




**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# ENHANCING SYSTEMS. EMPOWERING CHANGE.

A summary of the learnings and recommendations from  
the **USAID Systems Strengthening Review**

A woman in a white shirt is writing on a chalkboard. The chalkboard has some faint writing on it. The woman is looking at the board as she writes.

**Systems strengthening goes beyond improving downstream education outcomes; it means working upstream to build governments' capacity to lead successful education reforms.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- **USAID Missions in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan**, who facilitated the evidence gathering for this Review.
- **USAID Missions in Cambodia, Nepal, and Philippines** for participating in the deep-dive case studies, which have contributed valuable evidence to the Review.
- **Government stakeholders and implementing partners** involved in the Activities across these countries, who participated in data collection activities for the Review, including the online survey and key informant interviews.
- **USAID Asia Bureau**
- **ACR-Asia team** at RTI International
- **Delivery Associates** whose input and contributions have made this work possible.

## OVERVIEW

Development activities can maximize their impact in strengthening education systems if they are **explicit about the change they seek.**

Over the past decade, USAID has funded education programs with an increasing focus on “systems strengthening,” the practice of **building a government’s capacity to implement successful education reforms.**

Looking at 20 Activities in 11 countries across Asia, we **found widespread impact on some elements of education systems’ capacity**—for example, helping systems to design evidence-based reading reform strategies, gather better student outcome data, and strengthen teacher development.

But Activities were less **likely to have succeeded** in supporting systems to set outcome goals for students, analyze the “delivery chain” of actors who must work together to implement the desired reforms, or use data to review progress and solve problems.

With these learnings in mind, we made a series of recommendations for future Activities, informed by some **key principles to maximize impact**, as seen on the next page.



# PRINCIPLES TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

How to build education systems' capacity to lead effective reforms.



## BE EXPLICIT

Define specific elements of capacity you are trying to strengthen, how you will do so, how you will measure progress, and ensure full alignment with government partners.



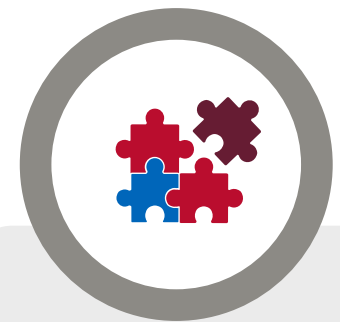
## PLOT OUT THE JOURNEY

Identify the phased process through which capacity will be built, including timelines, roles, and how the roles of development and government partners will change.



## MEET SYSTEMS WHERE THEY ARE

Design activities to match the capacity of the current system, and consider investing in longer or multi-phase activities for greater impact.



## CONSIDER ALL ELEMENTS OF SYSTEM CAPACITY

Increase attention on elements that are sometimes neglected, such as designing for equity and leveraging EdTech.

[View the Recommendations From the Review](#)



# SETTING UP THE SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING REVIEW

We evaluated a portfolio of **20 USAID Activities** across **11 countries** in Asia collectively and individually.

## 4 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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*Click on the buttons to navigate to the corresponding section.*

What Did the Activities Set Out to Do? >

What Have the Activities Accomplished? >

What Were the Conditions of Success? >

What Are the Main Learnings  
for Future Activities? >

## 4 KEY DATA SOURCES

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Desk Review



Online Multi-Country Survey



Key Informant Interviews



Deep-Dive Case Studies

Access the Full Report for More Information  
on the Review Process and Methodology >

# THE ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK: DEFINING SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

Systems strengthening means building a system's capacity to implement education reforms effectively, rather than just focusing on the improvements to the quality or availability of education in classrooms.

Systems strengthening can mean many different things. To structure our analysis, we created an Analysis Framework, which breaks down the concept of systems strengthening into 10 core elements.

Our framework is adapted from **Delivery Associates' Delivery Capacity Review** framework, which has been used globally to assess system capacity for delivery. It also brings in key concepts and good practices from the education development literature and USAID policy and strategy documents.

## ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK



### 1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy

- A.** Define Clear Goals
- B.** Determine the Reform Strategy
- C.** Visualize the Delivery Chain



### 2. Drive Delivery

- A.** Use Data Effectively
- B.** Monitor Performance and Solve Problems
- C.** Harness the Power of Relationships



### 3. Create an Improvement Culture

- A.** Review Capacity to Deliver
- B.** Build System Capacity All the Time
- C.** Leverage Educational Technology
- D.** Promote Equity and Inclusion

# WHAT DID THE ACTIVITIES SET OUT TO DO?

**USAID programs incorporated more references to systems strengthening in their stated aims after 2015, suggesting an increased focus on building system capacity as a means to achieving improved learning outcomes for students.**

## Systems Strengthening Language Across Activities

Major emphasis on systems strengthening in IR statements  
 Some emphasis on systems strengthening in IR statements

Activity	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026		
BGD READ						Some emphasis															
KHM	All Children Reading									Major emphasis											
	All Children Learning									Major emphasis											
	Inclusive Primary Education Activity															Major emphasis					
IND Scaling-Up Early Reading Intervention								Some emphasis													
IDN Prioritas					Major emphasis																
KGZ	Reading Together					Some emphasis															
	Time to Read								Some emphasis												
	Okuu Keremet!											Major emphasis									
LAO Learn to Read											Some emphasis										
NPL	Early Grade Reading Program I							Major emphasis													
	Early Grade Reading Program II												Major emphasis								
	Reading for All											Major emphasis									
PAK	Sindh Reading Program								Some emphasis												
	Teacher Education Project	Some emphasis																			
PHL	Basa Pilipinas					Some emphasis															
	ABC+												Major emphasis								
	Opportunity 2.0												Major emphasis								
TJK	Quality Reading Program					Some emphasis															
	Read With Me									Some emphasis											
UZB Education for Excellence												Some emphasis									

**Though all Activities had elements of systems strengthening within their stated aims, this was more explicit for some Activities than others.**

Activities' stated aims tend to directly relate most frequently to the following systems strengthening elements of our Analysis Framework: 1B) Determine the Reform Strategy; 2C) Harness the Power of Relationships; and 3B) Build System Capacity All the Time. Stated aims *indirectly* related most frequently to element 2A) Use Data Effectively.

We saw less focus in stated aims on the following elements: 1A) Define Clear Goals; 1C) Visualize the Delivery Chain; 3A) Review Capacity to Deliver; 3C) Leverage Educational Technology; and 3D) Promote Equity and Inclusion.

“Strengthening partnerships among government, donors, and stakeholders to implement education reform.”  
(Example of an Activity's stated aim that relates to *Element 2C: Harness the Power of Relationships*)

**Activity Results Framework Alignment With Analysis Framework**

		1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
		A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
BGD	READ		o		o		o		•	•	
KHM	All Children Reading		•				•		•		
	All Children Learning		•		o	•	•		•		•
	Inclusive Primary Education Activity					•	•		•		•
IND	Scaling-Up Early Reading Intervention*										
IDN	Prioritas						•		•		
KGZ	Reading Together								•		
	Time to Read		•		o		•			•	
	Okuu Keremet!		•				o				
LAO	Learn to Read		•				o		•		•
NPL	Early Grade Reading Program I		•		o		o		•		
	Early Grade Reading Program II		•		o	o			•		•
	Reading for All		•						•	•	•
PAK	Sindh Reading Program		•		o		•		•		
	Teacher Education Project		•						•		
PHL	Basa Pilipinas		•		o		o		•	•	
	ABC+		•				•		•	•	
	Opportunity 2.0		•			•	•		•		•
TJK	Quality Reading Program				•		o		•		
	Read With Me		•		•		o		•		
UZB	Education for Excellence		o	o					•	•	

- Activity stated aims directly aligned with Analysis Framework
- o Activity stated aims indirectly aligned with Analysis Framework

\*We did not find a Results Framework for SERI comparable to other Activities

Countries: BGD=Bangladesh, KHM=Cambodia, IND=India, IDN=Indonesia, KGZ=Kyrgyz Republic, LAO=Laos, NPL=Nepal, PAK=Pakistan, PHL=Philippines, TJK=Tajikistan, UZB=Uzbekistan



**The aims were more likely described as improvements in student outcomes than in terms of systems strengthening.**

Conversations around systems strengthening and capacity building of government partners were mostly centered around ensuring sustainability of Activities, building country ownership, increasing adoption of reforms, and supporting the government to expand or model reforms in other regions.

