

Fostering Blueprints for Local Government Development: The Local Governance Development Framework

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Abstract

The Local Government Development Framework (LGDF) is a local governance performance measurement and monitoring tool based on government-citizen collaboration. Developed by RTI International, the LGDF provides for the establishment of demand-driven benchmarks and participatory assessments for the improvement of local governance, service delivery in particular. The paper presents the development-project origins of the LGDF beginning in the 1980s, comparatively examines LGDF's strengths and weaknesses, and provides a step-by-step discussion of its utilization. Four developing countries in which the LGDF has been applied serve as examples. The LGDF involves, first, the establishment of performance benchmarks for the priority functions of the local government. Second, local officials and community stakeholders come together to collaboratively assess and score progress toward achieving the benchmarks. Third, local officials working with stakeholders develop action plans for achieving priority objectives. Finally, the process is regularly repeated to identify areas of improvement and future capacity-building needs. Successful implementation of the LGDF, we conclude, requires leadership, well-aligned political incentives, proper design and implementation, and dedication to the process. Yet, it has withstood the test of time and proven to be an effective tool for bringing government together with the community to achieve local development objectives.

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Introduction

Decentralization in developing world countries has long promised to improve local governance. The transfer of authority from the center to subnational governments presents opportunities to promote participatory, accountable, and effective management of local affairs, even if those opportunities are not always realized. That transfer further provides the chance to improve the delivery of public services. As local government takes on increased responsibilities, for a time, there is usually a strong impetus domestically and among foreign assistance agencies for strengthening the capabilities of local officials, the voice of civil society, and the interaction between the two on critical policies.

From the late 1980s through the 2000s, though a variety of other motivating factors were at work, its perceived benefits encouraged most developing countries to adopt some measure of decentralization; many of those countries promulgated a major reordering of intergovernmental authority. Meanwhile, the widespread prospect of improving decentralization and local governance prompted multilateral and bilateral donor agencies to develop a multitude of decentralization-support programs.

Within a decade or so, however, it was clear to scholars how difficult accomplishing decentralization reform could be (Bird, Ebel, & Wallich, 1995; Oxhorn, Tulchin, & Selee, 2004; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). Local government development invariably proceeds slowly and takes considerable time to show results. It involves changing not just laws or bureaucratic structure, but also attitudes, behavior, and expectations within institutions that have usually been in place for generations.

Indeed, change is best measured over several years, if not decades. Where leadership is poor or local institutions are especially weak, well-meaning reform can turn into local elite domination, mismanagement, and corruption. Incentives for change, such as increased revenue authority to improve services, may well be offset by the disincentives. Regular increases in automatic fiscal transfers from the center, for example, may dampen local officials' interest in raising needed revenue through local taxes or fees.

Facing the imperative of reform and the wave of programming aimed at promoting it, development practitioners in particular sought to develop means of making decentralization more effective and local governance stronger throughout the developing world. In the process, they learned a great deal through their programs about what works and what does not, and they developed a variety of tools in efforts to make their own work more effective (Burki, Perry, & Dillinger, 1999; US Agency for International Development [USAID], 2000; USAID, 2009). Through its international development programs, RTI International was by the early 1980s among the growing number of organizations from all sectors—public, private, and nongovernmental, usually funded by aid agencies in industrialized nations—grappling with the question of strengthening and sustaining reform in institutions of local governance.

One of the most important lessons RTI learned is that the development of more responsive and effective local governance requires sustained engagement between local officials and community stakeholders as an integral part of the reform planning and implementation process. This principle emerged over time and, as discussed below, through considerable programming experience, particularly in the many programs calling for the enhancement of citizen participation. This period of extensive (and continuing) work on decentralization and local governance gave rise to an innovative program tool that continues to be utilized today. That tool—the Local Governance Development Framework (LGDF)—is the subject of this methods report.

The LGDF is a performance measurement and monitoring tool based on government-citizen collaboration. The LGDF provides for the establishment of demand-driven benchmarks for participatory local governance development. It allows for the measurement of performance over time and for comparisons among local governments within or even across similar countries in the same region. The tool also provides for regular capacity assessments, helps identify gaps in practice and policy, and can enable the community to hold leaders to account for their commitments. The LGDF helps bridge the gap between data and development; it involves major stakeholders at each stage of its application.

This paper describes the LGDF approach using the implementation experiences of four countries to highlight its various aspects. We begin in the next section with a brief description of the LGDF's origins. We then describe various methods, including the LGDF, that have been used to measure local government performance and consider those methods' strengths and weaknesses. The subsequent three sections focus, with some reference to implementation experience, on the methodology: development of functions and benchmarks, the scoring process, and implementation aimed at sustainability, respectively. The final section of the paper provides general conclusions with respect to utilization of the LGDF.

LGDF Emerges to Address a Need

The LGDF was born of RTI's experience implementing municipal finance and local governance programs during the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-2000s, the methodology had been sufficiently refined to include a strong democratic governance emphasis, and RTI was beginning to implement it in a few countries. Over time, the LGDF underwent several transformations to meet changing objectives, absorb new conceptions of development, and reflect the increasing sophistication of local government development programs (see Figure 1).

