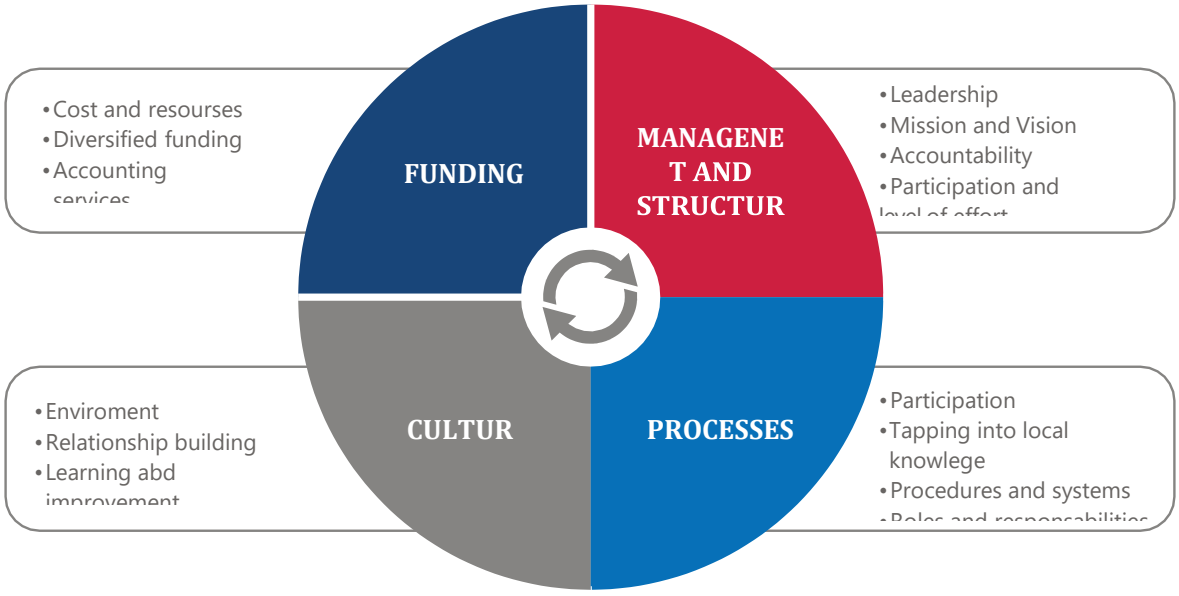


TABLE 4. DESCRIBES THE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN MORE DETAIL, PROVIDING KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EACH DIMENSION

TABLE 4. DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY	
MANAGEMENT AND STRUCTURE	• Leadership: Clearly defined[13] roles and responsibilities including delegations of authority to participating staff.
	• A mission/vision is defined for the Learning Community.
	• A set of accountability measures and interaction guidelines are defined.
	• Participation schemes and methodologies are considered and incorporated, and level of effort is defined.
FUNDING	• Costs and resources: Clearly defined costs and schemes for contribution.
	• Diversified funding: A fundraising plan that includes targeted donors, potential fee-for-service schemes, and opportunistic fundraising over time; clear responsibilities, budget goals and transparency mechanisms; and specific plans to diversify funding sources.
	• Accounting services: Defined management, skills and level of effort needed to sustain the Learning Community
	• Mapping and recognition of the collective assets (in cash and in kind) that member CSOs can put forward.

[13] To support sustainability, csa has determined and systematized the elements in this Table and documented them in writing.

PROCESSES	• Participatory methodologies are established to elicit diverse contributions.
	• Information sources are made public and local knowledge is incorporated.
	• Procedures and systems are established to capture, synthesize, store, and disseminate key information and tacit knowledge.
	• Roles and responsibilities of participants are clearly established to enable effective engagement in Learning Community activities.
	• Levels of autonomy and decision-making processes are established to ensure constant and equitable participation.
CULTURE	• An environment is established and cultivated where people can share ideas (inclusive, open and safe spaces for collaboration and interaction).
	• Strong relationships are built on trust and good communication, in order to share knowledge and resources.
	• Participants and members of the Learning Community are empowered to participate, learn and reflect.
	• Reputation of participants, organizations and the Learning Community group is valued and protected.
	• Experience of participants and organizations is leveraged and optimized.

