



Community members gathering to assess red panda populations and habitat. Nepal. Photo by World Wildlife Foundation (WWF).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

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I. INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has a long history of supporting community engagement and participatory development. The purpose of this Community Engagement Guide is to discuss the concept of engagement broadly. Where specific issues or concerns refer to Indigenous Peoples, it is noted.

The USAID [Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(PRO-IP\)](#) establishes a mandate to engage Indigenous Peoples and their communities. In addition, Congress requires USAID to carry out due diligence with respect to how Indigenous Peoples and local communities are engaged and affected by USAID investments in national parks and other protected areas.¹

The PRO-IP offers inspiration and ideas for robust engagement with the diverse communities that interact with USAID projects in all sectors. The Statement of Managers language refers to impacted local communities; in this document, relevant communities will be referred to as “communities.”

Building on USAID and global resources, this Community Engagement Guide defines key concepts and provides an overview of approaches, frameworks, and tools for engaging communities involved in and affected by USAID projects. The audience for this guide is USAID managers, technical staff, and implementing partners in all technical sectors. The actions described here comprise common forms of engagement. Implementing partners should consult their contract or agreement for specific award requirements, such as obtaining **free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC)** from affected and potentially affected Indigenous Peoples and establishing a grievance and redress mechanism for USAID projects supporting protected areas. Other actions, such as holding consultations and collecting data with and within communities, will depend on the type of project as well as the level of engagement that USAID, partners, and community members determine are necessary and appropriate.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is critical for development and allows USAID and implementing partners to understand and address the goals, concerns, and challenges facing people affected by and partnering with development projects. For purposes of this guide, community engagement refers to the full suite of communications and interactions with communities over the life of a project. It should not be

¹ The Statement of Managers or Joint Explanatory Statement to the 2020 Senate Foreign Appropriations Act included new requirements for community engagement and accountability in connection with use of fiscal year 2020 Federal funds for or within National Parks and other protected areas. Such funds can only be made available “if agreements for the obligation of funds between implementing partners and the Department of State and USAID include provisions requiring that:

1. Information detailing the proposed project and potential impacts is shared with local communities and the free, prior, and informed consent of affected Indigenous communities is obtained in accordance with international standards;
2. The potential impacts of the proposed project on existing land or resource claims by affected local communities or indigenous peoples are considered and addressed in any management plan;
3. Any ecoguards, park rangers, and other law enforcement personnel authorized to protect biodiversity will be properly trained and monitored; and
4. Effective grievance and redress mechanisms for victims of human rights violations and other misconduct exist.”

assumed that communities are willing and able to take on engagement. Nevertheless, the guide recommends that community engagement be as deep as possible because this is the pathway to high-impact and sustainable development that reduces USAID, partner, and community risks. See the “How To” Community Engagement Guide for resources on deep engagement.

Robust community engagement, undertaken in accordance with best practices, can achieve the following, among many other benefits:

- Increased trust between USAID, implementers, and communities through meaningful consultation and open dialogue.
- Identification of community development priorities and plans to ensure that USAID interventions align with community priorities, assets, and needs, while ensuring that the voices and perspectives of different types of community members are heard and understood. Additionally, ensuring that steps are taken to understand and incorporate competing priorities and needs is important (e.g., between men and women, youth and elders, different ethnic groups).
- Facilitation of community participation in the design process and application of local knowledge and resources to address development challenges.
- Ongoing consultation and communication over the life of the activity that informs collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) to improve project and development outcomes.
- Community identification of potential positive or adverse impacts and mitigation measures that may not be considered by external stakeholders, including mitigation of reputational risks to USAID, implementing partners, and the project.
- Reduction of risk and associated costs of project redesign or closure if “social license” (approval of local actors) is not obtained or lost.

OUTLINE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide provides an overview of concepts, approaches, and tools for engagement. It advises on how to determine which approach is right for the OU and implementing partner, and when to apply these approaches during the program cycle. It also links to more comprehensive Agency and external guidance, such as information on engagement with Indigenous Peoples. As noted in the PRO-IP, engagement is mandatory for USAID programs that have potential impacts on Indigenous Peoples.

