

# Implementation Tips for USAID Partners

Sharing Resources and Knowledge Among the Global CSO Community

Inclusive Development 2 | 2020

## Definitions

**Inclusive Development:** The concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and that their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes.

**Inclusion:** Ensuring equal access to social, political, and economic opportunities for all people, regardless of differences in personal characteristics or identities.

**Spoilers:** Individuals who try to interfere with or negatively affect the implementation of a development project.

## Introducing an Inclusive Civic Engagement Project to the Community

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How can I gain community support for a civic engagement project that incorporates gender and social inclusion principles?

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Development projects that seek to advance gender and social inclusion in civic or political life may encounter resistance from people who perceive such change as a threat to their culture or positions within the community. Gaining support from the community, and particularly from traditional and religious leaders, can be critical to achieving the project's outcomes. However, doing so without compromising principles of inclusion can be difficult. Several tactics—such as framing inclusive civic engagement projects as a “best practice” and emphasizing mutual gains of inclusive citizen participation—can be helpful in encouraging community support and minimizing the potential for backlash. This *Implementation Tip* provides guidance for securing community support for inclusive civic engagement projects.

### USAID programming and inclusive development

USAID projects are expected to promote gender equality, women empowerment, and social inclusion. Inclusive approaches ensure that all members of the community—regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other personal identities or characteristics—will benefit from the project. These priorities are reflected in various USAID policies and guidance documents on inclusive development, gender equality, youth development, disability, and others. For more information on USAID policies for inclusive development, see the *Implementation Tip* on [Inclusion and Inclusive Development](#).

### Encountering opposition to gender and social inclusion

To be successful, projects supporting civic engagement need “buy-in” from the community/ies where they work. This support may be difficult to achieve in places where the concept that all community members meaningfully participate in civic life presents challenges to traditional gender norms and power structures that exist within the

community. For example, in communities where the word “gender” is seen as referring only to women, projects emphasizing the gender-related aspects of a project may be perceived as benefitting women to the detriment of men. These misperceptions may lead men to believe that a project will decrease their power, and they may therefore voice opposition to it. People who respond negatively to a project and attempt to sabotage it may be considered “spoilors.”

Opposition may come from any member of a community but gaining support from traditional and religious leaders is often especially difficult if they hold more conservative attitudes about the participation of women and marginalized groups in public life. As a result, project staff should take intentional approaches to gain the support of traditional and religious leaders without undermining principles of gender and social inclusion. Important opportunities for seeking support may include meetings with community leaders during project start-up and efforts to recruit participants or to engage members of the community

### Engaging religious and traditional leaders in project start-up

When starting a new civic engagement project, it is often necessary to approach religious and traditional leaders who act as “gatekeepers” and may control access to a community. It is important to gain their support during project start-up and maintain communication throughout a project to secure the participation of community members who may not feel comfortable participating in activities unless they have been endorsed by local leaders.

On the other hand, directing projects through these leaders may also reinforce the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups. Religious and traditional leaders may not be willing to engage all members of the community—such as women; youth; people with disabilities; or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people—in decision-making processes. Such leaders often choose their own supporters or members of their own identity group to represent the “community” in a priority-setting meeting. This may in turn undermine principles of inclusion, democracy, and citizen participation. Reflecting this concern, the *2012 United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights* suggested that relying on the support of religious and traditional leaders may be a human rights violation. The report emphasized the need to take measures to remedy structural discrimination by ensuring that communities are not exclusively represented by people who are

traditionally vested with power or authority (most of whom are male). The report notes that relying on the support of traditional and religious leaders may allow diverse subcultures or groups—such as youth, ethnic minorities, migrants, women, and others that either do not accept or do not live according to the norms prescribed by the dominant group—to be ignored or completely silenced.

If project staff members choose to work extensively with traditional and religious leaders, it is important to ensure that all members of the community can participate equally. The following recommendations may allow for constructive engagement of traditional leaders in project start-up meetings without undermining gender and social inclusion principles.