**There is no evidence of a robust or shared basis for measuring systems strengthening.**

Often Activities defined success in terms of outputs, or mirrored the generic language used in USAID policy and strategy documents.

“Districts use financial analysis to allocate more resources to quality improvement.”

(Example of an outcome indicator from Prioritas, Indonesia)

**Some activities had a coherent theory of change relating to systems strengthening within their defined Results Framework.**

We discovered that several Activities conveyed a coherent flow of logic and were able to describe the role of different inputs or outputs in improving learning outcomes.

**Except in a few cases, Activity documentation did not clearly articulate the “journey” of systems strengthening.**

Systems strengthening is a journey, in that the system becomes increasingly independent, self-led, and a critical consumer of external support—but this journey was rarely articulated for the Activities we looked at.

**We found some evidence of Activities coordinating with other donor activities to streamline reform efforts and avoid fragmentation/duplication.**

Coordination with other donors helps the system build on existing efforts, harness the collective impact of investments, and produce more sustainable reforms.



Access the Full Report for a More  
Detailed Discussion of the Activities' Aims



# WHAT HAVE THE ACTIVITIES ACCOMPLISHED?

## Tracking Systems Strengthening Impact Through the Heatmap

To assess the systems strengthening impact of Activities, we synthesized all the evidence gathered for each Activity to assign a “traffic-light” rating against the 10 elements of our Analysis Framework. The ratings for all Activities are presented in the heatmap below.

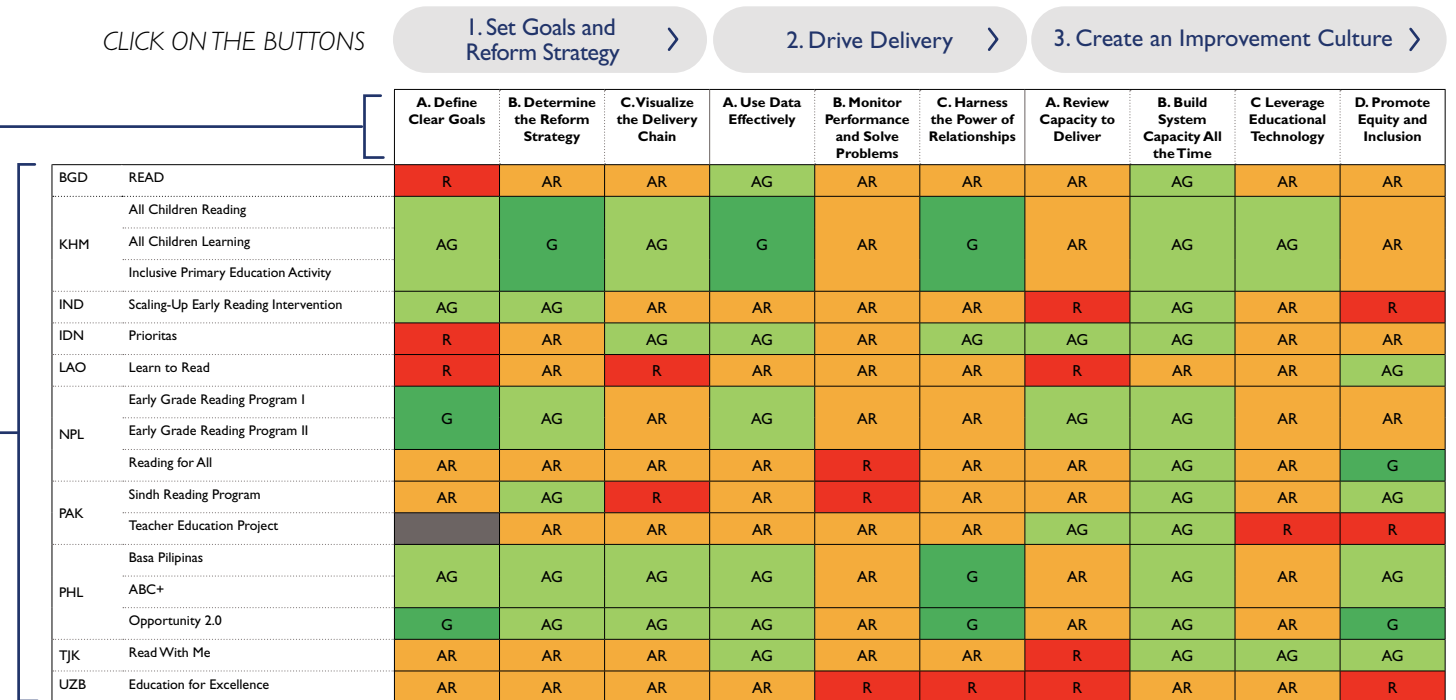
Heatmap Ratings for All Activities, Against the 10 Elements of the Analysis Framework

