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ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Outcome Collection

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The international development community has coalesced around an overarching objective to localize. USAID defines localization as "the set of internal reforms, actions, and behavior changes USAID is undertaking to ensure our work puts local actors in the lead, strengthens local systems, and is responsive to local communities."[1] The rationale for localization is straightforward. First, international development actors have long acknowledged it as a moral and ethical imperative, and they consider locally led development to be more effective and appropriate than externally led development.[2] More recently, development institutions have made compelling arguments for the economic benefits of localization, suggesting that shifting ownership and resources to local actors is the most efficient use of resources.[3] Given the value of localization to international development program efficiency and effectiveness, Digital Frontiers has regularly selected and empowered local actors to lead work on the ground. Through formal and informal capacity-building and mentorship support, the project has served as a bridge between local partners and USAID.

USAID's FY22 "Localization Progress Report" highlighted important progress that had been made to shift resources from international to local actors.[4] Nevertheless, other parts of the localization agenda are lagging. A 2021 report from the Overseas Development Institute noted that international donors had not taken collective action to change cumbersome solicitation, management, and reporting practices that are often bottlenecks to local partner participation. The report noted this lack of progress was partly due to donors' accountability requirements to their constituents, particularly regarding the perceived risks involved in conducting assistance through local actors.[5] As a result, many actors with deep roots in local communities may choose not to engage in solicitation processes led by international donors. Local actors that do participate in solicitation processes are often rejected due to not "ticking all the required boxes" related to compliance. In cases where local actors successfully complete a solicitation process, they are often weighed down by significant reporting requirements during implementation that detract them from conducting impactful, locally led programming. In this environment, international implementers—familiar with donor requirements—often play a critical role in building the capacity of local partners or potential collaborators to ensure that they can comply with solicitation and implementation provisions. USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy also highlights the role of international implementers in supporting this vision, stating: "Resources provided indirectly to local actors through international partners can help local actors access specialized expertise and forge new network connections."[6]

Although not mandated in its agreement and not implemented based on a clear strategy, Digital Frontiers has contributed to the localization agenda in several ways. These contributions have taken the shape of informal trainings and mentorship on topics such as monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) and financial management

1   "Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach," United States Agency for International Development (USAID), August 2022, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/USAIDs_Localization_Vision-508.pdf.

2   "Missed Opportunities: the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based humanitarian responses," ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, and Tearfund, October 2013, https://actionaid.org/publications/2013/missed-opportunities-case-strengthening-national-and-local-partnership-based#downloads.

3   "Passing the Buck – The Economics of Localizing International Assistance," The Share Trust, October 2022. https://thesharetrust.org/resources/2022/11/14/passing-the-buck-the-economics-of-localizing-international-assistance.

4   "Moving toward a model of locally led development – FY 2022 Localization Progress Report," United States Agency for International Development (USAID), June 2023, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/FY%202022%20Localization%20Progress%20Report-June-12-23_vFINAL_1.pdf.

5   "Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: models, approaches and challenges," Overseas Development Institute, 2021, https://odi.org/en/publications/are-we-there-yet-localisation-as-the-journey-towards-locally-led-practice/.

6   "Local Capacity Strengthening Policy," United States Agency for International Development (USAID), October 2022, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/LCS-Policy-2022-10-17.pdf.

and reporting. Additional trainings focused on digital development technical areas. In other cases the project, in collaboration with USAID, identified opportunities to formally support capacity-development of local organizations through earmarked resources or direct support. This report outlines three such formal capacity-development support efforts the Digital Frontiers team conducted in support of local actors.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The Digital Frontiers Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning team conducted a study to identify the approach, results, and lessons learned from three formal capacity-development support efforts. Through desk reviews and qualitative interviews and analysis, the evaluation team sought to answer four core questions:

1. What were the approaches to capacity-building of local partners?

2. What approaches worked (and which were less effective) in building partner capacity?

3. What were the results of improved capacity among local partners (e.g., application of new knowledge, ability to implement programming more effectively, or ability to attract future funding)?

4. What are the main lessons learned from the capacity development initiatives?

Summary of Key Outcomes and Lessons Learned

1. **AirJaldi:** A local internet service provider (ISP) that provides internet access to rural or underserved communities in nine states in India.[7] A Digital Frontiers staff member provided capacity development support to AirJaldi over a 12-month period in the following development areas: 1) training design and delivery; 2) training outreach and marketing; 3) partnership development; 4) data collection and management; and 5) team capacity and make-up. As a result of the capacity-development support, AirJaldi achieved the following:

    I. *Increased recruitment of women participants to their connectivity trainings.* After eight months of implementation, AirJaldi had only reached four percent (240 women) of its participant target. After the completion of the 12-month capacity-development support effort, 79 percent of the initial participant target had been reached (4,710 women).

    II. *Improved training content and delivery.* The project designed seven robust digital literacy modules that were based on a needs assessment and built in accordance with human-centered design principles. Additionally, AirJaldi's ability to conduct staff capacity-building trainings was improved through the hiring of a highly skilled lead trainer. In the penultimate week of the project alone, three women trainers built the capacity of 1,100 women in the field.

    III. *Strengthened data collection, management, and reporting systems.* Through the capacity-development support effort, AirJaldi's ability to identify prospective training participants, track training participants, collect basic training feedback, and generate post-training reporting was greatly improved.

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7   Although AirJaldi is led by expatriate co-founders, it is considered a local entity under USAID's definition. For more, please see: "New Partnerships Initiative Standard Practices and Definitions," United States Agency for International Development (USAID), accessed on March 22, 2024, https://www.usaid.gov/npi/npi-key-definitions.

The key lessons learned from the AirJaldi engagement were:

- **Cross-sectoral partnerships necessitate careful attention to strategic alignment.** For-profit companies must prioritize the profitability and sustainability of their businesses. This can run counter to development objectives, especially if this understanding is not built into the collaboration from the start. In this project, lack of comprehension between these two "cultures" led to unnecessary strain throughout the project life cycle.

- **Continuity is required for true organizational development to materialize.** Without gaps in Digital Frontiers capacity development support efforts, the initiative would have been more effective.

- **The approach was critical to the success of the capacity development support effort.** The consultant took the time to understand AirJaldi's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative as well as to understand the organization's goals and objectives, management structure, team composition and personalities, and culture.

- **Capacity development efforts take time, which needs to be incorporated into project timelines.** Building a "runway" into project timelines is critical when engaging with non-traditional actors in order to account for time spent understanding their language and their operational environment and organizational processes, imparting the knowledge the local actors need to carry out their, and co-developing mutual objectives that further both organizational and development goals.