### ***Tips for Engaging Traditional and Religious Leaders in Project Start-up Meetings***

- **Ensure that women and men from majority and minority social groups attend meetings about the project or community decision making.** This requires intentional efforts to find marginalized groups and persuade their members to attend.
- **Address power imbalances between traditional leaders and women and non-majority groups.** This may require providing targeted training to women and non-majority groups to build their confidence and skills to fully and equally participate in meetings with traditional leaders and members of majority groups.
- **Provide special training to meeting and activity facilitators.** This type of training prepares facilitators to conduct a meeting in a way that respects religious and traditional leaders but prevents them from dominating the meeting.
- **Establish clear ground rules for the meetings and enforce them equally.** The facilitator must establish ground rules (such as prohibiting interruptions and respecting time limits for speakers) and enforce them to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups are heard.
- **Meet with the traditional and religious leaders beforehand to clarify expectations.** It may be useful to meet with the traditional and religious leaders prior to a meeting to establish respect and ensure they are aware that the purpose of the meeting is to learn about the needs and interests of all members of the community—not just those the leaders may represent.

### Securing broader community support

The following tactics can be useful to encourage support for and participation in a project by local leaders and other members of the community.

#### ***Tips for Securing Community Support for Inclusive Civic Engagement***

- **Gender-sensitive programming is a best practice.** Rather than highlighting gender and inclusion aspects of programming, frame your approach to the community as crucial to achieving project outcomes. For example, achieving improvements in local government service delivery requires that both women and men from diverse social groups participate in activities that prepare them to engage productively with their local government, express their distinct service delivery needs, and work with government to improve the provision of those services. Efficient public expenditures must account for the different service needs and interests of diverse community members. Providing services that are not based on all citizens' needs is inefficient and poor governance. This approach enables project outcomes to benefit both women and men without focusing on the term "gender."
- **Use a mutual gains approach.** If community members believe they will benefit from a project's outcomes, they will be much more likely to offer their support or participation. Using a "mutual gains" approach—or an approach that emphasizes a project's benefits for all community members—can help foster support for a project. This entails explaining the benefits that women's participation in civic life can have on improving service delivery; efficient public expenditure; and improving the lives of women, their children, and communities. It emphasizes that gains for women do not come at the expense of men, but often produce benefits for both women and men that further flow down to children, families, and communities.
- **Recognize gender as one social difference among many.** Communities comprise various social groups, including women and men; old and young people; people with disabilities; people of different ethnic and religious groups; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LGBTI) persons. Broadening a discussion about gender to one about inclusion of all social groups is not only essential for inclusive development; it may also prevent men from feeling threatened by the prospect of including women in public decision-making processes.
- **Point out that cultures always change.** Community members may also resist an inclusive project approach if they perceive it as a threat to local culture or identity. "Spoilers" might claim that the

## Resources

[United Nations' Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights](#)

[Youth Power's Technical Brief: Making the Pitch for Youth Engagement](#)

## For More Information

For this or other issues of Implementation Tips, please visit [NGOConnect.net](https://ngoconnect.net). The website is a dynamic and interactive portal dedicated to connecting and strengthening CSOs, networks, and CSO support organizations worldwide.

Funding for this publication was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) Global Leader Award. Its contents, managed by SCS Global, do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government.

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project is the product of development agencies imposing “foreign” ideals on their community. One response to this critique is to point out that cultures are constantly changing. Ask community members to provide a few examples of things they can do now that their parents could not do or to discuss how they have benefited from changes in society. You may point to new innovations such as cars, new medical facilities, or wells, and ask the community if these innovations have changed their culture and if those changes are positive or negative.

- **Engage “spoilers” with respect.** In any community, there may be people who remain wary of change—and especially change that might bring about shifts in power between men and women or between different social groups. Such individuals may act as spoilers by attempting to sabotage an inclusive civic engagement project. It is important to handle these people with respect and, ideally, to provide opportunities for them to voice their opposition in front of the community and for the community to hear the project staff’s response. The key is not to assume that the “spoilers” have all the power in the community. An inclusive approach that engages a greater and broader number of citizens has the power to outweigh people who oppose the project.