At the start, in the early 1980s, RTI staff began drawing from early technical work on urban finance to introduce techniques such as benchmarking to measure municipal performance. Improving performance eventually came to be viewed as not simply training or generically building local capacity but also as strengthening the effectiveness of local government systems. Identifying the best performers among local governments operating within similar institutional contexts became increasingly emphasized; sharing experience was seen as a means of improving project effectiveness. In Cote d'Ivoire in the late 1980s, for example, RTI utilized an approach that examined how departments carried out their core functions and assessed the gap in practice between local governments that were managing well and those that were relatively weak.

During the wave of democratization that spread through the developing world in the 1980s, many transitions to representative government were soon followed by decentralization reform. Democracy promotion programs with a focus on decentralization quickly followed, particularly at USAID. Defining the roles and desired performance of local government became imperative. With little to no training and often unclear expectations, local officials were expected to meet the goals of new legal frameworks, adopt new practices, and respond to the needs of

Figure 1. A timeline for the Local Governance Development Framework's development and implementation

1982–1983	1983–1986	1986–1988	1990–1992	1991–1994	2001–2007	2007 Onward
Studies in Urban Financial Management Project: Identified best practices in local financial management; focus on local level led to thinking about benchmarking.	Municipal Financial Analysis Handbook: Included quantitative techniques to analyze local governance performance, not organizational characteristics. Used in the Town and Panchayat Strengthening Program in Nepal.	Municipal Management Training Program in Cote d'Ivoire: Conducted a training needs assessment to analyze organizational and management best practices in local governments. Used a functional approach, examining how departments carried out their functions and what could be described as best practices.	Local Government Academy–Philippines: Developed a performance-based needs assessment. Qualitative examination of management best practices. An expert review panel reviewed each characteristic, determined gaps in performance, and identified priorities. Participatory process involving multiple stakeholders.	Series of Activities Funded by the USAID Regional Houses Office in Tunisia: Confirmed the importance of performance-based framework for assessing local governments and the value of a participatory approach when conducting assessments to determine priorities.	Local Government Initiatives in Bulgaria: Fully integrated themes related to participation, communication, and transparency into the methodology. Used as an organizational self-assessment instead of a training needs assessment.	Implemented in a variety of contexts including Guinea, Jordan, Nigeria, and Uganda to assist with program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

citizens. In what began to look a lot like the LGDF that is in use today, RTI worked with the Local Government Academy in the Philippines in the 1990s to develop a performance-based needs assessment. RTI used a qualitative methodology to examine best practices in management. An expert panel reviewed each characteristic, determined gaps in performance, and identified priority reforms.

In addition, in southeast Asia and western Africa, RTI-implemented projects began focusing on the identification of performance characteristics for individual functions of local government. Best practices that could be easily adopted and managed were targeted for broader replication. Local elected officials and department heads, ministerial representatives, and other experts joined RTI's effort to review those characteristics and develop guidelines for achieving them.

A few years later, in a study of local best practices in Tunisia, RTI developed a complete list of functions of targeted local governments, an experience that confirmed its growing interest and belief in the utility of a performance-based approach for RTI's project work. The exercise also demonstrated the value of a participatory approach. It involved 30 or so practitioners organized into subgroups to examine specific functions, prioritize actions, and then reconvene for a plenary vote on broader final priorities.

As USAID's democracy and governance programming grew, RTI's experience with local governance likewise expanded. Its confidence in the performance-based approach further evolved, and that approach grew into the methodological framework that is used today. RTI's work, particularly in Bulgaria, illustrated the value of a governance-focused approach in which participation, transparency, and public access to information were introduced into local government performance measurement. Good performance began to mean the integration of these principles into as many government functions as feasible; administrative improvements and training alone were seen as too narrow.

In addition, the educational value of the more communicative and collaborative approach became

clear. Participants—mayors and councilors, municipal department heads, representatives of civil society organizations, and members of the general public, who had never before openly discussed the full functions of government—appeared to find the process highly informative.

Current application of the LGDF begins with a delineation of priority functions and subfunctions, usually by local officials and project staff working together. Local officials, stakeholders, and the community at large join in a local workshop to conduct an organizational assessment or diagnostic across the identified local government functions. The workshop discussions provide the basis for generating action plans or development agendas for implementation over the coming year. Updated assessments using the LGDF provide a means of measuring progress over several years. With each application, the LGDF remains subject to further refinement, while some aspects of its implementation can become important local objectives themselves, such as the mobilization of dialogue between local government and the community (Minis, 2014).

Means of Measuring Performance

Performance measurement, succinctly defined, is “the regular measurement of progress toward specified outcomes” (Hatry, 2006, 3). In the public sector, as elsewhere, it is a critical component of efforts to manage with a keen eye on the progressive achievement of results. The objective is more effective, efficient, and accountable government (Castro, 2011). Performance measurement is customer oriented and driven by data and—of particular relevance to local governance—entails maximizing the benefits of public services while minimizing any negative effects (Hatry, 2006).