Section II provides an overview of basic levels of engagement and then presents key forms of engagement, from least to most robust. The section includes a table depicting roles of USAID staff and implementing partners. Section III starts with a discussion of engagement approaches and frameworks that can shape how any tool or method is used. Tools and methods for engagement are matched with engagement forms and steps, noting that many tools and methods can be deployed at different stages of engagement, depending on timing, type of project, and other factors.

II. LEVELS AND FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Early and continuous engagement with communities is best practice and is expected in most situations. The form of engagement differs, however, depending on timing and task. This section first presents three basic levels of engagement and then walks through forms of engagement that represent progressively deeper relationships and potentially more formal processes. Table I summarizes different engagement entry points and the roles of USAID and implementing partners.

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Research on community engagement in development has identified three basic levels of engagement. The first level (informing) remains common for multiple reasons, including a lack of dedicated resources for engagement or a highly technical focus of the project or project team. Consultation, the second level, should be undertaken only after identification, introductions, and initial contact. As engagement moves beyond consultation, there are many avenues for devolving decision-making to communities. The more decision-making power and resources community institutions have to refine and enact decisions, the better activities can meet the sustainable development needs and aspirations of communities.

Communities are **informed** about what has already been decided or what action has been or may be taken. This level of engagement may be focused on communities and other stakeholders not closely affiliated with the project or for general awareness (e.g., health messages). This communication is usually informal but could take place in more formal settings such as community organizational meetings.

Communities are **consulted** on preferences for alternatives, decisions, or actions. This level may be most appropriate for planning. This could be an informal process or built into agreements with communities, depending on commitments to adhere to communities' preferences. Implementers should be clear about follow-up to consultations so that communities are not frustrated after providing input and not seeing it reflected in the project.

Decision-making involves collaborative communication and effective partnering with communities in all relevant activities and phases of the decision-making process, including identifying issues, holding consultations, gathering information, formulating alternatives and exploring their potential consequences, implementing the project, and evaluating the project. This level is recommended for robust community engagement and ownership of project actions and results. Note that it can involve both formal (e.g., memoranda of understanding, grants) and informal processes. Capacity-building, mentoring, and other support are often needed for effective co-decision-making to reduce power inequalities. (Adapted from USAID's [Best Practices in Stakeholder Engagement in Biodiversity Programming](#))

BOX I. WHAT IS A STAKEHOLDER?

A stakeholder is a person or group that has a stake in the outcomes of a project. Stakeholders can include government officials and agencies, civil society and advocacy groups, the private sector, and other donors, as well as communities that may or may not be represented by groups. Identification and consultation with all stakeholders, as well as strong engagement with key stakeholders—those central to success—are elements of any good project. Different engagement approaches are appropriate for different types of stakeholders and in different situations. For instance, in some cases, it is best practice to have diverse stakeholders come together for joint planning, and in other cases, this approach is not feasible or appropriate. This guide will not address all types of stakeholders and situations but can point to best practices in engagement in general. is focused on the essential task of engaging local communities.

FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

This section follows a path from the least active form of engagement (identification) to the most robust (partnership). FPIC, described in detail below, may be mandatory in activities where Indigenous Peoples have been identified, regardless of the level or form of engagement. FPIC is a heightened set of standards for engagement that is established by international laws based on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. Implementing partners must consider national laws, award provisions, and community protocols to determine if FPIC is required. In some cases, communities may not wish to engage or may be unable to do so. USAID may also decide to limit or curtail engagement, for example, in the case of conflict, security risks, or other factors.

IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITIES: WHAT IS MEANT BY COMMUNITY?

The term community has many meanings and components. For this guide, community will refer primarily to groups of people in a host country who are the intended targets of or affected parties to USAID assistance. The term communities covers groups of people who may be affected by USAID projects, such as by living in a target area or affected by a USAID investment. Note that the [PRO-IP](#) addresses the identification of Indigenous Peoples and their communities in detail.

In many cases, initial target groups may be small, but, as a project expands, the number of people and groups involved increases—such “scaling up” is often built into project designs. Engagement may also initially be limited to a few people in a group, such as leaders, a civil society group, individuals with specific roles or needs, or self-selected participants. USAID has robust policies and practices to support the inclusion and representation of Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, persons with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex individuals. There are other categories of people who may be underrepresented, including the very poor, landless, lower caste, less politically powerful, or more isolated. As such, it is important to learn about the diversity of communities and how active participants represent the whole target group, and to reach as many sub-groups as is feasible within a target community to ensure equitable outcomes.