SECTIO N 3

6 STEPS TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE LEARNING COMMUNITY

This section presents six steps with associated considerations and lessons learned that csa has identified in working with over 40 Mexican CSOs. The six steps incorporate various dimensions of sustainability described in Table 4. In addition, these steps reflect broader usaid best practices on the consolidation of Communities of Practice.[14] csa has synthesized these steps for CSOs to apply in their own work with Learning Communities and for usaid's use in determining how to support, promote and scale sustainable Learning Communities.

Step 1. DEFINE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Before creating a Learning Community, it is important to define its purpose based on the specific needs the Learning Community will help address. Leadership and potential participants should understand this purpose and agree upon core goals and objectives. Ideally, leadership and participants would determine the short, medium- and long-term objectives for the Learning Community, as well as preliminary ideas on learning topics and activities aligned with those objectives.

KEY CONSIDERATION: A Learning Community is driven by the desire to share knowledge that better equips CSOs to implement their agendas in fluid, or even volatile, operating environments. Thus, unlike a working group or a product-driven group, a Learning Community can have a longer life span. Defining clear goals and related objectives is key to the sustainability of a Learning Community; even though these can evolve, goals and objectives provide the Community's leadership and participants (including new leaders and members who join the group) with a common purpose and a clear notion of why a Learning Community adds value to their work.

LESSONS LEARNED: For csa, defining goals and objectives for Learning Community events was challenging at the beginning of this initiative, because the participating CSOs were invitees, rather than co-creators of the agenda. CSO participation evolved over time, as they began to take interest in the decision-making process and defining the Learning Community's ongoing purpose and agenda (i.e., its goals and objectives). This process took time to consolidate. Therefore, it is recommended to kickstart a Learning Community's consolidation by facilitating a process in which member organizations collaborate on defining common goals and objectives from the very beginning.

[14] usaid, n.d. "Communities of Practice" Accessed July 27, 2020. https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resour- ce/files/ppl_guidance_docs_cops_final.pdf.

Step 2. TARGET PARTICIPANTS

Leadership and potential participants should agree on the number of members a Learning Community will have, understanding that a large membership is not synonymous with a successful Learning Community. Participants should have sufficiently similar work objectives, organizational agendas, or technical areas of work, that the shared knowledge and other resources developed and disseminated by the Learning Community are relevant and useful.

KEY CONSIDERATION: Although Learning Community members should share core characteristics, it is important to think of different ways to engage participants, appeal to different interests, and consider different resources available to them. This can be achieved by promoting the participation of different kinds of staff, as well as integration of other key actors into the Community dynamic, so that there is a constant motivation to be part of the Learning Community.

LESSONS LEARNED: As the Learning Community begins to consolidate, it is natural that the agenda focuses on the work and interests of the original group of participants CSOs. However, CSOs are constantly evolving and learning, and looking for new allies to expand their work, as well as strengthen linkages in the system in which they operate. Thus, it is important to integrate other actors (such as members of the private and public sectors) that can strengthen CSOs individually and the Learning Community as a whole, as well as the Local System.

RESULT:
New alliances are formed to strengthen the sector.

USAID/Mexico constantly encouraged the CSA team to broaden its thinking about how CSOs could further connect and collaborate with the Local System. This guided CSA's methodological approach and allowed the team to facilitate Learning Community meetings that emphasized the value of alliances. Over time, the CSA team was intentional about incorporating new types of allies that increased the member CSOs' understanding of the Local System and strengthened their

Step 3. DETERMINE GOVERNANCE

Engage participants in discussions about the Learning Community structure and rules of engagement at the outset. Agree on expectations for Learning Community roles and responsibilities, as well as governance mechanisms. For example,will the leadership of the Learning Community rotate over time or will certain CSOs by virtue of their experience remain in this role into the intermediate term? Will the Learning Community develop a membership charter to help clarify the group's vision and objectives to support ongoing participation? And, what other forms of documentation might be helpful to orient new and existing members to the Learning Community's purpose and collaborative norms?