2. **AFCHIX:** An organization and network of African women in technology, led by a Board of Directors of four African women technologists and run by chapters of volunteers across Africa. As a grantee of USAID's WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) Round I and WCC Round III, AFCHIX established community networks that provide network services and internet access at a fraction of standard commercial prices in rural areas in Namibia, Kenya, and Morocco. Women were trained to maintain the infrastructure and to develop sustainable business plans to manage community access to the Internet. The Digital Frontiers team undertook three workstreams that provided capacity development support for the following development areas: 1) strategic planning support, 2) executive board training; and 3) fundraising. As a result of the capacity development support, AFCHIX achieved the following:

I. *Development of a new Strategic Plan.* Previously, AFCHIX business decisions had not been guided by an overarching strategy. This plan serves as a foundational document that, if implemented effectively, will support the organization's evolution and growth in the years to come.

II. *Strengthened capacity of the Board of Directors.* Through a series of trainings, board members were provided with new knowledge about their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, this workstream succeeded in creating consensus among board members around key priorities to support the organization's future growth.

The key lessons learned from the AFCHIX engagement were:

- **The separation of the three support workstreams led to inefficiencies.** Better communication and collaboration across workstreams would have improved the capacity development support effort.

- **Reducing the number of support organizations (three were involved) would have led to efficiency gains and improved continuity.** A sequential support process, where each workstream was brought to its conclusion prior to starting the next, could have been more effective in identifying the needs and synergies across workstreams.

- **Funding partners and local partners should collaborate on identification and design of capacity support initiatives.** It is important that the design of a capacity development initiative is collaborative, that its broad objectives are clearly communicated and mutually understood, and that the implementation process is streamlined to not lose time and momentum.

- **Capacity development initiatives need to be rooted in a deep understanding of the organization, its goals, and the path to achieving them.** Building in the time to build rapport with and understanding of an organization is critical to a successful organizational capacity initiative.

- **Building in time and resources to evaluate medium-term outcomes of organizational capacity support efforts is pivotal to understanding how newfound knowledge does— or does not—translate into action.** It is not enough to provide resources to implement initiatives of this type; there needs to be a parallel drive to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts and build an evidence base around what works and what does not.

3. The **South Asia Regional Digital Initiative (SARDI) Regional Co-Creation Symposium:** The Strengthening Women in Tech in South Asia Initiative aimed to address barriers for women entrepreneurs seeking to expand their businesses by connecting these women across the region for peer-learning opportunities and providing them with mentorship, investment, and capacity-building support. As part of the solicitation process, Digital Frontiers hosted a multi-day symposium from February 28 to March 3, 2022. This symposium was designed in the spirit of USAID's new localization approach;[8] ensuring that local partners are connecting with each other and leading the design of solutions. The symposium: 1) facilitated partnerships and encouraged establishment of consortiums that could implement regional programming with country-specific activities; 2) strengthened final proposals for the project; and 3) increased knowledge of USAID solicitation processes that could be beneficial beyond the specific solicitation process for this grant. The symposium was successful in achieving the first two objectives, but this study could not make a determination about the third. Overall, as a result of the Co-Creation Symposium, the following results were achieved:

I. **Participants were satisfied with the symposium:** The participating organizations felt supported through the solicitation process in a way they had not previously experienced (see feedback from the post-event survey on page 29).

II. **New partnerships were built:** The participating organizations engaged with other regional actors, developed relationships, and formed new consortiums that collectively submitted proposals for the SARDI grant.

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8   Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach

III. **Proposals were strengthened:** After the Co-Creation Symposium, participants demonstrated an improved ability to create proposals that demonstrated their local reach through partnerships, a strong understanding of local context in each of the countries, and detailed descriptions of how projects would adapt to those circumstances in each of the contexts.

The key lessons learned from the SARDI Symposium engagement were:

- **The symposium provided a "proof of concept" for engaging new actors during a solicitation process.** When engaging new actors, USAID and implementing partners should consider phased approaches for building the necessary capabilities of prospective grantees early in the solicitation process.

- **The timeframe from the symposium to final proposal submissions was too compressed.** Providing more time after the event for partners to establish consortiums and finalize their proposals would have put all of the participants on more equal footing, especially since some implementers had worked with USAID before and others had not.

- **The focus on a unique target audience required consistent messaging to guide proposal development.** Providing specific messaging examples might have helped participants be more comfortable designing projects for the target audience.