Communities comprise other dimensions as well. A common unit of development assistance is the household. But it is well known that, due to gender bias, discriminatory sociocultural norms, uneven power relations, and other factors, benefits may accrue inequitably within households. Individuals within families and households often live in different locations, such as straddling towns and countryside for education or livelihood opportunities. Thus, depending on the type of project, engagement efforts may have to reach beyond the “local” to, for example, youth attending school or members of the community

living outside the project area. Engaging with a community can—and often should—entail working with and within social networks and factor in increased migration and social mobility (see the discussion of working within local social networks and systems in Section III). Finally, it is critical that conflict analysis be built into community engagement. Although engagement can mitigate USAID’s reputational and operational risk, it can engender mistrust if it is not sensitive to conflict.

A scoping study or series of studies, both field-based and drawing on documentation, is used to identify communities. As mentioned previously, the communities initially identified as target groups may expand, or potentially contract, during the life of the project. But initial target communities should be identified, and summary information should be prepared by the USAID Agreement Officer’s Representative (AOR)/Contracting Officer’s Representative (COR) and the implementing partners to inform future stages of engagement. The information should include, at a minimum, whether Indigenous Peoples are present, where they are, and basic demographic information, as well as their relationships with surrounding communities. In addition, learning about the history, as well as the political, cultural, and economic systems of these groups, can greatly improve initial and subsequent engagement. For instance, cultural norms relating to gender may affect how men and women participate and the types of actions they may take. Learning about a people’s history shows respect for their heritage and also reveals changes that have affected their livelihoods and rights (e.g., migration, relocation, new investments, occupations).

INTRODUCTIONS AND INITIAL CONTACT

Consultation or dialogue should not be the first step in engagement. Consultation implies some level of relationship or even commitment. It is critical to develop a framework for consultation, including determining the level of consultation that communities can and wish to undertake, if any, and to establish culturally appropriate rules of engagement. Refer to the [PRO-IP](#) for more information on this stage of engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

The first steps before organizing a consultation or series of consultations should incorporate the following:

1. Identification of key communities and previous dialogue and engagement efforts by USAID and other major actors (e.g., other donors).
2. Review of the history and culture of communities.
3. Conflict and risk analysis to avoid harm from consultations. For example, such analysis could identify the perception that consultation leaves out a group or privileges one group over another.
4. Logistical assessment to determine best times and locations for consultations and enable a wide range of community members to meaningfully participate.
5. Development of consultation protocols between USAID and community representatives, including any compensation for participation and what compensation might entail for future engagement.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue involves a discussion, typically informal, between two or more people or groups, in which information and ideas are exchanged. Focus groups (see Section III, Direct Engagement, for more detail) are often employed in dialogue, but other methods, such as roundtables or even workshops, can be used, depending on the purpose. Dialogue could be part of initial contact and introductions, to identify stakeholders, understand local perspectives, and gather context information.

CONSULTATION

Consultation is a process, often facilitated and guided by the consultation framework developed in the initial contact stages, by which community input into matters affecting them is sought. Consultation is used to provide information about process, objectives, and proposed strategy and interventions to identify potential impacts (positive or negative) and mitigation measures; to gather feedback on the proposed intervention or strategy; and to determine the level and type of support.

Formal consultations involve a flow of information, during which USAID shares activity details with communities and other stakeholders who then provide informed feedback freely on the activity before implementation.

FREE, PRIOR, AND INFORMED CONSENT

FPIC is a heightened standard for consultation with Indigenous Peoples conducted in accordance with international standards and pursuant to USAID's [PRO-IP](#). FPIC is based on the principle that before an action can take place that would affect Indigenous Peoples positively or negatively, the affected persons or community must give approval for the activity to move forward ("consent"). However, the Indigenous Peoples, persons, or community must have full information regarding the activity; otherwise, the consent would be meaningless, because it would not be based on adequate knowledge about the proposed activity and its potential impact ("informed"). The Indigenous Peoples community must provide the consent before the activity begins ("prior"). It is also critical that the community not feel any pressure or coercion to agree to the activity ("free"). FPIC seeks to determine the level of support among Indigenous Peoples, ensure that the intervention retains support over its lifespan, share full information about the potential impacts (and identify any additional impacts) with stakeholders, and share proposed mitigation measures (developed in the consultation phase) and determine whether they are sufficient and acceptable. FPIC is undertaken prior to and throughout the project.