A good performance measurement system is based on three dimensions. First, the system must produce valid, precise, and reliable information; second, it must be accepted by the leading stakeholders; and third, it should contribute to the goals of the institution at hand (Sterck & Bouckaert, 2008; Coppedge & Gerring, 2011). Though performance measurement has been in use for decades, the 1990s and 2000s saw greatly renewed interest in

it. International donor agencies were among those enthusiastically adopting it to gauge the success of their programs. The growth in popularity, however, gave rise to concerns about problems or unintended consequences in practice (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002). The focus on performance assessments has led to operational paralysis, for example, and tunnel vision, in which the emphasis on quantifiable measures comes at the expense of important unquantified performance objectives (Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002).

A variety of well-known methods is available for use in measuring the institutional strength and performance of local governments. Surveys, expert evaluations, focus group discussions, opinion polling, and other approaches can be effective, each depending on the nature of the task and its objectives. Below we describe a few of the major approaches and their relation to the LGDF, briefly compare the advantages and disadvantages of different methods, and make the case that the LGDF's approach appears in a number of ways well suited for the promotion of local institutional development.

Independent Expert Analysis

An individual or group of local government specialists designs and implements a study that allows a detailed investigation of local governance improvement in areas such as administrative effectiveness, public participation, and quality of services. An expert team does this periodically, perhaps every two years or so, to gauge the rate of progress over time. The team should include country technical experts with the aim of ensuring that that local institutional context is well understood. The resulting reports would be informative, and if covered by the media, might help educate the public and create pressure for change in government practice.

However, depending on the degree to which the evaluation team is familiar with the local government under assessment, the results will tend to be more prescriptive and less appreciative of local realities. Another concern with an expert study is the passive participation by local officials and the community of stakeholders—the average citizens, neighborhood groups, private sector representatives—who have a direct interest in knowing how well local officials

are performing and where progress is or is not being made. Stakeholders might be treated as sources of information and become interviewees, but that role is a fairly limited one and leaves little room for them to engage in the process and influence the resulting recommendations. An opportunity to educate officials and stakeholders and promote their ownership of reform is lost. An expert study is also more likely to be disregarded as usually there is no requirement or means of pressuring local officials to implement its recommendations. Except in the unlikely event that they are championed by someone with influence or extraordinary motivation and organizational capability, independent expert studies are more than likely to be found on a bookshelf or filed away and forgotten.

Data Collection and Evaluation

The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data that are useful for decision making is at the core of the performance measurement process (Sterck & Bouckaert, 2008; Castro, 2011; Cook et al., 1995). Data must be accurate, obtainable, and as carefully linked to the performance indicators as possible. The ease with which data can be collected, through a variety of means, is often closely tied to the nature of the performance evaluation that is sought. On the one hand, for example, an output evaluation requires reporting on targeted activities of an institution or project, perhaps the number of visits made or trainings conducted. On the other hand, an impact evaluation is aimed at attempting to measure the effect of an activity relative to what would have occurred in the absence of the activity; multiple layers of data may be required in such cases (National Academy of Sciences, 2008).

Evaluations of all types face a number of limitations, perhaps particularly in the developing world. Administrative recordkeeping can be weak or information may not be collected regularly enough (Mackay, 2007; Castro, 2011). Knowing the information may not be entirely accurate or not trusting in it for some other reason, local officials may simply refuse to use it. Often the financial burden of data collection is the major roadblock (Mark, 2014; Mackay, 2007). Someone must conduct the analysis on a timely basis; good data collection and

evaluation takes time, commitment, and practice, and the personnel to do it are usually in short supply (Castro, 2011). Data collection and analysis should involve stakeholders as well (Yang, 2008). When that does not occur, nongovernmental participation and oversight are likely to be quite limited, and there thus will be few incentives to make use of data that may not reflect well on local officials or to follow through with recommendations that may flow from those data. Were civic groups to develop a database of their own, local government officials may not see it in their political interest to support the effort; the process could be politicized and even lead to political conflict.

Opinion Surveys

Surveys of public opinion, important stakeholders, or government officials themselves are a form of data collection and one worthy of note. Surveys have long been popular measurement tools in development, and they appear to have increasingly come into use as the debate on aid effectiveness demands increased efforts to measure project performance (Stipak, 1979; Swindell & Kelly, 2000; World Bank, 2014). Surveys of beneficiaries or users provide important feedback for service improvements and allow citizen voice on important issues, and they can offer valuable means of broadly highlighting in the media or elsewhere successes or challenges in local governance. They are most helpful when the questions asked are precise and when the respondent has direct experience with the issues at hand, which in the governance sector can be difficult to ensure and which has led to perception-based approaches that may not accurately reflect performance (Stipak, 1979). The publicity surveys receive can be helpful in educating the public and promoting policy reform, though usually to a limited extent. Despite the advantages, surveys are not particularly useful tools for promoting public participation in local affairs.

Public Meetings

Public meetings, be they open council sessions or exchanges with the community in the neighborhood or town plaza, can be effective means of identifying issues for local government discussion and attention. In the developing world, a wide variety of participatory mechanisms has in recent years been mandated in new decentralization and local

government laws (Cornwall & Coehlo, 2007; Cameron et al., 2012). These new laws are meant to help identify and prioritize issues of public concern. Citizens are able express their degree of satisfaction with local government performance, and government officials gain insight into their perceived level of effectiveness.