KEY CONSIDERATION: Learning Community structure and governance may change over time, depending on participants' vision and experiences in the Community. It is advised to keep an open dialogue on governance, including group norms. In the spirit of CLA, members should take time periodically to pause and reflect on governance procedures and the way they are documented and implemented, and then revise them as necessary.

RESULT:
The Colombia Study Tour group forms key alliances with the Local Government.

After traveling to Colombia, the Study Tour Learning Community has structured a project to prevent violence. Their project rests on the idea that CSOs, the government and other key sectors can work together to achieve a common goal. As a result, Group 3 has established an alliance with the local government to share information and best practices to prevent violence and protect the most vulnerable groups.

LESSONS LEARNED: Transitioning from a Learning Community that is convened by CSA to an independent, self-managing Learning Community is challenging, because participants themselves need to define leadership and governance structures.This step is essential for the sustainability of the Learning Community.It is recommended to have discussions around these issues early on,with adequate time allotted to the topic and with meeting management that encourages active listening, so that allied CSOs understand how self-governance is a mutual responsibility to be addressed in a participatory and productive way.

Step 4. PARTICIPATION, AGENDA SETTING AND FACILITATION

Participation from both the leadership and staff of member CSOs is key to Learning Community sustainability. Leaders who model commitment to the Learning Community through their own behavior as members and who encourage their staff to participate signal the importance of collaboration and learning. In addition, context, institutional backgrounds, and sociopolitical interests are important considerations when promoting participatory methodologies. Through joint agenda setting, Learning Community members are empowered to propose and further engage with other key actors while they are strengthening their own organizational agendas.

KEY CONSIDERATION: Facilitation is key to promote inclusive and substantive participation by individuals from different levels in an organization. The Learning Community's leadership and members should design facilitation methodologies that ensure participatory and productive meetings. Facilitators should be selected based on identified skills and experience; at the same time, learning effective facilitation techniques is an opportunity for capacity building and professional development among members. It is recommended to dedicate time, resources and expertise to this step, because appropriate participation and effective facilitation will lead to a more sustainable Learning Community model.

LESSONS LEARNED: csa has emphasized participatory methods to build ownership and sustainability, rather than dependence. csa staff have invited CSO partners to create agendas collaboratively, which means that Learning Community members have defined their own topics of interest, activities, and facilitation methodologies.This has ensured that CSOs are engaged during Learning Community events and that their organizational interests are reflected.

In addition, csa has observed the benefits of having different staff members of the same CSOs participate in Learning Community events. For example, if a manager participates in one event, then a coordinator

RESULT:
Young CSO staff took the baton.

One of CSA's most interesting and valuable experiences as convener of the Learning Communities was recognizing the potential and energy that young people bring as participants in these collaborative spaces. Young CSO staff members embody the dynamic nature of the civil society sector, where intergenerational knowledge is created and incorporated into high impact projects. The knowledge, outlook and concerns that young people have, all strengthen the Learning Community and help contribute to sustainability as these individuals move into more senior

or other staff member can participate in a second Learning

Community event. Rotating and varying who participates, and establishing the expectation that participants will report back on key take-aways, methodologies, or decisions, ensures that Learning Communities integrate new perspectives while also providing different staff with opportunities to cascade learning through their organizations and, potentially, serve as change agents.

CSO leaders who are committed to Learning Community participation make all this possible: Leadership have a unique role in permitting and promoting staff involvement; they model engagement and collaboration; and they bring technical expertise as well as an understanding of the Local System.

Step 5. BUILD A VIBRANT NETWORK AND PROMOTE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Foster constant exchange of ideas and mutual support among members. From the beginning, participants should be invited to share professional and organizational experiences, challenges, resources and interests, as well as questions and requests for peer support, to help connect people and organizations through different communications and outreach strategies. A vibrant Learning Community depends on both the **supply** of relevant knowledge and experience and members' **demand** for the knowledge and experience they acquire through participation.

KEY CONSIDERATION: Capitalize on opportunities for in-person engagement since this can help strengthen the Learning Community by building trust and rapport among participants. One approach entails scheduling Learning Community activities around other events that members are already attending, as this can build in-person presence and interaction. Another approach entails designing events with enough flexibility in their topics and meeting structure to create space for new learning and to enable knowledge creation in real time.