Elements from the Analysis Framework with a high number of Green and Amber-Green ratings suggest relatively **widespread progress** in the Activities.

Example: Element 3B-Build System Capacity All the Time

Activities with primarily Green and Amber-Green ratings demonstrated a **significant impact in strengthening education systems** across the Analysis Framework. This indicates that the impact supported system capacity and can be **sustained longer term**.

Example: ACR/ACL/IPEA Activities in Cambodia



**Note: Some Activities have been rated together because they built on each other as part of a continuous sequence of support.** The ratings given reflect the cumulative progress made since the beginning of the first Activity. The Activities in question, which are explored in more detail as case studies in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of the Report, are ACR, ACL, and IPEA in Cambodia; EGRP I and EGRP II in Nepal; and Basa Pilipinas and ABC+ in the Philippines.

Activities in the Kyrgyz Republic and Quality Reading Program (QRP) in Tajikistan are not included in the heatmap analysis since stakeholders from these Activities were unable to participate in the Review, as noted in Chapter 1 of the Report.

### Ratings Key



**Limited/no evidence** of systems strengthening or increased system capacity



**Some evidence** that the Activity has played a role in building system capacity, but **not consistently or in a way that was sustainable** beyond the life of the Activity

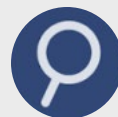


**Significant evidence** that the Activity has built system capacity in meaningful ways, even if this **was not always consistent or sustainable** beyond the life of the Activity



**Strong evidence** that the Activity has built sustainable capacity, strengthening the system's ability to deliver improved outcomes for students **beyond the life of the Activity**

The Activities were more likely to have strengthened some elements of government implementation capacity than others—but for every element in the Analysis Framework we found at least one example of impact.



## I. SET GOALS AND REFORM STRATEGY

Although Activities focused on improving student learning outcomes, they rarely supported systems to set their own system-wide outcome goals.

### IA: Define Clear Goals

Activities modeled effective goal setting by introducing more substantial ways of measuring learning outcomes and supporting systems to develop reading proficiency benchmarks. However, overarching metrics or system-level targets were not often cited by interviewees, indicating the Activities' limited impact on setting system-wide outcome goals.

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All Activities equipped systems with knowledge of good practices around reading reform design and implementation, but there was mixed optimism about governments' capacity and will to independently drive these efforts.

### IB: Determine the Reform Strategy

Some interviewees expressed concerns about governments' ability to adopt or continue reforms because of 1) limited skills to independently update new strategies and amend key components; 2) lack of confidence in the reform strategy; and 3) financial constraints.

In a few cases, Activities played a major role in shaping national policies or were integrated into national policies.