ACTIVE AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

Active and inclusive engagement can take many forms and occur without a formal partnership or process, such as co-creation. With prolonged engagement, it is likely that both collaborating communities and USAID can dedicate resources and develop commitments to sustain the engagement. Even if informally, it is important to outline roles and responsibilities as well as expectations: Will engagement, including travel or other costs, be compensated? How will such compensation be managed? Is participation inclusive? Who is responsible for monitoring and reporting on engagement, and how do communities provide feedback? Engagement circumstances evolve, so it is important to revisit conditions regularly. An example of active and inclusive engagement comes from the USAID

[West Africa Biodiversity and Climate Change project](#), involving coastal and mangrove conservation and climate change adaptation undertaken with communities in the Sherbro River Estuary of Sierra Leone.

PARTNERSHIP

In a partnership with USAID, communities engage in the design of a project or activity, or its implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. In a partnership, communities have genuine decision-making authority. A partnership provides a high level of ongoing engagement and may involve the negotiation and signing of a formal memorandum of understanding. USAID may work with communities to engage in the design of a project or activity, or as the implementing partner of the activity. (An operating unit should consult with the cognizant Regional Legal Officer and the Management Bureau Office of Acquisition and Assistance regularly if adopting a partnership approach. If an operating unit determines that a partnership is appropriate for a given intervention, it should explore such an arrangement prior to the launch of the design of the project or activity to ensure buy-in from all partners from the earliest stages of decision-making. Partnership continues through the conclusion of an intervention, which could extend beyond the end of USAID funding.

TABLE I. ENGAGEMENT ENTRY POINTS AND ROLES

SITUATION/ CONTEXT	FORM OF ENGAGEMENT	ROLE OF USAID STAFF	ILLUSTRATIVE ROLE OF IMPLEMENTING PARTNER
Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) or other large-scale planning exercise Development of the Initial Environmental Examination	Move from pre-consultation steps (introduction and initial contact) to consultation as is feasible in any proposed target areas for identification of local communities' Indigenous Peoples, risk management, integration of cultural dimensions into the CDCS or other large-scale analyses, and integration of engagement in overall strategy.	USAID Missions and operating units conduct portfolio reviews and midcourse stocktaking to adapt country strategies or other large-scale planning to changes in context, development needs, new priorities, and evidence from implementation and development literature. Operating units are also responsible for ensuring the environmental compliance of each USAID activity throughout the project cycle through the USAID environmental assessment process.	As relevant, use the CDCS, large-scale exercise planning, and Initial Environmental Examination analyses to guide projects.
Design of project with target area and population	Identify communities and (as relevant) describe how they are organized, identify strengths and weaknesses of representation, align with community needs and capacities, and craft a framework for cooperation. Integrate Do No Harm, feedback, and grievance and redress mechanisms, as needed. Identify	Undertake due diligence concerning the presence of Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable groups; commission conflict analyses as appropriate.	Build engagement into project design and performance criteria. Validate findings with communities and integrate findings and recommendations from community engagement and conflict analysis into work