RESULT:
CSOs and other actors in the Local System overcome stereotypes and find common ground for collaboration.

A key juncture in the Learning Community process occurred when it became clear the Learning Community was a space where people who did not normally interact (nor tend to trust one another) could find common ground. This new behavior did not happen straight away, and it took time to consolidate. However, when these unprecedented exchanges did occur, exciting new learning took place between different CSOs and between CSOs and other types of participants who

LESSONS LEARNED: csa has had successful Learning Community meetings that were scheduled around other civil society events. For example, csa invited CSOs to participate in a 2-day Learning Community event that it purposely scheduled to complement a civil society conference. CSOs were able to participate in both events, providing a variety of insights and learning experiences, while also increasing linkages to the Local System.

Moreover, csa provided enough flexibly in the designs and enough open space in the event agendas to enable the type of robust, dynamic interaction that leads to unexpected connections and knowledge creation. While this kind of agenda design can pose risks, csa learned that the pay-off was well worth the initial uncertainty.

Step 6. BE PREPARED TO LEARN AND ADAPT

A Learning Community is organic and should adapt as necessary to meet members' expectations and needs. The participatory methods described above signal an openness to inquiry, candid discussion, and collegial feedback. In both structured and semi-structured ways, a Learning Community should provide opportunities for brainstorming and sharing ideas so the Community can adapt and evolve. Pause and reflect on programming and hold After Action Reviews to support learning and adaptive management. Examine why certain approaches and activities have not been successful or could have been more effective. Use Appreciative Inquiry and other asset-based approaches to understand key success factors of activities that have gone well, and how they can be accelerated, replicated,and scaled.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: Purposeful documentation of a Learning Community's lessons learned and reasons for adaptive management will strengthen sustainability. It is expected that Learning Community membership will change over time as personnel rotate in and out and as new members join. Maintaining brief but accurate documentation of key Learning Community events and experience will help orient new members and assist other Learning Community members and their donors to learn from past successes and mistakes. A practical way of supporting documentation is to administer polls and questionnaires to determine participant satisfaction and degrees of learning. Members can also rotate the role of rapporteur to share the responsibility for documentation and enable the cascading of information to CSO staff who did not attend Learning Community events.

LESSONS LEARNED: At each Learning Community event that csa has facilitated, a rapporteur was assigned to document and systematize experiences, insights and the most important issues that the convened CSO participants discussed.This systematization allowed participants to revisit previous Learning Community events to reflect on what has worked best and why, as well as on changes that can improve these collaborative spaces. Additionally, csa administered user-friendly polls and questionnaires to learn how CSOs perceive these events, their peers, the facilitation methods and the activities.

USAID'S PROMOTION OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

To support usaid and partners in Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting, csa has analyzed its experiences to share lessons learned about usaid's role in promoting and supporting Learning Communities.

csa's experience has been possible because itis a usaid-funded program, which – among many benefits to capacity development in Mexico
– enabled csa to establish its own convening authority in collaboration with usaid. This work aligned well with usaid Local Systems principles.[15] For example, in collaboration with usaid, csa was able to assemble multiple stakeholders, encouraging local CSOs to identify alliance opportunities and share relevant technical knowledge to strengthen CSO performance in the Mexican context. usaid made non-financial contributions that are directly related to Learning Community sustainability, in addition to the funding support they provided.

Figure 8 illustrates examples of usaid/Mexico's mostimportantcontributions and direct inputs in supporting the csa Learning Communities, followed by more detail on the important role usaid plays in Mexico and worldwide in catalyzing effective capacity building work. csa was fortunate in working with usaid/Mexico, a funder and partner that understood the dynamics of Mexico's civil society sector and that demonstrated deep understanding and sensitivity to appropriate roles and dynamics.