- **The long-term nature of capacity-building necessitates realistic objective setting.** Avoiding lofty objectives and being specific about the change that one seeks to achieve is critical for designing (and measuring) effective capacity- building activities.
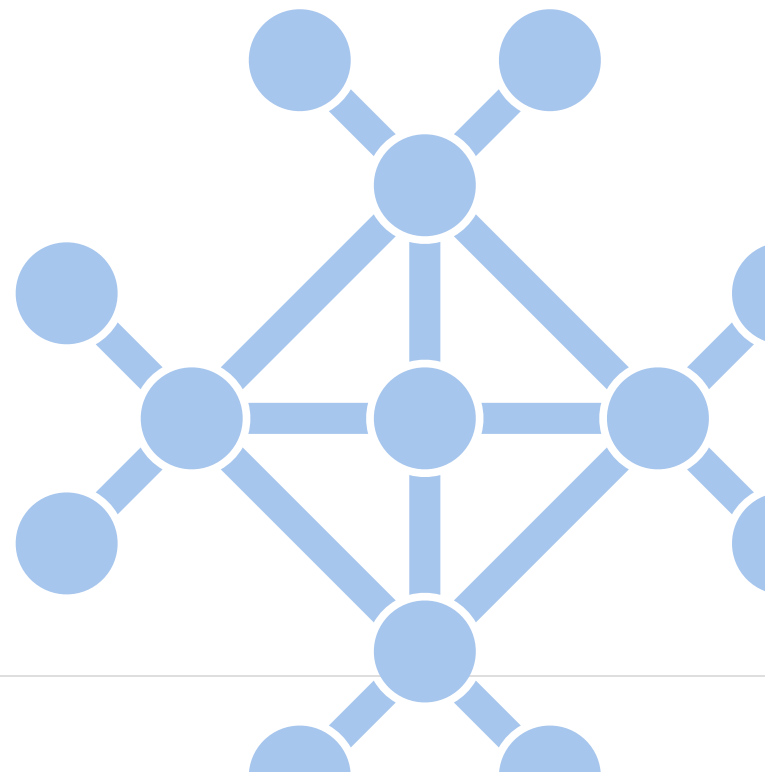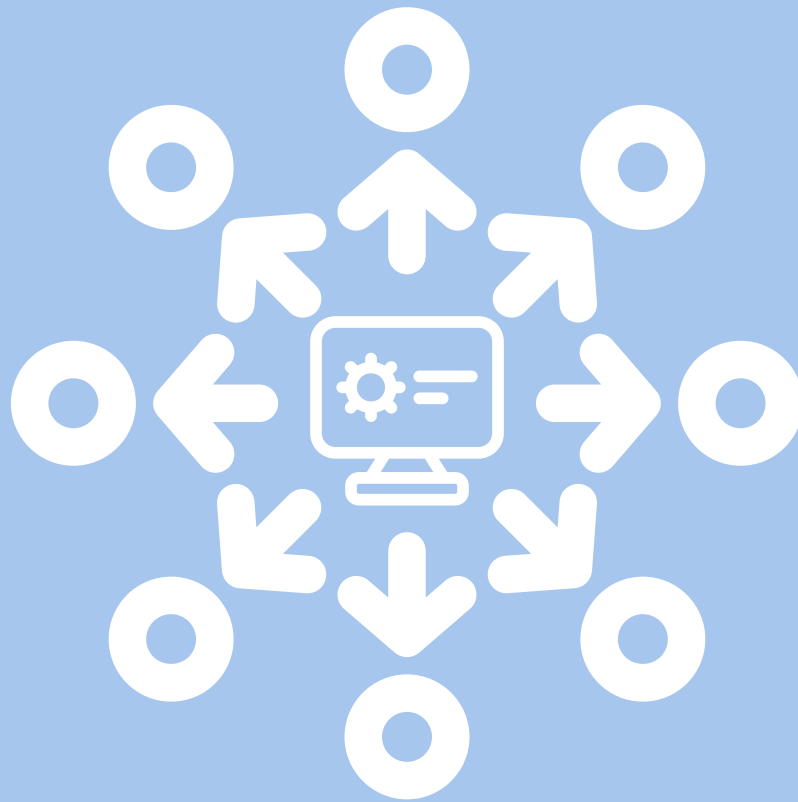
AirJaldi—**Strengthening an Indian internet service provider's ability to conduct women-centered connectivity and digital literacy programming.**

SUMMARY

Through the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, AirJaldi, an Indian ISP, sought to: 1) Increase sales of internet services to women; and 2) build women's capacity to use these services productively through formal trainings. This was the company's first initiative to bridge the gender digital divide. Due to operating in a new space with new partners, AirJaldi struggled to meet its targets. Eight months into implementation, Digital Frontiers stepped in to provide support by embedding a staff member with the team. This total support effort spanned 12 months and focused on the following development areas: 1) training design and delivery; 2) training outreach and marketing; 3) partnership development, 4) data collection and management, and 5) team capacity and make-up. This study seeks to understand how the capacity support effort was implemented, what elements were effective and what they led to in terms of organizational development and successful delivery of the project, and the prospects for sustainable change to AirJaldi's business operations.

BACKGROUND, PROBLEM, AND APPROACH

In 2019, Microsoft approached USAID to partner on providing "meaningful connectivity" to women in underserved markets through its Microsoft Airband Initiative.[9] The Airband Initiative was originally created to expand internet connectivity globally by working with select local ISPs. At first, the Airband Initiative's success metrics focused on the quality and connection speeds of new nodes of connectivity, but not the affordability or equitability of internet access. The Microsoft Airband team, who had been considering strategic pivots to ensure that their work could more effectively target women, saw an opportunity to improve equitable access to connectivity when the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative (W-GDP) launched, and began seeking private partnerships to further its agenda.[10] Microsoft would recruit a cohort of private, for-profit companies that acknowledged the importance of being gender-inclusive but did not know how to create commercially viable and marketable solutions to address gender inequities in internet access and adoption. USAID would add value by providing gender-based assessments of underserved markets, training, and strategic advice to the local ISP companies. Following an extensive co-creation process, the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative public-private partnership (PPP) was launched in August 2020. Digital Frontiers, as the implementing partner, then came in to execute the Initiative's vision.

AirJaldi was one of six organizations invited to participate in the public-private partnership. The organization started its operations in 2007 and officially launched in 2009. Its core objective is to contribute to connecting rural Indian communities to low-cost, reliable internet. Although the connectivity market in India is saturated, with more than 300 operators working across the country, only a small share of these companies is focused on rural and semi-rural connectivity. AirJaldi's top priorities are profitability and sustainability, both of which are necessary to expand internet access for rural communities. The company has grown from working in one location, where it had three employees and served 30 customers, to now working in nine states, with more than 200 employees serving over 11,000 customers. In 2016, AirJaldi partnered with Microsoft through the Airband Initiative, and this partnership has been a key contributor to AirJaldi's expansion and growth. In 2020, through the USAID/Airband Initiative, the company launched its first intervention to bridge the gender digital divide. The key objectives of the intervention were to 1) increase sales of internet services to women, and 2) build their capacity to use these services productively.

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9   "Meaningful connectivity" refers to users having a safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost.

10   Launched in February 2019, the White House-led Women's Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative is the first-ever whole-of-government effort to advance global women's economic empowerment.

This new gender-specific focus required AirJaldi to modify its approach. First, the company had not conducted in-depth needs assessments in the past; with a shift towards a new target customer group that the team was not familiar with, assessments were critically important to understand target communities' needs, behaviors, and barriers to connectivity in order to create products that could drive technology access and adoption. Second, the company had not engaged directly with communities and mobilized women to participate in their offerings in the past. Third, although AirJaldi had previously established partnerships with major private technology companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, and Google, it had not worked closely with local Indian government institutions and nonprofit entities to create local community demand for its services. This created a gap in AirJaldi's capabilities; the company did not have access to local networks of women, a prerequisite for reaching the scale of participation expected under the project's initial activity agreement. Finally, AirJaldi's data collection and management system was exclusively designed to track internet usage data, in line with its business objectives. However, as the company had not previously engaged in large-scale trainings for women in underserved communities, and systems to track basic data on trainings and participants had not been developed. As a result of these challenges, by the start of the support effort, AirJaldi was falling short of meeting many of its project targets and was not able to track others in a meaningful way.