**IB: Determine the Reform Strategy**

**Success Story: Nepal**

EGRP played a role in shaping the government's National Early Grade Reading Program, including the design and demonstration of a national model that the government could implement nationwide.

[Explore the full story of the Activities' impact in Nepal](#)

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In some cases, Activities supported the system to better understand and shape the role of stakeholders and institutions.

**IC: Visualize the Delivery Chain**

**Success Story: Cambodia**

IPEA identified the need for a dedicated team of mentors to implement early education reforms, but also identified a risk within the existing fiscal rules that districts could not be required to use the funds earmarked for mentors for this purpose. The Activity helped the Ministry make the case to the Finance Ministry for reforms to make this requirement possible.

Activities had less impact in supporting systematic reviews of the “delivery chain” of actors involved in implementation.

**IC: Visualize the Delivery Chain**

Mapping the chain of actors involved in implementing reforms—from central government to the classroom—can help government leaders identify issues in human resource capacity, financial constraints, technical capacity, support, and accountability mechanisms.

**Success Story: Cambodia**

The adoption of new teacher support model under IPEA highlighted the need for further mapping of roles, responsibilities, and for systematic tools to gather information on implementation progress.

[Explore the full story of the Activities' impact in Cambodia](#)





## 2. DRIVE DELIVERY

Activities helped systems to generate assessment data and develop monitoring and evaluation systems—but a sustained and independent use of data was often cited as a challenge.

### 2A: Use Data Effectively

Although assessment data was used to understand *how* the system was performing, there was less evidence of it being used to understand *why* the system is performing the way it is.

#### Success Story: Philippines

ABC+ helped set up a dashboard of Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment results to identify which schools need support.  
[Explore the full story of the Activities' impact in the Philippines](#)

There is limited evidence of Activities establishing effective routines to review progress and solve problems early.

### 2B: Monitor Performance and Solve Problems

Data-informed conversations had either not been developed at all or had not been embedded in a way that was regular, systematic, action-focused, and inclusive of senior leaders who are integral to drive implementation forward.

#### Success Story: Cambodia

A presentation of data at a Steering Committee meeting, showing relatively weak performance of Grade 3 students' learning of foundational consonants, enabled a discussion which identified a missing component in the teacher training curriculum.

Activities modeled stakeholder engagement, particularly donor coordination, aimed at leveraging stakeholder forums to seek expertise and resources for reform.

### 2C: Harness the Power of Relationships

#### Success Story: Cambodia

"Before 2017, there were many development and NGO partners in early grade reading in Cambodia. Since the harmonization of the package, all of them are on the same page and use it in their areas."

[Explore the full story of the Activities' impact in Cambodia](#)





### 3. CREATE AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

There was limited evidence of Activities creating a shared understanding of capacity in the systems in which they worked.

#### 3A: Review Capacity to Deliver

In most cases, situational analysis and sector assessments were one-off assessments used to design policy reform, rather than periodic exercises; and they did not always focus on system implementation capacity.

We also saw limited evidence that Activities had created a shared language for talking about system capacity. Sometimes interviewees expressed differing views on 1) system capacity; 2) the extent of gaps in system capacity; and 3) the readiness of the system to progress reforms independently.

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**Strengthened teacher training was frequently cited as a key success.**

#### 3B: Build System Capacity All the Time

Many Activities institutionalized teacher training models and updated training materials to strengthen and align pre-service and in-service training, equip teachers with techniques for improved learning, and further professional development.

##### **Success Story: Nepal**

EGRP II developed a network of local teachers and mentors. To ensure this capacity can be sustained, the program partnered with the government to employ all in-network trainers as “in-house” government staff and build the network funding into government budgets.

[Explore the full story of the Activities’ impact in Nepal](#)

Almost all Activities evolved beyond “doing things for the system” to a more collaborative approach to building system capacity.

#### 3B: Build System Capacity All the Time

Collaborating with system actors to develop teaching and learning materials was cited as an exercise that enhanced system capacity. Additionally, some Activities adopted an “I do, we do, you do” approach to intentionally empower systems to build their own capacity. Demonstration and collaboration with systems occurred in the first phase of reform, with the aim of supporting systems to independently replicate and scale up reforms as Activities progressed.