TABLE I. ENGAGEMENT ENTRY POINTS AND ROLES

SITUATION/ CONTEXT	FORM OF ENGAGEMENT	ROLE OF USAID STAFF	ILLUSTRATIVE ROLE OF IMPLEMENTING PARTNER
	potential harmful impacts to the community and community dynamics—particularly with regard to political, social, and gender power dynamics—including forms of social and physical violence and gender-based violence.		plan; consider ways to co-create with communities.
Design of project without specific target area (e.g., policy reform)	Identify potentially affected communities (e.g., areas affected by land tenure reform or health systems strengthening); consider whether Indigenous Peoples or other communities are appropriately represented.	Undertake due diligence concerning the presence or involvement of Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable groups; commission conflict or political economy analyses as appropriate.	Validate findings with communities and integrate recommendations from community engagement and conflict or political economy analyses into work plan; consider ways to co-create with communities.
Implementation	Depending on consultations, engagement could range from regular communication with communities to project co-management (see Table 2).	Hand off information, contacts, and processes to implementers. Undertake due diligence on “customer satisfaction” through site visits and analysis of reporting and budget allocations.	Hire qualified staff and allocate sufficient resources. Undertake due diligence in getting feedback from communities; where possible, implement co-management; adaptively manage engagement with feedback.
Target area with Indigenous Peoples	Undertake FPIC at the earliest stage of design and throughout project. Engagement could range from regular communication to co-management.	USAID AOR/COR integrates FPIC into award/contract and work plan and monitors it.	Provide contract expertise as needed (as agreed with USAID AOR/COR).
Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plans	Adopt CLA approaches with communities; for example, co-identify and use indicators and other measures that are meaningful to communities as well as community verification of analysis of data from community-level monitoring and data-gathering. Integrate social risk and related mitigation measures into Environmental Mitigation and Monitoring Plans (EMMPs). Analyze social impacts identified in the EMMP.	Include CLA with communities in the work plan and MEL plan. Develop a scope of work for integrating social risk into the EMMP. Commission social impact analysis in cases of conflict, dispute, or poor community relations.	Work with USAID AOR/COR and technical staff to incorporate community engagement into MEL plan. Undertake adaptive management in line with findings from the social impact analysis or EMMP.

III. ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES AND TOOLS

This section first presents four approaches or frameworks to guide engagement based on USAID and global experience that establish a foundation of trust and mutual learning among communities, USAID, and partners. It then describes key tools or methods for engagement and places these in the context of the forms or stages of engagement discussed in Section II (Table 2). The level of engagement, approach, and tools used will depend on an activity's objectives. If an activity presents potential adverse environmental or social impacts as determined by initial screening and consultations, more formal engagement approaches are required.

ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES AND FRAMEWORKS

An approach to engagement should be informed by best practices and a vision for how engagement fits into a community's culture and can be sustained through local systems. There are numerous tools or methods for engagement, but the overall *approach* can shape how these tools are selected and deployed. For example, a household survey to better understand needs and challenges of communities could be an extractive exercise—“mining” the data and never returning the results to the informants—or an empowering one in which local people are trained to undertake the survey and then verify and communicate the results to the community. The four approaches that follow incorporate community realities and USAID experience and systems.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Rather than focusing on problems and concerns, engagement teams can start by asking what steps people are taking to improve their communities and environments, not only through the project but particularly by their own initiative. This [appreciative inquiry](#) approach demonstrates respect and garners useful insight into community priorities and strengths. Appreciative inquiry puts communities on a stronger footing at the outset and provides a foundation for collaborative work in which USAID and partners contribute to the plans and strategies developed by communities. Building trust is the most important element of engagement, and an appreciative inquiry approach can foster such trust. Appreciative inquiry was used in Uganda to build trust and plan collective action around Mt. Elgon National Park among former pastoralists who migrated to the area, Indigenous Peoples (the Ogiek), and the Uganda Wildlife Authority.²

WORKING WITH AND WITHIN LOCAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SYSTEMS

Engagement is magnified and sustained when messages and actions are embedded in local social systems. Social systems include civil society groups and networks, faith-based groups, market and value chain systems, interest groups, groups formed around governance of a locality or a natural resource, alumni, kinship networks, and other informal social groups. Peer-to-peer communication and learning within local systems is deemed one of the most effective methods of behavior change communication.

² Tanui, JK, D Russell, DC Catacutan, and TTB Yatich. 2007. Land Care in East Africa: Redefining social movement through understanding the capacity of rural people to develop holistic actions in civil society. Nairobi, Kenya: World Agroforestry. <https://www.worldagroforestry.org/publication/land-care-east-africa-redefining-social-movement-through-understanding-capacity-rural>

USAID’s Local Systems Group and Local Systems Office developed a framework with associated tools for and experiences in [understanding and building on local systems](#). They have also produced the [Listening for Program Design guide](#), a useful tool aligned with the appreciative inquiry approach to support engagement. Working within local systems is a best practice, but these systems can contain inequities that should be identified by USAID and partners for the purpose of equitable engagement, nondiscrimination, and social inclusion goals. Community-level inequities can be addressed when trust is established through appreciative inquiry, dialogue, and team-building. For instance, women’s access to land in a local community in Kenya was improved through sustained dialogue with customary leaders and authorities³.

INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

The framework of inclusive development helps USAID and partners consider and understand diversity in communities during engagement, as well as how inclusivity can strengthen outcomes.

Inclusive development is the concept that every person, regardless of their identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies, and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes. As the help document to ADS 201 entitled *Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations*⁴ explains, “inclusive development is good development [because]:

- Engaging marginalized groups enables USAID to identify the development needs of these groups and develop activities that better meet their needs (as compared to activities designed for the general population).
- Robust engagement through consultations and other meetings can lead to greater community buy-in for development programs, which may lead to more sustainable outcomes.
- Engagement with marginalized groups helps to identify impacts of interventions that may differ from impacts on the broader population. This is critical in identifying and mitigating against potential adverse impacts.
- Marginalized communities may possess significant local knowledge that can be leveraged in program design to improve agriculture or conservation outcomes.”

CO-CREATION AND CO-MANAGEMENT

Co-creation is an approach to designing activities that brings people together to produce a mutually valued outcome by using a participatory process that assumes some degree of shared power and decision-making. It is a time-limited process that focuses on generating a specific outcome. Co-creation is a technique that can be used at various points throughout USAID’s program cycle. Communities may

³ <https://www.land-links.org/document/kjp-success-story-kenya-justice-project-pilot-ready-to-be-scaled-up-nationwide/>

⁴ https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/additional_help_for_ads_201_inclusive_development_180726

share decision-making authority during the process. USAID is crafting a large number of co-designs, partnerships, and co-management agreements across its portfolios. These frameworks incorporate a number of tools covering many processes from facilitation to procurement.

Missions should work with the Management Bureau Office of Acquisition and Assistance, the Development Innovation Lab in the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation, and the relevant regional bureau to undertake a co-creation process that complies with procurement and assistance regulations.

USAID plays a key role as a convener of co-creations and mediator of power relationships among potential and active collaborators (communities, government, private sector). This role may involve providing additional resources to communities to build their capacity and level the playing field. One example is the USAID/Guatemala Climate, Nature, and Communities in Guatemala activity, an initiative led by the Rainforest Alliance in partnership with Association of Forest Communities of Petén, which supported forest concessions in managing nearly 17 percent of the Maya Biosphere Reserve's 2.1 million hectares.⁵

In co-creation and co-management, communities are often represented by civil society organizations (CSOs) or, in the case of Indigenous Peoples, by traditional leadership. Due diligence is important even in cases in which the CSO can directly manage USAID funding. For instance, some CSOs may not be seen as accountable to constituents, especially those in more remote areas, as they move from advocacy to service provision. Leadership may become more technocratic to meet donor requirements and less linked to community needs. These observations are not meant to disparage CSOs or traditional leaders—it is very positive when CSOs can receive direct funding—but are meant to help USAID and partners with assessment and capacity-building as needed.

BOX 2. WHEN TO BRING IN EXPERTISE

Like any other technical area, engaging communities, collecting information from and with them, planning, and building trust necessitate experience and skills. Distrust and misunderstandings are major causes of project failure. It is tempting for implementing partners to want to carry out engagement on their own that it takes time and resources away from them to hire or contract expertise. However, such investments pay off when this expertise is embedded, respected, and resourced. Engagement expertise is not necessarily tied to specific qualifications in a person's CV. A staff member could be a trained botanist and have excellent community engagement skills. As such, USAID and partners should probe candidates about their experiences and feedback from communities with they have worked. Best practice is for a staff member to mentor others on the project and within the communities to become more effective at engagement, facilitation, and learning.

KEY TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The tools described in this section can be used in multiple ways in the context of a sound approach or framework as described previously. In general, using the least invasive methods to consult and gather information, while still maintaining transparency and representativeness will not only save money but,

⁵ <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/in-the-field/new-report-shows-net-forest-gain-in-maya-biosphere-reserve/>

more critically, avoid unnecessary and time-consuming data-gathering and meetings that do not help the community.

IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITIES AND PRE-CONSULTATION

Identification of Indigenous Peoples (per PRO-IP)

Optional [Social Impact Assessment](#) Framework

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are forms of structured data collection that were once commonly used in planning USAID rural development projects. RRA and PRA bring together a team from different disciplines such as rural sociology, agriculture, and natural resource management. The aim of RRA/PRA is to collect a body of information on the people and ecosystems of a region, including ethnic and cultural groups and their interactions, farming and natural resource management systems, governance bodies, and social, demographic, and environmental trends. PRA is appropriately used not only to collect information but also to plan interventions with a group of potential beneficiaries based on a joint analysis of problems and situations. Although RRA and PRA are labor-intensive, this type of method could be useful if data are scarce, the project area is large, and there is a desire to engage a number of groups. [RRA and PRA Summary tools](#) outline USAID methods, demonstrate the applicability of these methods, and encourage their rigorous application to obtain the best results from these types of appraisals.

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

Key informant interviews and focus groups are flexible (structured, unstructured, or semi-structured) methods for collecting information. They typically employ *interview guides* rather than fixed questionnaires, which allows interviewers to pose questions and lead discussions at a pace and sequencing that is comfortable to the respondents and, as such, may enable access to particular forms of information, including sensitive information, which should be properly handled to protect informants. Key informant interviews and focus groups can also yield incomplete or misleading information and can put informants at risk if carried out inappropriately or if the data are mishandled. For instance, an informant can describe a human rights violation, and if the accusation is transmitted to authorities, there could be repercussions.

If staff decide to collect information through key informant interviews and focus groups, they should consider getting training on qualitative interviewing and adopt a stance of patience and humility, listening more than talking. Before any formal data collection, organize a round of informal group discussions that engage different sectors of society such as men, women, and youth in different localities to get a sense of the diversity of outlooks. How people frame concepts and concerns in open discussion reveals what matters to them and how they think. For example, what are their aspirations? What does “well-being” mean to them? What are its constituent elements? By what standards do they measure it?

Gaining insights into how people perceive and frame certain issues can enrich understanding of both the participants themselves and the subject matter. Note that in the context of development projects,

however, people may wish to please the interviewer by trying to express what they think the interviewer wants to hear. A skilled and trusted translator or assistant can thus be invaluable.

BOX 3. CONSIDERATIONS FOR USAID STAFF USING KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS DURING FIELD VISITS

- Plan for adequate time and resources such as translators and trained facilitators, as well as travel logistics for more remote locations.
- Use the appreciative inquiry approach.
- Learn about the history of people on the land, both in the past and recently. Ask how migration, mobility, and other changes have affected the community.
- Interview communities independently of the local partner. Use independent translators or assistants who are perceived as a “cultural insiders” based on gender, ethnicity, class, and other characteristics; such a person or persons (e.g., for gender or other diversity considerations) can greatly enhance the quality of information obtained and the flow of discussions.
- As relevant, consult with respected authorities about how to interview Indigenous Peoples, women, men, or other subgroups separately, and how to do so in culturally appropriate ways.
- Strive to obtain a wide variety of views on topics of interest. If there is uniformity of views or it appears that people have been “coached” to respond in a certain way, there may be a problem with the approach and methods used.
- Schedule meetings at the convenience of the individual or group, ideally when they are already meeting and not during times when they need to be tending their fields or performing other duties. This point is particularly important in terms of women’s participation.

CONSULTATION, CONSENT, AND FEEDBACK

Feedback mechanisms, customer service plans, and surveys: Years ago, USAID Missions undertook customer service assessments and created customer service plans that were based on consultations with communities. Such a plan could be developed based on a needs assessment and monitored as part of the MEL plan. Customer service is particularly relevant if USAID is supporting or developing a service such as a health or an educational service. Analysis of the information would lead to improvements in the service and incentivize host country counterparts to become more consumer- and service-oriented. For instance, if a health service is perceived as being costly or poorly delivered, people may decline to use it, and USAID’s investment may be diminished. A customer service assessment could bring such issues to light and recommend changes not only in the service but also in how the local service provider communicates with customers.

MONITORING, EVALUATING, AND LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATING, LEARNING, AND ADAPTING

CLA can foster engagement through mutual learning and sharing when it is expanded beyond USAID and direct implementing partners to include communities. There are several MEL tools that can enhance engagement if communities are directly involved. Many are forms of “[complexity aware monitoring](#)” that provide an opportunity for communities and other stakeholders to give direct input. These include “outcome harvesting,” “most significant change,” and others. “[Stocktaking](#)” is another approach used in natural resource management that gathers information from communities about actual outcomes in a project area, regardless of whether these outcomes can be attributed to USAID investment. This evaluative approach is built around the knowledge and experiences of local actors rather than project implementers.