Government interaction with the community can be educational and productive for both officials and the public, though this can depend on the degree to which the average person independently participates and has some authority to influence decision making. The agenda for these sessions can be controlled by local authorities, and new practices that break with long-held traditions are not easily sustained or integrated into a larger community development process. A public event can be manipulated politically if, for example, only or mostly political supporters are invited or the questions presented are prepared in advance (Bland, 2011b). Depending on their size, these public meetings can be too unwieldy to generate much discussion about local issues, especially where the tradition of public participation is weak.

LGDF

The LGDF relies on performance benchmarking to improve the functioning of local government in as collaborative and consensus-oriented a fashion as feasible (see Table 1). The LGDF is initially introduced to local officials by project implementers as part of a larger, externally financed development project. Application of the LGDF usually proceeds as one of a number of related project activities in which local government officials—primarily but not exclusively mayors and department heads—and external project implementers are working together for a multi-year period to strengthen the responsiveness and effectiveness of local governance.

Engagement with the local community is often a central requirement of the project as a whole. LGDF project implementers bring together local officials and stakeholders on the design and implementation of the tool, providing technical assistance and training as needed to develop the inputs and support implementation. Since those participating in the exercise determine the LGDF's scope and set the agenda, it is easily adapted to the local institutional

Table 1. The Local Governance Development Framework

Principles	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relies on facilitated assessment of performance and capacity • Involves key stakeholders in an inclusive and participatory process • Can cover all key functions of local governments as prescribed by national legislation • Serves as an iterative process that should be repeated on a yearly basis • Assesses capacity based on national and local standards not international canons 	
Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes collaborative and consensus-oriented governance • Generates standards that allow quantitative measurement of performance • Is flexible to respond to varied local contexts • Serves broadly as an educational tool and promotes broad ownership over results • Allows detailed discussion of technical and nontechnical issues • Provides for diverse perspectives to be voiced • Allows for joint, transparent agenda-setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical discussions may limit participation by nonspecialists • Sustaining the process and participation over time could prove difficult • Participation can be manipulated politically • Requires a preliminary understanding of good governance concepts and approaches • Introduces an element of subjectivity to performance/capacity measurement • Requires an outside facilitator to lead the initial assessment workshop

environment. Working groups include specialists and the general public and thus allow for technical discussion that is accessible to individuals with varying levels of experience. Highly technical issues can be handled in separate groups and subsequently brought into the larger discussion. This type of collaborative identification of institutional weaknesses and priority reforms can be seen as an exercise in good, participatory governance (Johnston, 2010).

The LGDF also faces disadvantages, as Table 1 indicates. Like any participatory process, it can be politically manipulated, and participation can be circumscribed. Local officials and local stakeholders working with the support of LGDF advisors must be committed, through the emphasis on transparency, to ensuring that participation is as expansive and independent as possible. Community stakeholders can be any interested individual or organization, but they are most likely to include neighborhood leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses or their representative organizations such as chambers of commerce, service delivery entities and officials, and leaders of professional organizations. As an externally introduced and facilitated process (at least initially), the LGDF's sustainability is also a challenge.

LGDF: Development of Functions and Benchmarks

The LGDF is based on the establishment of a series of performance characteristics or benchmarks for the major functions of the local government system. Determination of the priority functions, subfunctions, and benchmarks allows local stakeholders—elected officials, other local officials, community organizations, and the public at large—to assess collaboratively the performance of local government in determining and addressing the priority needs of the locality, particularly public service provision.

Progress is rated through the organization of participatory assessment workshops in each locality. Following the workshops, participants develop action or service improvement plans aimed at achieving priority objectives, often with the assistance of the activities of a larger development project. The LGDF must be regularly repeated—RTI's experience indicates that doing it annually is best—to identify areas of improvement and areas in need of any additional capacity-building activities.

As noted above, the LGDF is typically introduced as part of a larger decentralization and local governance

project, specifically USAID projects implemented by RTI in recent years. The following discussion of the LGDF's primary features highlights in particular, the experience of four different applications: Bulgaria's Local Government Initiatives (LGI); Nigeria's Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Development (LEAD) project; Uganda's Government, Accountability, Participation, and Performance (GAPP) project; and Kenya's 2013 creation of new subnational governments.

In Bulgaria, RTI implemented LGI from 2001 to 2007 and, as part of that effort, assisted in the development of the Municipal Development Framework (MDF), the first iteration of the LGDF tool. As the MDF was being developed and applied, Bulgaria continued to undergo a process of democratic consolidation and economic transformation that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Bulgarian national and local elections were held throughout the 1990s, representative democracy was gradually deepening.

LGI's objective was to strengthen local governments by making them more responsive, efficient, and publicly accountable. Core activities included clarifying the roles and responsibilities of local governments, increasing citizen participation, supporting decentralization policy reform, training in public finance and administration, strengthening institutional infrastructure, and improving municipal access to infrastructure finance. The MDF was developed for 10 municipalities and applied at the national level to improve national-level organizations' understanding of municipalities' roles and functions.