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**There was limited evidence of Activities building system capacity to address the digital divide or use the EdTech Ecosystem framework to exploit digital learning opportunities.**

#### 3C: Leverage Educational Technology

This could be because some Activities did not involve a significant EdTech component while others might be hindered by constraints such as lack of devices and infrastructure, the digital divide and barriers to remote learning, and teachers’ capacity to use EdTech.

##### **Success Story: Tajikistan**

Read With Me set up resource centers in schools to conduct capacity building of system staff to use ICT. The program also collaborated with another USAID project to ensure more visibility for its EdTech initiatives.

Interviewees tended to talk about equity as a discrete feature of Activities, rather than as a fundamental design principle.

### 3D: Promote Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion efforts include students with disabilities, out-of-school youth, females, ethnic minorities, and learners residing in remote areas.

#### Success Story: Cambodia

IPEA focused on tailoring instruction to the needs of children with visual or hearing disabilities by training teachers to deliver inclusive lessons and assessments

[Explore the full story of the Activities' impact in Cambodia](#)



Evidence of long-term impact is strongest where Activities were able to influence the national policies of the government. We also see evidence of longer-term impact in approach to reading reform, teacher training, and sensitization to data.

However, not all policy change is evidence of systems strengthening and not all evidence of systems strengthening relates to policy change. Policy changes provide the most tangible and visible evidence of governments adopting long-lasting approaches, which may be why they were cited more by interviewees.

#### Success Story: Pakistan

“After the program, the Government of Sindh would refer to reading in their own policy positions—there was a huge achievement of buy-in in terms of reading. Reading focus is present on education reform policy documents of the Government of Sindh.”

The correlation (or lack of one) between systems strengthening and improved learning outcomes is unclear because of limited data. Metrics for measuring learning outcomes varied across Activities, making it difficult to determine which Activities had a more positive impact on student outcomes than others.

Access the Full Report for a Comprehensive  
Review of the Activities' Achievements



## WHAT WERE THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS?

USAID programs saw significant impact on system capacity when Activities were deliberate and explicit in their approach to systems strengthening.



### **Activities which had an explicit focus on systems strengthening in their stated aims were more likely to demonstrate impact.**

Although an explicit focus is necessary, it is not always sufficient. Sometimes Activities had systems strengthening language in their stated aims but still did not achieve strong impact—for example, because of a lack of alignment with the system's current capacity or challenges in securing buy-in.



### **Activities tended to have the greatest impact on those elements of systems strengthening which were listed as an explicit focus in their stated aims.**

Elements of system capacity which were referenced in the Activity's stated aims tended to show a stronger impact, while elements not mentioned yielded weaker impact.



### **Activities were more likely to strengthen a system when leaders understood the purpose of the Activity from the outset.**

All Activities worked in collaboration with governments to help implement education reforms. However, unless it was made explicit, government partners were not necessarily aware of the extent to which Activities aimed to build their capacity to implement effective reforms—as opposed, for example, to building instructional capacity in classrooms or developing new curriculum materials.



### **Activities were less effective in building sustainable capacity when they failed to “meet systems where they were at.”**

For some Activities, we found a mismatch between the support provided to systems and the system's capacity to receive that support. When interventions that hoped to strengthen system capacity were inappropriate for the technical, financial, or human resource capacity of systems, Activities tended to have less impact.



### **Aligning Activities with the reform priorities of the system can encourage system ownership, leading to more impact.**

Activities which engaged with systems to co-design reforms increased system buy-in and tended to have more impact. Sometimes, this alignment was brought about by syncing with national programs or other significant donor grants.





**Activities tended to have more impact when they were part of a sequence of Activities which built on each other over several years.**

A longer time frame allows implementing partners more opportunity to understand crucial system components, like the delivery chain and structural barriers.