BOX 4. GRASSROOTS INDICATORS ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT

The use of grassroots indicators builds on Indigenous and local knowledge and strengthens engagement. Grassroots measures are a form of scientific data and should be integrated with other scientific data for robust monitoring. For instance, hunters and fishers can measure catch per unit effort and make observations within transects. Social change measures proposed by Indigenous Peoples open up an understanding of what they see as significant trends and concerns. At one USAID site, Indigenous Peoples noted that “number of intermarriages between clans” was a key indicator of conflict mitigation. In terms of environmental change, observations of changes in timing of seasons, intensity of rains and fires, vegetation, cropping systems, and movements of animals can be highly significant.

Surveys are often used to collect general information about households or individuals, but this may be an expensive and inefficient method, especially if there is no existing census data to create a sample frame. If surveys are collected without a sample frame (i.e., with no idea of whether or how respondents represent a wider target population), the data have little utility for science or evidence-based decision-making. In addition, “household” can be a poor unit of analysis when major differential impacts are found within households (men, women, youth, persons with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, transgender, and intersex individuals).

Make sure to secure local input and consult social science expertise before developing and undertaking a survey. If poorly designed, surveys may generate misleading and even false information. People often provide normative answers—what they think they should say or do—and their real behavior and actions can only be confirmed through observation, especially when it entails sensitive topics (information derived from key informant interviews and focus groups can also be distorted in these ways, but good facilitation will build trust and encourage a diversity of views). Surveys that involve selecting households or individuals and interviewing them separately can create suspicion. Finally, if analysis of survey data is never returned to the communities that provide the data, the survey has little or no value for them. Thus, it is best practice to allocate time and resources to validate and share survey findings.

In a research setting, nested qualitative and quantitative methods are often used for greater precision, enabling “triangulation” of views that may diverge, depending on the role and status of informants. In an applied development setting, this may not be possible. Establishing trust and developing data collection methods in a participatory manner will greatly improve the quality of data collected with communities.

TABLE 2. WHEN TO USE APPROACHES AND TOOLS

PURPOSE OF ENGAGEMENT	TOOL OR APPROACH	CONSIDERATIONS
Initial identification of communities	Review of studies, reports, assessments, and selected academic literature, demographic surveys, and maps of any project area; discussion with knowledgeable people; local systems analysis; rapid appraisals	Rapid appraisals should be done after reviewing documentation and consulting with experts.
Consultations with communities	Undertake pre-consultation steps; Initial consultation approach will depend on size and diversity of group Inclusive development analysis and gender analysis Key informant interviews to develop approach Focus groups, disaggregated appropriately to gather diverse views Appreciative inquiry approach for key informant interviews and focus groups	Review information on culture and social protocols as well as community diversity and representation. Conduct or review conflict analysis if in a conflict or potential conflict zone. FPIC may be needed at this stage if Indigenous Peoples are to be engaged in future stages.
Project design with communities	PRA tools that facilitate joint planning; See additional tools in the USAID “How To” Guide	Depending on the type of project, these steps could be undertaken by the implementing partner as part of work plan development.
Due diligence and risk management	Social impact assessment Conflict analysis Initial Environmental Examinations and EMMPs Grievance/feedback mechanism	Requires commissioned expertise.
FPIC	Various formats and timing (see associated guidance)	Requires commissioned expertise.
MEL/CLA	Training communities to undertake MEL in their communities	Need to incorporate community inputs into formal MEL plans. Include engagement in performance criteria. Create strong theories of change linking engagement to results.

IV. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This guide is meant to provide an introduction to policies, approaches, frameworks, and tools that facilitate and enhance engagement with communities as well as inspire USAID staff to delve into the richness of community engagement. It can be further enhanced by the experiences of USAID staff, implementers, and communities.

As such, it is important to document experiences with and lessons learned from community engagement in partner reports. In addition, incorporating feedback and grievance mechanisms allows communities to provide input and express concerns. Such mechanisms also reduce the possibility of harm and reputational risk to the partner and USAID. Finally, USAID operating units should develop performance criteria for the quality of engagement as well as consider the contribution of community engagement to achieving results, which can be captured in assessments and evaluations.