When these implementation challenges were identified and the need for assistance became clear, Digital Frontiers proposed to embed a staff member (consultant) to support AirJaldi's organizational development and capacity to overcome these challenges. This individual had already supported AirJaldi in their project design process and knew the company leadership well.[11] Moreover, the consultant was an expert on strategies to bridge the gender digital divide and had a deep understanding of the local context. The engagement started eight months into implementation (March 2022) and lasted until the last few months of the project (March 2023). The organizational development activities included:

1. A March-April 2022 field visit that included:

    a. A mid-project assessment to identify areas of strength and provide recommendations for improvement.

    b. Employing a "learning by doing and mentoring" approach to needs assessments and partnership building. The consultant initially took the lead and demonstrated how to perform these activities, and then stepped back to provide space for AirJaldi staff to conduct the activities while observing and providing feedback.

2. An August 2022 visit with AirJaldi leadership in Delhi and a visit to the company's main office in Dharamsala with other Digital Frontiers staff and USAID representatives. The trip was largely focused on providing USAID with a comprehensive picture of the progress made to that point on the project, but also provided the consultant with more face time with the AirJaldi team and opportunities to further support their capacity development.

3. A weekly call to cover operational and program management. These calls were mentoring sessions, where implementation challenges were discussed and solutions were identified.

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11 All six Airband partners worked with a Gender Technology consultant during the project design process. This was a project design innovation developed between the three main stakeholders to get ahead of the potential challenges.

OUTCOMES

1. Increased recruitment of women participants

In the first quarters of implementation, AirJaldi struggled to recruit enough women to its trainings. When the capacity development support effort started eight months into implementation, AirJaldi had only recruited 4 percent (240 individuals) of its 6,000-person training target for the project. While the AirJaldi team did not ultimately reach this target, it did train 4,710 women (75.8 percent of its target) during the project. Of the 4,710 women trained, 3,837 were trained in-person, and 873 women were trained through online modalities. At the outset of the project, AirJaldi envisioned exclusively conducting trainings online. However, due to low training participant recruitment and the internet access challenges faced by women with low levels of digital skills, in-person trainings became the main training modality by the end of the project.

As a relatively small internet service provider, AirJaldi had a limited client base, community networks, and capacity for outreach. The company's field-based sales teams had no experience pitching a development-focused project to women—and its existing relationships with this consumer segment were scarce. During the initial monitoring visit, the consultant noted that AirJaldi could remedy this by identifying potential new partners with broad female membership or networks in order to build networks through which to reach women in the target communities. The consultant, in collaboration with the AirJaldi team, identified potential partners, one of which was the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society (JSLPS), a government agency under the Rural Development Department of the Jharkhand State Government. The consultant accompanied the AirJaldi team for an in-person meeting with the JSLPS, which is responsible for the implementation of the National Rural Livelihood Mission Project—a project aiming to reach a total of 70 million rural households across India—in Jharkhand State. The JSLPS also seeks to support underprivileged women and members of vulnerable communities. As such, it was an ideal partner for AirJaldi in their quest to reach more women in rural communities. The relationship between AirJaldi and JSLPS was formalized on September 9, 2022, many months after the first conversation initiated by the consultant.

In addition, AirJaldi successfully established a partnership with the Uma Amrita Foundation, a non-governmental entity that operates in areas where JSLPS had little reach. It was noted by AirJaldi that they did not fully realize the value of these partnerships prior to the capacity support effort, but recognized the immense value of new partnerships as they were forged. These partnerships led to a sharp increase in the number of women trained by AirJaldi, as the JSLPS and the Uma Amrita Foundation consistently encouraged women in their networks to participate in trainings. AirJaldi, supported by the consultant, formed additional relationships with government livelihood missions on the backend of this first successful intervention. Although these relationships did not develop into any direct collaboration on the project, they were considered important connections to potentially aid future efforts.

Additionally, AirJaldi's internal capability to mobilize women was increased during the capacity development support effort. Previously, AirJaldi had conducted trainings, but at a significantly smaller scale and with a very different focus to what was required for this intervention. This necessitated new approaches to the recruitment of training participants. Examples of this included pitching the trainings at a local film festival, conducting outreach over community radio and social media, and promoting the trainings through 10,000 ad banners.

2.   **Improved training content and delivery**

Previously, AirJaldi's capacity-building efforts had been predominantly focused on its hiring process. The company organizes month-long trainings for prospective hires, and then hires the best candidates at the end of the trainings. These trainings are highly technical in nature, focused on topics such as establishing internet hotspots and resolving common technical connectivity issues, and have built-in incentive structures for participants. This is very different to training women end-users on basic digital literacy.

Initially, AirJaldi aimed to incorporate its new trainings into existing operations by designing curriculum based on presumed needs rather than through a human-centered design process. The consultant encouraged the company to conduct a needs assessment to understand the real needs of women on the ground in target communities. To model what the assessment process should look like, he conducted a number of interviews with women in rural communities. AirJaldi staff observed and learned from these pilot interviews before replicating this process themselves. The needs assessment provided the company with data that informed a new training curriculum based on the real needs of the end-users.

Moreover, the Digital Frontiers consultant advocated for the hiring of a lead trainer with the suitable skillsets and experience to lead the curriculum design process and the implementation of trainings for women end-users. The AirJaldi team and the new lead trainer designed seven robust training modules that have been rolled out through online and in-person trainings. The lead trainer initially conducted most of the in-person trainings, but as demand for in-person trainings increased, other AirJaldi team members— along with one new hire—conducted some additional trainings.

Importantly, the mode of trainings also changed after the consultant came on board. At the outset of the project, AirJaldi planned to conduct most of its trainings online. Although AirJaldi and Digital Frontiers acknowledged the inherent risks of this approach with a segment of the population characterized by low levels of digital literacy, this strategy was pursued for eight months. The consultant, with the support of

Photo Credit: Elisa Choi for DAI

institutional partner JSLPS, encouraged the AirJaldi team to invest in in-person trainings, which helped facilitate greater participation among rural women with low levels of baseline digital literacy.

Although AirJaldi had struggled with recruitment and the organizational preparedness to carry out trainings at scale for most of the project, in the project's penultimate week, three AirJaldi trainers were able to collectively train 1,100 women in the field—amounting to 18 percent of the total training target. This was a clear reflection of how far the company had come in developing its internal capabilities to conduct trainings at scale.

3. **Strengthened data collection, management systems, and reporting systems**

AirJaldi's data collection and management systems and processes were set up to support the organization's standard operations. These systems could track internet usage metrics—the company's primary key performance indicator prior to this project—not metrics related to novel digital literacy trainings. As such, AirJaldi struggled to report on indicators related to trainings, as specified in its MEL plan. Specifically, its ability to track individual training participants was limited, resulting in significant data gaps. Moreover, the company had not previously considered gender disaggregating the data it collected.