Sequencing of Activities also allows the “journey” of systems strengthening to come into fruition.



**Champions in top leadership were a powerful condition for success—while changes in leadership, administration, and system staff at different levels were cited as challenges.**

Because support, especially from top leadership, is crucial to ensure commitment at different levels, changes in leadership or turnover of actors in the delivery chain present challenges to institutional capacity strengthening.



**There is no straightforward relationship between USAID or system funding and impact of Activities on systems strengthening.**

Activities that are able help systems secure funding tend to have more success, but we did not observe a direct correlation between either the availability of system funding or the level of financial support from USAID.



**Activities were most successful in helping systems be more equitable when equity considerations were mainstreamed into project design.**

Approaching equity as a mainstream aspect of program design, rather than an add-on, acknowledged that systems cannot afford to neglect the lowest performing communities, schools, and children—who are often part of underserved minorities or excluded groups.



Access the Full Report for More Insights on  
Success Factors and Approaches From Activities >

# WHAT ARE THE MAIN LEARNINGS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITIES?

The recommendations provided for structuring activities will enable future activities to maximize their impact on education systems' capacity to implement effective reforms.

## **1. Specify clear systems strengthening objectives as part of the Results Frameworks of Activities, and agree on these with the system.**

Specific language that sets out the capacities to be built in system actors or units is preferable to more vague references to “capacity building” which can be interpreted differently by different partners.

## **2. Embed ongoing measurement of systems strengthening progress in activity monitoring and evaluation, including baseline, endline, and external evaluations.**

Measurement of systems strengthening is potentially most useful when it is expressed as progress in terms of outcomes—skills developed, practices adopted by government—rather than outputs. Capacity assessments at the beginning of activities allow partners to identify areas of focus and create a baseline measurement from which to measure progress.

Using common evaluation tools (like our Analysis Framework) across activities has the potential to build a shared language and allow easier comparisons across USAID-funded activities.

[View our Analysis Framework](#)

## **3. Clearly articulate systems strengthening strategies from the outset, and ensure aligned expectations with system leaders.**

Communication that clearly outlines the expected journey of systems strengthening to implementing partners and system actors will give activities the best chance of success. Key points to articulate include:

- How roles will change over time.
- Specific systems strengthening milestones with timelines.
- The commitment required from the system.

## **4. Set the scope of activities to allow for realistic progress—and consider investing in longer or multi-phase activities for greater impact.**

Activities can increase their chance of success by being realistic about the time required for systems strengthening and adjusting their scope or time frame accordingly.

Longer engagements can allow activities to increase the likelihood of good practices and behaviors being institutionalized in systems.

**5. Focus programs to “meet systems where they are at,” through understanding of finances, other donor work, and capacity to deploy new approaches.**

Complementing the capacity of the current system will pave the way for building needed skills, support the adoption of practices within governments, and lead to greater system buy-in and reduce duplication of efforts.

**6. Incorporate EdTech interventions based on the maturity of the ecosystem, and in ways that can enhance the impact of activities at scale.**

EdTech interventions can strengthen the capacity of systems most when they are deployed strategically, not reactively, and in ways that are appropriate to the skills of system actors and the infrastructure available.

**7. Mainstream equity considerations into activity design, so that everyone is included.**

This means going beyond the idea of equity and inclusion work as an “add-on” to the core activity. Consider how systems strengthening efforts aimed at making the system more effective can also support it to be more equitable.

**8. Increase focus on the elements of the Analysis Framework for which activities have had the least impact.**

Specifically, we recommend USAID works with implementing partners to:

- Encourage governments to set student outcome targets wherever this is politically feasible.
- Systematically analyze the “delivery chain” for risks or weaknesses, and engage the system in this process.
- Bring data into formal, regular, and structured problem-solving conversations with system actors at all levels, especially senior leaders who can influence action.
- Facilitate government partners to assess their own capacity to implement reform on a regular basis.



# CONTACT

Please connect with us if you're interested in learning more about systems strengthening, and how the lessons and recommendations from this Review could apply to your own work.

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