In Nigeria, RTI supported the development of the LGDF under USAID-financed LEAD, implemented from 2009 through 2014. The LGDF was a response to the strong need to define local government assistance priorities and build local government and community collaboration. Specifically, LEAD sought to strengthen the capacity of local governments, increase the transparency of local government operations, enhance the capacity of local community organizations, and improve service delivery. Through the use of the LGDF, as one of the project's first activities, LEAD staff conducted performance assessments of the targeted local governments to learn their strengths and weaknesses. The knowledge

gleaned helped in designing the project's assistance plans under each objective and supported the development of improvement plans.

In Uganda, RTI continues to implement the LGDF under GAPP, which began in 2012 and is scheduled to be completed in 2017. GAPP's objectives are to improve the capacity of relevant national institutions to support local government accountability, strengthen local government fiscal management and accountability, and improve citizen and community participation in local government. In Uganda, the LGDF has so far been applied once to all 25 districts and 7 municipalities in which the project works.

In Kenya, following the March 2013 elections, under an extraordinary devolution reform, 47 new county governments with elected governors and assemblies were established. The counties are now responsible (formally at least) for a wide array of services and for the management of significant financial resources. Neither the national nor the county governments, however, have any way to continuously monitor and evaluate the progress of the new counties. As part of an internally funded research activity, an RTI team set out to create an LGDF-type tool for Kenya. The result was the County Development Assessment Tool (CDAT), a pilot tool of limited scope, developed for application throughout Kenya depending on the availability of resources (as of this writing it has yet to be applied). The CDAT covers four functions and 52 subfunctions.

The design of any LGDF requires a good understanding of the country context and local government system. The differences among local systems are political, requiring analysis of the major political cleavages; of the electoral requirements, such as direct election for the establishment of local official autonomy and accountability; and of the strength of civil society organization and participation. The administrative and public service functions formally mandated or locally expected of local government—and the extent to which they are actually carried out—are a second feature that requires consideration.

Differences in the financial regime are the final critical aspect that requires assessment, especially the degree to which local authorities can regularly count on the resources they need to carry out

their major functions and, for fiscal autonomy and accountability, the degree to which those resources are locally provided (Bland, 2011a). Indeed, the varied local settings lead to differences in approach and terminology; no two frameworks are identical. In addition, often the decision to use the LGDF follows the enactment of a series of constitutional and legal reforms that promise to reshape the authority of local government institutions. The degree of commitment to the reforms, at both the national and local levels, and the extent to which transformation is progressing are leading considerations in the development and implementation of the LGDF as well. There is almost always considerable variety among local governments in the quality of administration or service provision, with some being much better than others.

Depending on the nature of the national reform effort, some local officials may give higher priority to certain aspects over others. In Uganda, for example, where decentralization began in the late 1990s, changes in laws and frequent splitting of districts meant that some districts performed better than others in areas like development planning. The average LGDF score for planning, which can range from 1.0 to 5.0, in the GAPP local governments was 3.0, while individual function scores ranged from 2.1 to 3.9.

The LGDF's design in any country therefore begins with the development of that list of core functions of

local government or, more precisely, those functions of greatest interest to local officials and stakeholders. Typically project advisors and technical specialists (external and local) initially develop the functions list in collaboration with local government officials. They then engage other stakeholders to consult and collaborate on relevance, priorities, and accuracy. In Uganda, the GAPP team drafted the 7 functions and 21 subfunctions, with their respective performance characteristics, and then consulted with national and local officials, civil society organizations, and other specialists to finalize them. In Uganda, the LGDF is to be completed on an annual basis, documenting changes in district and municipal performance and highlighting areas for improvement. In Nigeria, LEAD project staff, working with local specialists, developed the functions (and subfunctions and performance characteristics) and then tested them in pilot local governments.

Depending on the available resources, the number of targeted functions can vary considerably, but based on these four cases 7 seems to be the most favored. In some form or another, planning, finance, and service delivery appear in all four LGDF cases discussed here. Given the importance of these functions to local government in general, this is not surprising. Service delivery in Bulgaria's MDF and service infrastructure and management in Uganda's LGDF are virtually the same, though the latter includes a greater infrastructure focus (see Table 2).

Table 2. Local Government Development Framework: Functions included in four projects

Bulgaria LGI (2001–2007)	Nigeria LEAD (2010–Present)	Uganda GAPP (2012–Present)	Kenya CDAT (2013)
Strategic policy and planning	Strategic policy and planning	Administration	Governance
Project management	Project planning and implementation	Development planning	Budget/financial management
Municipal institutional development	Institutional and personnel development	Local economic development	Agriculture service delivery
Financial management	Assets and infrastructure management	Policymaking and oversight	Health care service delivery
Service delivery	Service delivery	Service and infrastructure management	
Local economic development	Financial management	Financial management and reporting	
External relations	External relations	External relations	

LGI = Local Government Initiatives; LEAD = Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Development project; GAPP = Government, Accountability, Participation, and Performance project; and CDAT = Country Development Assessment Tool

Likewise, the MDF's project management and Nigeria's LGDF project planning and implementation are largely the same. Kenya's CDAT is distinct in two important ways. First, given the importance of governance to devolution in Kenya, that function is treated separately; the five subfunctions include citizen participation, access to information, ethics and integrity, diversity, and inter-county relations. Second, rather than treating general service delivery as a single function, two of the most important services—health care and agriculture—are assessed individually.