The consultant worked with the AirJaldi team to strengthen their data collection processes to ensure the company could report relevant data to Digital Frontiers and USAID. By the end of the support effort, AirJaldi's ability to track this type of data was improved. A database was established that documented 12,000 rural individuals interested in participating in connectivity trainings, providing a wealth of potential training participants who could potentially participate in future AirJaldi trainings or activities. The company was also able to successfully collect information on the respective numbers of women participating in their offline and online trainings. The consultant developed a simple post-training survey to capture attendance, solicit feedback on participants' experiences in training, and identify potential future participants from participants' personal networks. One area that remained unexplored at the end of the project was the measurement of actual knowledge and behavior change resulting from the trainings. The focus of the overall support effort was—reasonably—on generating solid output-level data collection and reporting.

The consultant played a significant role in strengthening the quality of the reporting—including quarterly reporting—that AirJaldi produced. As one AirJaldi staff member pointed out, the DF [Digital Frontiers] consultant was proactive in ensuring the staff stayed on top of reporting dates and that quarterly reports were submitted on time. The staff member said: "[Consultant reminded us] 'we have to send this report. We have to review.' Above and beyond that, he even helped with writing the reports. He helped a great deal." Another Digital Frontiers team member highlighted these oversight efforts as critical in improving internal monitoring of the project.

SIGNIFICANCE

Private-public partnerships have become important features of the international development landscape in recent years. PPPs have the potential to bring greater efficiency gains, new innovations and capital, and a broader range of expertise to complex development challenges. The USAID-Microsoft relationship was intended to leverage the comparative advantages of the two organizations to promote more effective digital development programming in underserved communities. Microsoft brought willing partners with digital technology expertise and strong ties to underserved markets, and USAID and Digital Frontiers brought expertise on how to design programs to address the gender digital divide. However, collaborations of this type will inevitably also create

challenges. AirJaldi—as is true for all the Airband partners—operates in the for-profit world, and its priority is to pursue profitability and organizational sustainability. Development objectives, although considered important, are secondary to the responsibilities AirJaldi leadership has to the business and its employees. These business goals, although not inherently at odds with development objectives, led to misalignment on expectations between AirJaldi and Digital Frontiers/USAID. Related to this—as documented above—AirJaldi committed to new activities, with new target audiences, that it was not operationally or technically prepared to conduct. As a result, project performance suffered.

Going forward, it is critical that USAID and its implementing partners create mutual understanding with its private sector partners so that expectations are realistic and aligned, and to ensure that the right capacities and systems exist or can reasonably be built early in the project life cycle. Digital Frontiers and USAID attempted to address this challenge by pairing each of the partner organizations with a Gender Technology consultant during the project design phase. However, these partnerships were not funded beyond this initial phase.[12] Digital Frontiers recommended AirJaldi re-engage with the Gender Technology consultant when the project continued to fall short of targets.

CONTRIBUTION

The capacity development support Digital Frontiers provided to AirJaldi had an outsized impact on project performance. First, the consultant's identification and facilitation of relationships with state government livelihood missions was considered the most important contributing factor to turning the project around. As one AirJaldi representative noted: "Without [the DF consultant's] involvement, this finding to work with government agencies in this particular way would not have happened." Second, the consultant played a critical role in revamping AirJaldi's training curriculum as the program pivoted towards in-person trainings. The improvement of the training materials started with the initiation of a needs assessment pushed by the consultant. One AirJaldi staff member reflected on the value of a needs assessment by saying: "We think we know India. We live in rural India, we live in the middle of the fields, we interact with them [women in rural areas]. But to really understand the really poor, rural India, the reality is quite different." Finally, AirJaldi's data collection, management, and reporting structures were strengthened as a result of the capacity development support effort. While AirJaldi staff did not perceive these improvements as critical to the performance of the project, Digital Frontiers team members noted that they ensured increased project visibility and compliance with USAID reporting requirements by the end of the project.

The approach the consultant used to achieve these outcomes was considered critical to the success. Through a field visit at the start of the engagement, weekly calls with the AirJaldi team, and often daily communication through WhatsApp and other channels, the engagement was strategic and consistent, yet flexible and demand-driven. AirJaldi staff remarked that they appreciated the consultant's flexibility, willingness to understand AirJaldi's challenges, and initiative to devise recommendations that aligned with the organization's objectives. It was noted, however, that this patient, flexible approach often led to organizational or project changes taking a long time to materialize.

Moreover, it was noted that the consultant was able to establish strong relationships with the female field staff and empower them to speak their minds. As one AirJaldi staff member reflected: "We could also express our opinions and he was very open to ideas. I think that taught them [the female field workers] a good lesson about

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12   Three partners, including AirJaldi, ended up working with their Gender Technology consultants during the implementation as well. The two other organizations allocated resources from their budget to continue the partnership, while Digital Frontiers funded a portion of its staff members' time to continue the support for AirJaldi.

being able to voice their opinions." This inclusive approach yielded an important result, especially when considering the gender-based hierarchy often present in this context; young women, relatively early in their careers, felt empowered to push back and voice their opinions to a male, senior expert from an international development organization.

SUSTAINABILITY

Given the relatively short timeframe since the conclusion of the project, this study cannot make a clear determination on the question of the project's sustainability. However, there are several signs pointing towards longer-term benefits stemming from the capacity support effort. AirJaldi staff emphasized that the new relationships formed with state livelihood missions will be key assets for future work. These relationships have already proven productive and are expected to be foundational to business operations in years to come. Further, it is expected that these existing relationships will lead to additional relationships with livelihood missions in other states as well—given the strong ties between these entities across states—which can help AirJaldi further expand its offerings to women in rural, underserved communities across India.

Moreover, the consultant supported a full overhaul of the company's approach to training women end-users. New hires were recruited, fundamental shifts were made to AirJaldi's training curriculum and pedagogy, and the company's capabilities to conduct trainings for women at scale were improved significantly. These new capabilities are likely to continue to be leveraged moving forward. The AirJaldi team also observed the value of a new approach to recruiting and training women in underserved communities. As stated by one of AirJaldi's trainers: "We would love to continue to work the way [the consultant] taught us wherever it is needed because we have seen the results, and it was quite effective."