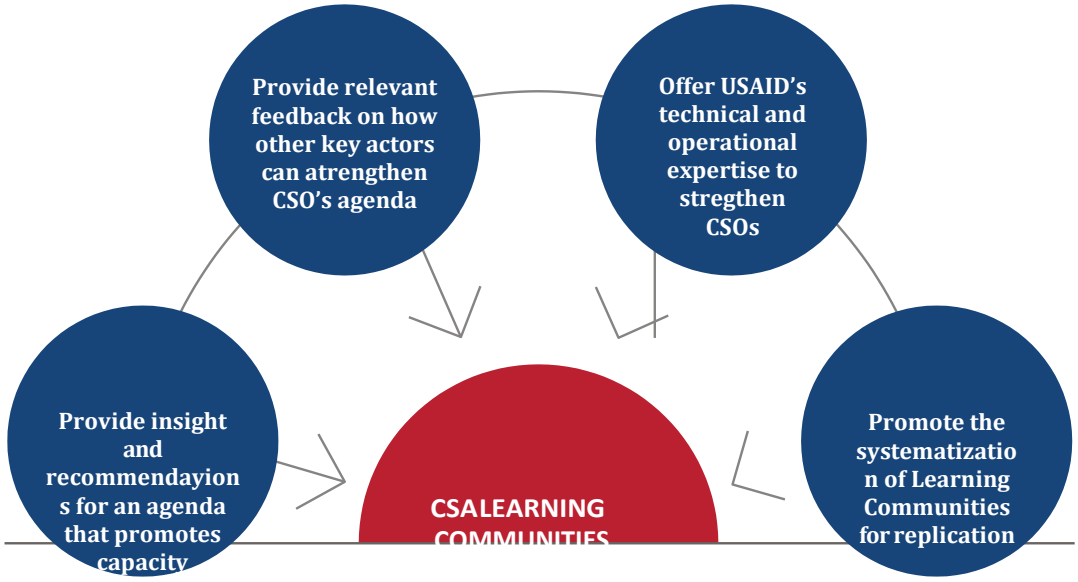
RESULT:
CSOs themselves are empowered to sustain the Learning Communities.

CSA learned there should be a balance between serving as convener and letting others assume leadership. This means stepping back to promote participation and allowing for new dynamics and new ideas to emerge naturally. It might also mean that some activities or initiatives evolve that are different from what was originally planned or envisioned. Stepping back to permit local leadership to emerge isn´t always easy, particularly if work plans and deadlines are inflexible. Fortunately, CSA had the support of a USAID Contracting Officer Representative (COR) who understood the importance of empowering participants to exercise

The Mission knew when to get involved and when to step back, which empowered csa to take the lead, without imposing directives that would have inhibited csa's ability to work with partners in an authentic way.

[15] usaid. 2014. "Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development." https://www.usaid.gov/sites/ default/files/documents/1870/LocalSystemsFramework.pdf.

FIGURE 8. EXAMPLES OF USAID'S INPUTS AS CONVENER IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES



PROVIDE INSIGHT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN AGENDA THAT PROMOTES CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT:

usaid is a global organization with numerous Headquarters Operating Units and dozens of field Missions that are directly engaged in capacity building activities. usaid is able to draw upon that technical experience on the ground and associated knowledge repositories, to provide insights and recommendations.

PROVIDE RELEVANT FEEDBACK ON HOW OTHER KEY ACTORS CAN STRENGTHEN CSOS' AGENDA:

Because of usaid/Mexico's broader democracy, human rights and governance portfolio, the Mission has considerable knowledge and insight into the Local System. Therefore, usaid/Mexico suggested csa expand the original, internally focused vision of organizational capacity building to the broader Capacity 2.0 and Local Systems approach that promotes "systems thinking" with partner organizations through the Learning Communities.

OFFER USAID'S TECHNICAL AND OPERATIONAL EXPERTISE TO STRENGTHEN CSOS:

Through its knowledge of the Mexican operating environment and broader international work, usaid was in a position to provide technical and operational expertise on areas that are essential for the sustainability of allied CSOs.These include strategic and project planning; financial management; alliance building; and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL).

PROMOTE THE SYSTEMATIZATION AND DOCUMENTATION OF LEARNING COMMUNITY LESSONS LEARNED TO SUPPORT REPLICATION AND SCALING:

Social Impact conceptualized and compiled this document directly in response to USAID's request that CSA systematize the Learning Community experience for others to replicate, thereby helping to scale up this systems-oriented capacity building intervention. Compiling this document required SI to pause and reflect on CSA and partner experiences, and to synthesize lessons learned and critical success factors.