In the second step, the functions are divided into subfunctions, or the components of particular interest within a functional area. Within the function of administration, for instance, we might find the subfunctions of policy implementation and technical support, human resource management, public procurement, and records management. Like the functions list, the lists of subfunctions are initially developed largely by project advisors and technical specialists.

The third step is to assign a series of performance characteristics—the benchmarks—to each of the subfunctions. This involves broader consultation. The performance characteristics require fine delineation and, again, local context is important. National laws

may provide for continuity of responsibilities among local governments, but administrative capacity, financial resources, geographic isolation, and the level of civic organization, among other aspects, can vary widely, especially between cities and rural areas. In Uganda, after field testing the LGDF, GAPP team members discovered that two versions had to be created: one for urban municipalities and one for rural districts. The core functions remained fairly similar, but the terminology had to be changed to reflect the needs of municipalities and districts to make the LGDF more user friendly. Ultimate agreement on all of these elements—the functions and subfunctions and performance features—is achieved through a series of workshop or pilot activities, so as to help ensure that local officials, stakeholders, and the community are in agreement on the scope and relevance of the tool.

The Scoring

Once the benchmarks are set, LGDF participants engage in a discussion of progress toward the achievement of each of the performance characteristics. Table 3 provides an example of an LGDF functional area scoring sheet used by the LEAD project in Nigeria. The groups of scorers can

Table 3. LGDF function, subfunction, and performance characteristics for Nigeria LEAD project

Function: Strategic Policy and Planning		
Subfunction	Successful Local Government Area	Scores
Performance Characteristics	a. A reliable and credible database is established.	
	b. Needs assessment of local government association (LGA) is identified and conducted in a participatory and gender-inclusive manner.	
	c. Short-, medium-, and long-term community-driven strategic development plan is established and states the vision, mission, and strategies aimed at achieving set goals and targets (physical, social, and economic).	
	d. The strategies are clearly defined and are based on the vision, mission, identified needs, and available resources. The development process for these strategies should be participatory and include vulnerable groups.	
	e. Council plays multifaceted role: direct provider for some services; catalyst/coordinator for others; seeking to foster an environment for local development (infrastructure services) and brokering partnerships with nongovernmental and other interest groups (e.g., business).	
	f. Multipronged campaign to raise awareness of strategic development plan among citizens is implemented.	
	g. Council is proactive in proposing interest and needs for activities beyond current fiscal schedule and for policy reforms to federal and states government.	
Assessment Levels		

be a random mix of participants or participants divided based on technical expertise, depending on the level of depth sought for the discussions. A facilitator, who during the early iterations is usually a member of the local governance project team, encourages the expression of views by all parties and moderates the deliberations. Opinions naturally differ. Specialists in the topic from both within and outside the government are asked to weigh in and share their insights as well. While some participants will be more informed than others, the assessment of benchmark progress is expected to be as close to direct experience, and not to general perception, as possible.

A five-point scale is used to score each of the performance characteristics of each subfunction. At the low end of the scale, local governance performance of a particular feature is considered incipient or weak. A score of “1,” for example, may be considered “emerging” or at “initiation.” At the high end, at a score of “5,” the performance characteristic exists in full or has been attained. At the scoring stage, success rests on being realistic about what can and cannot be achieved by the local administration. Participants, especially the external project advisors, must be careful not to promote practices, drawn from developed nations, that are not well suited to local institutions or that a local government is incapable of achieving. A too-much-too-soon approach leads not only to implementation failures, but also to an inability over the long term for the local administration even to achieve progress (Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2010).

The participatory evaluation of the subfunctions and scoring is the heart of the LDGE. The assessment workshop (or a series of workshops, as needed) brings together local elected and administrative officials, neighborhood organizations, private sector representatives, NGOs, interested individuals, and any other stakeholders. Broad representation can help avoid domination of the activity by local elites or any one particularly powerful group, enhances the legitimacy of the exercise, and allows for small-group discussion of the functions (USAID/Uganda, 2013a). The text box at right provides a sample list of the types of people who have been invited; project implementers work with local partners to

develop an invitation list that includes non-elite community representatives as well. Together, through a facilitated session and in some cases in smaller break-out groups, participants review and discuss the critical issues involved to assess performance. Each participant then draws from his or her own experience to score each performance characteristic. Individual scores are tallied. At least two calculations are made from the results. First, the scores for each performance characteristic are summed and divided by the number of scores provided to reach an average score for each one. Second, the performance characteristic scores (averages) are summed and divided by the total number of characteristics. The result is the subfunction score. As needed, the subfunction scores can be averaged to determine a score at the functional level. All scores are presented to the larger group for consideration.¹

This process should be carried out on a reoccurring basis, and as the performance of each subfunction is evaluated over multiple years, the ratings or score ideally would be on the rise as progress is being made. In Nigeria, for example, the LGDF was completed three times in LEAD’s “champion” local governments on an annual basis. The results were used to develop local service improvement plans, identify gaps, and develop targeted capacity development plans.