A Microsoft representative considered AirJaldi to be well-positioned to continue work focused on providing access and digital skills to women. The representative observed that the company operates in a connectivity market where a large proportion of the population is underserved or unserved. Further, although it took time to establish partnerships and refine its training content and delivery, AirJaldi's capabilities have greatly improved and it is set up to conduct similar work efficiently in the future. Moreover, Microsoft Airband has publicly committed to incorporating a gender focus into all its programs going forward. Given the longstanding institutional relationship between Microsoft Airband and AirJaldi, the gender focus will continue to be a critical component of this collaboration.

AirJaldi is launching three new projects, a promising indicator of short- to medium-term sustainability: one project is a collaboration with UKAID's "Transform" program, Unilever, and Microsoft Airband; the second is a new collaboration with Microsoft Airband and an Indian NGO; and the third project is a USAID-funded pilot. All three projects will incorporate significant digital literacy components and two of them will have an explicit gender focus, further accelerating AirJaldi's foray into the development sector.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Cross-sectoral partnerships necessitate careful attention to strategic alignment.** For-profit companies prioritize profitability and sustainability of their businesses. This can run counter to the objectives of development institutions they partner with, especially if this understanding is not built into the collaboration from the start. In this project, a lack of comprehension between these two "cultures" led to unnecessary strain throughout the project life cycle. One example of this was seen when AirJaldi did not want to exclusively offer its subsidized Connectivity, Tools, Training and Tech Support (C+3T) to women.[13] Rather, the company saw it as a part of their mandate and in alignment with their profit and sustainability objectives to offer this service to men as well. Digital Frontiers pushed back on this idea, pointing to the fact that the entirety of the funding was earmarked for advancing women's access to connectivity and training—the Digital Frontiers (DF) team added that AirJaldi was free to provide C+3T to men, but it could not be done with USAID funding. In future collaborations between USAID and private, for-profit companies, it is important that objectives are aligned from the outset and regularly revisited throughout implementation and that both sides have equal stake in ongoing decision-making. In addition, intermediaries—stakeholders that straddle both worlds—have an important role to play in creating this mutual understanding. In this case, Microsoft Airband, as a liaison between the two parties, could have played a translation and facilitation role, ironing out some of the "wrinkles" in communication and understanding.

- **Continuity is required for true organizational development to materialize**. The Digital Frontiers consultant ultimately ended up leading the capacity development support effort, assisting AirJaldi during its project design process. The majority of study respondents noted that if capacity development support had not stopped after the project design phase as the project transitioned from design to implementation but had instead been continuous, the support would have been more effective. There was also an acknowledgment among some respondents that the challenges AirJaldi experienced were predictable from the outset of implementation; respondents noted that the required shift in business operations, coupled with ambitions of reaching significant scale, should have alerted involved parties to the project's potential challenges. Respondents added that if scaling back ambitions was not an option, the stakeholders should have proactively designed a support effort to run through the life of the project. More generally, when organizations from other sectors, with limited experience working with international development donors such as USAID, move into that space, there is a need to get ahead of challenges and commit the resources and support to make sure that the transition can be successful. Rarely will these organizations be fully prepared to adapt their business operations without capacity development support. In the event they are prepared, concerted support will make that transition more efficient.

- **The approach was critical to the success of the capacity development support effort.** The consultant took the time to understand AirJaldi's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the USAID/Airband project, as well as the company's goals and objectives, its management structure and team composition, its personalities, and its overall culture. Many stakeholders noted that, had the consultant not carefully built understanding and trust, this capacity development effort would not have succeeded. The engagement between AirJaldi and Digital Frontiers had been challenging up until the point of the consultant's engagement, necessitating a patient, diplomatic, and open approach. Future capacity development support efforts should mainstream a more deliberate, patient approach by formally incorporating relationship- building and stocktaking exercises into SOWs and workplans.

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13   C+3T is one of AirJaldi's core offerings—a package of connectivity services, training, and technical support.

- **Capacity development efforts take time, which needs to be incorporated into project timelines.** Although the support effort was successful, the approach required significant time investments. As noted by one AirJaldi team member: "I think it took [the consultant] at least as much time to understand us as it took us to understand his angle." Building a "runway" into project timelines is critical when engaging with non-traditional actors in order to account for time spent understanding their language and their operational environment and organizational processes, imparting the knowledge the local actors need to be able to carry out their work, and co-developing mutual objectives that further both organizational and development goals. The need for "bilingual comprehension" was mentioned repeatedly by AirJaldi staff.

AFCHIX—**Strengthening the organizational capacity of a regional network of African women in tech.**

SUMMARY

AFCHIX, a regional African network of women in technology, partnered with USAID through Digital Frontiers for the WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) Round I and WCC Round III. Under WCC Round I, the organization successfully supported the establishment of women-led community networks in four communities in Kenya, Namibia, Senegal, and Morocco. In its WCC Round III proposal, AFCHIX requested approximately half of the allotted funds for the award with the goal of strengthening their community networks, building out their infrastructure, and expanding connectivity. Given AFCHIX's potential as a strategic local partner, Digital Frontiers and USAID decided to use the remaining grant funds to provide an in-kind grant to AFCHIX to bolster its organizational capacity. Although AFCHIX had been in operation for nearly 20 years and had grown its membership of national chapters, its organizational structure, strategy, and policies had not evolved with it, which inhibited its ability to absorb larger grants and grow as an organization.

Digital Frontiers' capacity development support focused on three areas: 1) Strategic Planning, Organizational Structure, and Organizational Policies and Procedures; 2) Development of the Board of Directors and Board Policies; and 3) Strategic Fundraising. This study sought to understand how these three workstreams could contribute to AFCHIX's future growth, and the lessons that were learned from the application of very different approaches. As this study was conducted immediately after the end of the capacity support initiative, it is difficult to gauge the significance of this effort on the long-term future of AFCHIX. However, stakeholders highlighted successful short-term outcomes including the development of a long-term Strategic Plan to guide decision-making and the strengthened capacity of the Board of Directors. The goal of improving AFCHIX's fundraising strategy was not realized.

BACKGROUND, PROBLEM, AND APPROACH

AFCHIX is a regional African network of women in technology, established in 2004 and founded on the idea that gender diversity is crucial to building a thriving and innovative ICT sector on the continent. The organization is led by a four-person executive board of leading women technologists from Kenya, Ghana, Morocco, and Senegal. National chapters implement activities, such as seminars to inform girls about careers in STEM, digital literacy workshops for women and girls deprived of access and knowledge, and technical workshops emphasizing specific ICT-related skills such as coding and web design. Currently, AFCHIX has 15 national chapters spanning the entire continent. The chapters are run by volunteers, and resources are mobilized both by the chapters and the central organization in support of these activities.