SECTION 4

BEST PRACTICES AND RESULTS

This section examines a set of successful activities that occurred within CSA Learning Community events. Each example includes a specific practice that CSA considers worth of replication because of the positive outcomes it has generated in the Local System. The examples also include critical success factors based on CSA and participant reflection; the value of the selected practice for building sustainable Learning Communities; and the outcome, which illustrates how this practice strengthened participant CSOs. These examples illustrate key dimensions of sustainability provided in Table 5 and reflect direct application of the 6 Steps for building a Sustainable Learning Community.

The following examples present successful Learning Community practices:

1. Joint site visits to member CSO activities
2. Purposeful design and facilitation to optimize collaboration
3. Consistent use of participatory methods
4. Joint inquiry and evidence-based collaboration
5. Alliances based on geographic characteristics and constraints (including violence and instability)
6. Providing access to experts in fundraising and alliance building
7. Providing access to media and communications experts.

TABLE 5. CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS, VALUE AND OUTCOMES OF CSA LEARNING COMMUNITY GROUPS

PRACTICE	CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS	VALUE	OUTCOME
Hold joint site visits to enable Learning Community members to observe and learn from colleague organizations' work	A CSO took leadership in planning and coordinating a hands-on activity: a joint site visit to acquaint other Learning Community members with their work and the importance of alliances beyond the CSO sector. The host CSO designed a purposeful debrief discussion afterwards to process the experience and synthesize learnings that all participants could apply in their own work.	CSOs were able to learn different methodologies and approaches for working with public sector institutions in Mexico. Learning Community members were able to visualize how a CSO can establish strategic alliances with key actors in the Local System, such as government entities, that are not typical partners.	Two CSOs that perform similar work compared methodologies and shared experiences, which resulted in redefining their model on how to better work with public authorities. A CSO that is a leader in the field of conflict mediation in Mexico shared resources and expertise to help other CSOs integrate this approach in their work with public authorities and other key sectors.
Design and convene a facilitated discussion of current political and social conditions in Mexico and how this operating environment affects CSO work	A Learning Community member (rather than CSA as the outside convener) facilitated a candid discussion of the socioeconomic context of the country. The meeting design and facilitation helped synthesize a deeper and shared understanding of the national context and current challenges faced by CSOs in Mexico.	CSO where able to safely share and examine different perspectives on the social and political reality of Mexico, conditions that greatly affect their work and the sustainability of their agendas. Organizations came to the realization that they had much more in common than they originally thought.They also came to understand that the prevailing,inaccurate narrative about civil society was a challenge they could face together.	A group of 16 CSOs listened to different perspectives, new ideas and potential strategies for communicating the value of the civil society sector in Mexico more effectively.This included sharing communication materials, approaches and access to a digital platform to share news about the CSO sector.

PRACTICE	CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS	VALUE	OUTCOME
Enable Learning Community members themselves to define and incorporate participatory schemes and methodologies according to their own timelines	CSO staff at multiple levels in their organizations were engaged and permitted to contribute to the design of the agenda and Learning Community activities. Key roles rotated among members to enhance individual and organizational participation.	Capacity development, including of individual staff, is placed at the center of Learning Community processes and discussions as a key factor for CSO sustainability. Experience and skills of participants and CSOs are cultivated, leveraged and optimized.	Having participated in more than 4 Learning Community events, CSOs from Groups 1 and 2 have taken ownership of the agenda setting process, including activities that reflect their interests and agendas.As a result, CSOs have learned the methodology for participatory agenda setting and are able to replicate this approach with their own key stakeholders.
Use joint inquiry and evidence to support collaboration and alliances with key sectors in the local system	CSA facilitated a stakeholder mapping event to enable group identification of potential allies and to model a collaborative assessment methodology. The agenda and process were highly participatory, enabling Learning Community members to recognize their collective assets and strengths, as well as individual complementarities.	CSOs use evidence to recognize opportunities to influence the Local System more effectively through informed individual action and collaboration, rather than competition. CSOs that had previously been relatively isolated and whose orientation was internal, shift to a more systemic focus.	In Groups 1 and 2, organizations that had never mapped their Local System, integrated these methodologies in their work to analyze potential allies in different sectors.
Convene CSOs working in the same geographic area to discuss similar challenges	CSOs identify and jointly examine geographical characteristics and constraints associated with their shared operating environment. CSOs exchange ideas and actively elicit suggestions and experience from colleague organizations for mutual benefit.	Peer-to-peer learning and support activities enable CSOs to leverage one another's experience and lessons learned from working in conflict areas with high levels of violence. This context poses challenges that can be better understood and confronted if CSOs work together.	CSOs in Groups 1 and 2 have exchanged information regarding security and how to better understand and work with public authorities, as well as best practices on how to advocate.