Potential invitees for an LGDF workshop

- Local government mayor/chair
- Council members, especially committee chairs
- Department heads (technical and administrative)
- Service sector heads
- Sub-local representatives
- Key NGOs and civil society organization representatives
- Local business representatives, including associations
- Media representatives

Source: USAID/Uganda, 2013a.

Participants are encouraged to recognize that the exercise is being conducted by the community in conjunction with local leaders for the general benefit of the local population. They are also encouraged to be forthright and constructive.

¹ In some country cases, the ratings were developed by consensus as opposed to average score.

The aim is to be as inclusive and collaborative as possible. The LGDF assessment workshop is not only about ratings and enhancing administrative and service performance, however; it is also a means of introducing and gradually instilling community voice and accountability as important values for the development of the local community (USAID/Uganda, 2013a). Participants often report that participating in the assessment workshop is the first time they become aware of all the functions of local government. They therefore tend to appreciate and become engaged in the effort to improve services. Alternatively, elected officials develop an appreciation of the increased awareness of their constituents' involvement. With continued effort, these early interactions can evolve into growing lines of accountability.

In Bulgaria, for instance, the MDF supported the LGI's efforts to enhance citizen involvement in local affairs. When a participant in LGI and specifically MDF activities was asked about the effect seven years after the project ended, he noted that council operations had changed in positive ways. The participant cited council sessions allowing citizens to make statements and ask questions and the creation of citizen consultative committees for priority issues as examples of the MDF's impact (personal communication with former MDF participant in Sofia, Bulgaria, September 2014).

Next Steps: Planning, Implementation, and Sustainability

When benchmark scoring is complete, workshop participants draw up action plans based on the scoring results. Given the scores, participants can make relative judgments on the state of local government functions and subfunctions. A lower average score in the finance function, for example, compared to the planning function—especially if taxes are deemed of particular importance to the local community—might lead to the adoption of a new procedure or policy to bring about a series of financial improvements. The relative scores within a subfunction will tell participants where the focus of attention for improvement should be within that subfunction.

In Table 3, for example, a high score of 4 or 5 for the reliability of the database (performance characteristic a.) compared to a score of two for the campaign to raise awareness about strategic development planning (f.) might lead to a call for the dedication of resources to improve the campaign. Such insights support the determination of reform and budget priorities for the coming months or years as application of the LGDF is repeated. Gaps in existing capacity-building efforts are identified, trainings can be tailored to individual communities, and new capacity-building tools may be developed. Following the LGDF exercises, for example, the Nigeria LEAD project designed capacity-development plans for local governments that included the targeted function area, identified gaps, proposed activities targeting the gaps, developed a timeframe, targeted stakeholders for capacity building (council members, unit directors, and planning officers, among others), and noted where the key stakeholders were in the training process.

Where the LGDF has been implemented more than once, participants can compare the absolute levels of function and subfunction performance over time. If the scores of a subfunction fail to improve from one year to the next, local officials and the community may decide that the problem is serious enough to immediately address. Their most likely motivation for acting will be the desire not to fail to meet a priority objective and, especially when the media participates and has publicized the effort, potentially face public complaints (and associated political costs) about the lack of progress.

The results in Figure 2 demonstrate the degree to which various LGDF function scores in the Nigerian local government of Katagum improved from 2010 to 2012. All six functions showed improvement from 2010, with the largest improvement witnessed in assets management. A clear setback was experienced, however, in service delivery between 2011 and 2012.

Again, the LGDF implementation process is intended to be as participatory and collaborative as possible. The resulting action plans—the policies, procedures, and investments—prioritized in the workshops are then executed with community oversight as well. Local government officials and citizens should have a clear picture of how the local government is viewed

Figure 3. Nigeria LGDF Performance in Katagum, 2010–2012

Source: Nigeria LEAD Project data.

by citizens and what their priority areas are for reform. Implementing the LGDF at least annually provides updates on local governance progress. Over time the assessment workshops provide consistent feedback and allow the project to further refine capacity-building efforts, identify what works best, or modify actions that are not achieving the desired results.

The participatory process, moreover, provides opportunities to continue to build on a growing relationship between local government officials and citizens, promoting civic engagement, accountability, and transparency. Whether or not public accountability and faith in local government actually improve is an open question subject to contextual factors that differ with each locality. Political division and public cynicism about government change of any kind will obviously serve as a brake on positive change. Conversely, a strong tradition of participation and the ability to demonstrate tangible community improvements can offset the potential limitations on progress.