In 2018, AFCHIX received its first grant from USAID through the WomenConnect Challenge (WCC) Round I. This grant supported the establishment of women-led community networks in four communities in Kenya, Namibia, Senegal, and Morocco. Through the grant, the organization demonstrated that its innovative approach to addressing the gender digital divide could be successful. Three years later, as part of the WomenConnect Challenge Round III (WCC III), AFCHIX received a second grant to further strengthen and expand these community networks, which empower underserved women to leverage the internet and technology to improve livelihoods and small business outcomes through digital skills trainings.

In its proposal for WCC Round III, AFCHIX requested approximately half of the allotted funds for the award. In the eyes of Digital Frontiers, this signaled self-awareness on the part of the organization, recognizing that it would not have the absorptive capacity to spend the full amount of the grant. This presented the Digital Frontiers team with three options: allocate the full amount to AFCHIX and support it on how to disburse the

funds, award an additional grant to a different organization, or find another use for the remaining funds unused by AFCHIX.

Given the positive experiences working with AFCHIX during WCC Round I, the gap the organization fills thematically and geographically, and the potential for its future growth and evolution, Digital Frontiers suggested using the remainder of the funding for an in-kind grant focusing on two components: 1) procurement support for AFCHIX to secure additional equipment to further bolster its community networks' connectivity offerings, and 2) develop the organizational capacity of AFCHIX. The latter component is the focus of this case study. USAID was supportive and agreed to allocate the money to these ends. Although the plan for an in-kind grant emerged at the start of the project, the design of the support effort did not take shape until seven months into implementation. Digital Frontiers initially encouraged AFCHIX to develop a capacity development scope but took a more active role in its development after six months of limited progress. Moreover, the procurement support happened prior to the organizational development effort and took longer than expected, leading to the organizational development component being implemented during the last four months of the one-year project.

The in-kind grant sought to address AFCHIX's key organizational challenges. Most fundamentally, the AFCHIX organizational structure was not conducive to growth objectives. The organization was led by a Board of Directors of four women—one of whom served as founder and CEO and three of whom executed their duties on a voluntary basis. AFCHIX's national chapters were mostly run by volunteers and short-term staff. Except for one employee, the organization did not have any personnel working at the management level; paid employees focused on day-to-day operations. This structure inhibited the growth and development of the organization.

Several interrelated factors had contributed to this organizational challenge. First, AFCHIX did not have a clear strategy to serve as a north star to guide operational, programmatic, and fundraising decisions. This limited its ability to plan and invest in the right capacities for the future. Second, the board members' roles and responsibilities had not been defined, and the organization did not have a clear corporate governance structure. As such, the board was responsible for both strategy and management, which was not viable for further growth and evolution of the organization. Third, fundraising up to that point had been inconsistent and non-strategic. In order for the organization to evolve and grow, a continuous stream of funding needed to be maintained to improve AFCHIX's organizational structure and ensure that it could engage in programmatic activities without interruption across the continent.

To address these organizational gaps, USAID, Digital Frontiers, and AFCHIX designed an organizational development initiative with three workstreams: 1) Strategic Planning, Organizational Structure, and Organizational Policies and Procedures; 2) Development of the Board of Directors and Board Policies; and 3) Strategic Fundraising. Digital Frontiers opted to outsource these efforts to three separate companies.14 The Strategic Planning workstream was led by Apprentice Job Works (AJW) Africa, the Board workstream was led by Dorion Associates, and the fundraising workstream was led by a third, unnamed organization.15 All three of these support organizations are based on the African continent and have offices in Nairobi.

The first workstream ran from March to July 2023 and included the following activities:

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14   Initially, it was envisioned that there would be Human Resources and Communications workstreams. Through the design process, it became clear that these were secondary priorities.

15   Organization kept anonymous as it opted out of participating in this study.

1. A needs assessment survey of external stakeholders (e.g., funders, partners).

2. A two-day kick-off meeting with AFCHIX that included an organizational capacity assessment (OCA) to identify gaps.

3. A presentation to the board of the findings of the OCA and the workplan to address the identified gaps.

4. Eight to ten in-person meetings with AFCHIX to develop a five-year Strategic Plan and associated organizational policies and procedures, including policies on procurement, financial management, travel allowances, and human resources. AJW also developed an operational plan and budget for the implementation of year 1 of the Strategic Plan.

The second workstream was conducted in August 2023 and included the following activities:

1. A kick-off meeting with board members to identify key priorities.

2. Six virtual training sessions, held over a total of 12 hours, on the following topics:

   a. The role of the Board of Directors.

   b. Fiduciary responsibilities of the board.

   c. Strategic responsibilities of the board.

   d. Ethics for Board members.

   e. Day-to-day operations.

   f. Legal requirements, specific to Kenya, that affect AFCHIX's operations.

The third workstream included the following activities:

1. An assessment of AFCHIX's resource mobilization capacity to identify and define gaps in their existing processes.

2. The development of a new resource mobilization strategy.

3. Presentations of the new resource mobilization strategy and opportunity tracking to AFCHIX.

PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

The organizational capacity development support effort was completed shortly prior to the writing of this report. As such, it is difficult to gauge the significance of this effort on the long-term future of AFCHIX. However, stakeholders highlighted short-term outcomes, outlined below, that can improve the organization's long-term sustainability. The third workstream was largely considered ineffective and the section of this report covering that workstream outlines some of the reasons why.

Development of a long-term Strategic Plan to guide decision-making

AJW developed an ambitious five-year Strategic Plan for AFCHIX, as well as organizational policies related to procurement, financial management, travel allowances, and human resources. The group also developed an operational plan and budget for the implementation of the first year of the plan. Additionally, AJW developed a forward-looking organogram of the organizational structure for the next phase of AFCHIX's evolution. These tools are foundational and necessary for AFCHIX's quest to evolve as an organization.

The board is currently in the process of ratifying these documents, which is an important step towards actualizing them within the organization. The AFCHIX leadership and board see this process and the final deliverables as hugely valuable for the future of the organization. However, given the timing of this study, it is unclear what the overall impact of this workstream will be. Although AJW developed an implementation plan to support the first year of the Strategic Plan, the impact of the strategy on decision-making can only be assessed after implementation has started and will be determined by the extent to which decisions that align with the Strategy are made. Another marker of success will be how thoroughly the Strategic Plan permeates throughout the organization and inspires staff and volunteers alike to pull in the same direction.