PRACTICE	CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS	VALUE	OUTCOME
Introduce CSOs to experts on fundraising and strategic alliances	CSO willingness to set aside judgments and learn how to target potential donors. Facilitated dialogue between CSOs and donors promotes a better understanding of the issues and challenges faced by both sectors and how they can collaborate more effectively.	CSOs receive direct information and technical assistance to improve their understanding of, and programming for, financial sustainability. CSO interaction with potential donors informs fundraising efforts, saving valuable staff time.	Two donors and 4 fundraising experts have continued to work with CSOs (beyond the Learning Community events) and have consolidated alliances with 5 CSOs.
CSOs invite an experienced CSO to share their knowledge and expertise about working with the media and other aspects of effective communication	A clear agenda and process to enable peer-to-peer support by a colleague CSO with considerable expertise in communication. Willingness of CSO participants to share expertise and practical lessons learned on how to use new media outlets and communications practices.	CSOs draw from each other's experience in effectively communicating their work and exchange best practices on how to engage wider sections of society. Expanded (and where appropriate, coordinated) communication activities help reinforce key messages and strengthen public understanding and support of CSO agendas. Accurate depictions of CSOs help strengthen their role in the Local System, while also making the system more hospitable to their work.	A CSO from Group 1 that has vast experience in communicating effectively has reached out to other CSOs in the group to provide advice and methods to reinforce key messages about their work. With this expertise, CSOs have designed new communication materials to reach various target audiences.

CONCLUSION

Implemented by Social Impact, csa has broken new ground in organizational capacity building by expanding and integrating a suite of organizational strengthening approaches (HICD, Capacity Development 2.0, and Local Systems) for Mexican CSOs working to promote Human Rights and reduce corruption, crime, and violence.

csa's strategy integrates three levels of intervention: 1) strengthening internal capacities and organizational processes; 2) strengthening organizations' external capacities to develop and sustain strategic alliances within the civil society sector and beyond; and 3) strengthening the organizations' respective positions within the Local System where they operate while also helping build a more enabling environment for CSO work.

These levels of intervention are reflected in csa's Learning Community initiative, which is based on CLA and composed of partner organizations who collaborate and share their experiences. Over the 4-year csa activity, the Learning Communities have become an important collaborative space for allied organizations and other key actors to share knowledge and best practices, thereby promoting the impact and sustainability of CSO achievements. Participation in the Learning Communities has enabled CSOs to improve their capacity to build the alliances that are essential to a stronger civil society sector in Mexico.

By design, the goal of the Learning Community initiative was for organizations to strategize and collaborate on their own, integrating the capacity development assets and processes that csa has facilitated during the usaid contract, as well as to promote a better understanding of the CSO sector in Mexico. Organizations that initially participated as invitees in Learning Community events have now integrated the value of being part of a collaborative network into their day- to-day work. Over time, participating organizations have taken a keen interest in defining the Learning Communities' agenda and activities. Furthermore, the organizations themselves are now leading the process to consolidate new collaborations; designing innovative ways to share ideas and resources; and identifying the aggregated value of working as a network.

For csa, convening and facilitating the Learning Communities has been a strategic component in strengthening CSOs' capacity to consolidate their position in the Local System. These collaborative spaces have been the fora through which members have established new alliances and planned many collaborations. This is the value of the Learning Community initiative: to consolidate a collaborative space where CSOs can find common ground, share lessons and experiences that help expand their vision and understanding of the Local System, and identify opportunities to advance and sustain their agendas.