To build sustainability, the successful transfer of skills to local officials and stakeholders so that they can implement the LGDF on their own is obviously imperative. Participants must come to appreciate through success over time the value in continuing to use the LGDF well after the project ends. There

are three strategies for attaining this level of sustainability. The first is to ensure that the LGDF is implemented efficiently and effectively. It should be providing tangible performance benefits (especially when coupled with other project assistance in relevant areas like service delivery) and positively engaging the community at a cost in time and money that is not considered burdensome. The activity must sincerely be considered impactful and, in fact, RTI experience has shown that local champions who have participated in the LGDF process and become convinced of its value can be an important source of sustainability.

In Bulgaria, when interviewed for a comparative case study, a former LGI participant stated that his experience with the MDF prompted him to continue to work in municipal development. He reported working in other municipalities to help them learn how to assess performance and even publishing a book on innovative municipal management methods (personal communication, Sofia, Bulgaria, September 2014). Another former LGI participant with MDF experience interviewed for the case study noted that the MDF is currently used in one Bulgarian municipality as a performance monitoring instrument and in another, Svishtov Municipality, for 2014–2020 strategic planning (personal communication, Svishtov, Bulgaria, September 2014).

A second LGDF sustainability strategy involves targeting political incentives. Through their own experience, ideally, or with the help of project implementers, local elected officials must come to understand the political rewards of utilizing the tool to improve administrative capacity, services, and government and community relations. The more the LGDF is seen as capable of supporting local officials' most powerful interest—building political capital so as to, most importantly, win reelection—the more likely it is to be continued. LGDF implementers and participants therefore need to demonstrate the link between utilization of the tool and the political benefits, which is challenging. Institutional memory of the LGDF can be entirely lost with the turnover of locally elected leaders and their staff following an election.

A final LGDF sustainability strategy calls for advocacy by local beneficiaries and promotional efforts by the project's implementers. Working together they may be able to convince a central government ministry or agency to adopt the LGDF as a national policy requirement. Such directives or mandates can lead to its widespread introduction at the local level and thus significantly increase the likelihood that it will be more widely sustained.

Conclusion

The LGDF has evolved through decades of use from a national capacity-building training effort into a blueprint for improving and measuring local governance, often in decentralizing countries and always in a wide variety of local contexts. As a tool that has withstood the test of time and continues in use today, the LGDF is a product of donor-financed efforts that seek to take advantage of decentralization and local governance reform trends in the developing world to promote citizen voice, local accountability, and effectiveness in service delivery. Local government and community partners are most likely to adopt the process as their own and sustain its use when the LGDF is shown to have a positive impact on the quality of life in their communities (including the attendant political benefits to local officials).

The LGDF entails three essential steps: identifying the priority functions, collaboratively assessing them against set benchmarks, and choosing priorities for reform based on the reported scores. A fourth step—repeating the process at least annually—should probably be added to the list. Each step of the LGDF is participatory and engaging of local stakeholders, from the development of the benchmarks and assessment scoring workshops to the implementation of follow-up activities and follow-on assessment workshops. When done well and under favorable circumstances, the tool can help implement reforms, lead to sustainability, and gradually begin to positively change attitudes, behaviors, and expectations about the operation and effectiveness of local institutions.

The LGDF's workshop discussion and scoring have four core purposes: (1) identifying priorities areas for development; (2) developing a local consensus on priority areas for improvement; (3) providing opportunities for citizens and elected officials to engage and deepen their understanding about local governance; and (4) serving as a baseline and means of monitoring and evaluating improvements over the life of the project and after project completion (USAID/Uganda, 2013b).

In comparing the variety of tools that can be used to measure local government performance, we have found that the LGDF, like all approaches, carries both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the LGDF has proven to be an effective methodology for the promotion of participatory, collaborative local governance development, especially with respect to the encouragement of interaction between local officials and their communities. It is important that the LGDF be iterative; local officials in particular, but stakeholders as well, must embrace it as their own on the grounds that it works administratively and politically. If key local actors adopt and remain committed to the LGDF, the practice of local governance should increasingly be defined by officials and citizens alike working together to achieve the common good.

Ultimately, as the process becomes institutionalized, the locality should become accustomed to the LGDF—or whatever the process may be called years

after its initial adoption. When the proper political and other incentives for sustainability are in place, it can become an accepted habit of governing. As public voice and accountability grow, the LGDF should help improve the quality and equitable coverage of public services for all, and not just for traditionally powerful interests. As the LGDF proves successful in one place, it can be promoted for replication in other parts of the country. Replication can be achieved over time in a few or many new jurisdictions, through a project or an independent government program, through word-of-mouth, publicity, the sharing of experience, or directed technical assistance.

Successful utilization of the LGDF involves an exceptional effort by project implementers and their partners in local government and civil society. It requires time for framework design and

implementation, dedication to the process, and some properly aligned political incentives to see it through to the end of the project and well beyond. Local partners must take the lead; the sooner they can do that the better. Institutional change is going to be slow under any circumstances, even where the local setting is relatively favorable for LGDF implementation. The LGDF, meanwhile, will need to demonstrate tangible benefits to convince local political leaders with short time horizons of its value, and this is perhaps its greatest test.

RTI experience in multiple countries demonstrates that it can be implemented and sustained with some measure of success. The LGDF's promise is the opportunity—there are no guarantees—that it provides. That opportunity is valuable enough to make it worth the effort.

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