One major risk was identified related to the implementation of the Strategic Plan. As noted by AFCHIX leadership: "Our Strategic Plan is an ambitious plan and requires significant resources." Without attracting resources consistently over the next five years, it is unlikely that the vision set forth in the Strategic Plan can be executed effectively. Moreover, AFCHIX leadership has identified the need for additional support to implement the plan and reached out to AJW to continue the collaboration once funding is identified. The fact that AFCHIX itself identified this capacity gap is important. A Strategic Plan, even with the support of an implementation plan, cannot be implemented without a thoughtful, consistent, and flexible implementation process in place—and this is something AFCHIX does not feel it has the capability to do on its own.

Strengthening the capacity of the Board of Directors

The AFCHIX Board of Directors is made up of four women, with one member each hailing, respectively, from Morocco, Senegal, Ghana, and Kenya. The Kenyan board member is also a co-founder and CEO of the company. The three other board members are leading technologists in their respective countries, all with advanced degrees in computer science and noteworthy careers in academia and the private sector. One of the board members proposed a training component to address the relative lack of understanding about their roles and responsibilities. Digital Frontiers was enthusiastic about this idea and added it to the overall capacity development scope.

Dorion Associates provided six online training sessions over a total of 12 hours to the board that helped clarify their roles and covered their fiduciary and strategic responsibilities, board ethics, and the legal requirements pertaining to their organization's operation within the Kenyan context. The support effort emphasized an adult-learning approach focused on discussion, "learning by doing," and consensus-building. The sessions were, according to the trainer and one participant interviewed, characterized by high levels of engagement. The board

members were open to learning and transparent about their blind spots. Moreover, by the end of the training sessions, the board had a clear road map of priorities to follow up on.

A key message, discussed in detail during the training sessions, was AFCHIX's need for new management personnel—staff on the payroll responsible for day-to-day operations and the overall management of the organization. AJW also emphasized this need during its consultations. Previously, AFCHIX's day-to-day management had largely been overseen by the CEO and the other board members along with one other full-time staff member. This personnel arrangement was deemed inadequate to suit AFCHIX's intent to grow and evolve in line with its new Strategic Plan. All board members were strongly in agreement that this change in organizational structure was required. As stated by one board member: "We have established that we need to move away from this 'project' mode to a program mode, which is long-term, where you can guarantee people long-term contracts."

Once that new management structure is in place, it will be important to clearly delineate where the board's responsibilities start and end. Rather than focusing its attention on operational decisions, the support organization, Dorion Associates, recommended that the Board of Directors focus its efforts on approving key policies, making major strategic decisions, and overseeing the organization's performance. Dorion Associates also encouraged formalization of the board's newly defined roles and responsibilities through an official board charter. There were not sufficient resources for the support organization to co-develop this charter with AFCHIX, but time was spent discussing the key elements of a prospective board charter.

AFCHIX's resources and internal capacity to implement a new direction—including a more defined management level and a narrower set of responsibilities for the board—are currently limited. New fundraising in the short- and medium-term will determine the extent to which the board can implement the changes they have committed to in principle. Moreover, it is worth noting that while the board is dedicated to the future of AFCHIX, the board members themselves are not compensated for their work. This is another risk that could be mitigated by changing AFCHIX's incentive structures. The post-project data indicated that the board members are committed to making necessary changes. However, without sufficient resources and continued support, these well-intentioned initial steps may not amount to much.

[NOT REALIZED] Improving fundraising strategy and capabilities

Fundraising is foundational to any non-profit organization's growth. The ability to put the Strategic Plan into action, recruit a management team, develop additional policies such as a board charter are dependent on financial resources. Thus, the fundraising workstream was critical to the success of the overall capacity development support initiative.

The organization that led this workstream conducted two consultations with AFCHIX and developed deliverables including a Resource Mobilization Strategy, documents guiding pipeline management and revenue monitoring, a proposal template and two exemplar proposals, and a grant sourcing tool. Despite the production of numerous deliverables, this workstream was ultimately perceived as ineffective by all stakeholders. In sharp contrast to the other workstreams, there were limited consultations between the support organization and AFCHIX. As noted by a board member: "They work[ed] on their own, and then sent us a lot of documents to read." This board member added that she could not be a very effective collaborator under those conditions. The support organization shared similar sentiments, pointing to the "effective non-participation in our consulting agreement."[16] The organization highlighted the lack of feedback on deliverables from both AFCHIX and Digital Frontiers.

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16   The grantee declined to sit for an interview, but provided some thoughts over email.

Digital Frontiers and AFCHIX team members reported they felt the timeline for the fundraising engagement was too short; however, they observed that the support organization did not utilize what time it did have to get to know the local partner, and that it eventually provided "cookie-cutter" solutions that were not appropriate for AFCHIX. There was a sense among AFCHIX leadership that it had not been provided with a strategy that aligned with its organizational goals, but rather with one that emphasized conventional tactics for fundraising. Even though the new Strategic Plan was shared with this workstream's support organization, Digital Frontiers and AFCHIX got the sense that the organization did not carefully review the plan or reference it during the creation of deliverables.

Given the inappropriate deliverables and lack of meaningful consultations, this workstream did not contribute to improving AFCHIX's ability to fundraise. This presents a significant risk to the overall sustainability of this capacity development support initiative. As noted above, the development and growth of AFCHIX will, in large part, depend on its ability to fundraise effectively over the next five years. However, it is important to note that the success—or failure—of this workstream will not single-handedly determine AFCHIX's capacity to mobilize resources in the years to come. The new Strategic Plan provides a roadmap for AFCHIX's development and growth and demonstrates a level of rigor and thoughtfulness that prospective funders will appreciate. Additionally, AFCHIX's sound organizational policies should appeal to prospective funders as they consider a partnership. As such, the Strategic Plan and policies can themselves be thought of as fundraising tools. Moreover, AFCHIX has matured as an organization, and to date has been awarded and successfully completed two projects with USAID. These experiences can be built on to ensure more success around resource mobilization in the future.

SIGNIFICANCE

AFCHIX has several characteristics that make it an attractive partner for any international development actor serious about localization and meeting the digital needs of underserved women. First, it is made up of local chapters in countries across the entire African continent. The local chapters are set up in close proximity to the communities they work in and the staff are familiar with the needs of the local stakeholders. Volunteers often live in the communities that they serve, creating a "closeness" that cannot be replicated by an outside actor. Second, the organization is led by women technologists and women staff and volunteers, all of whom believe that "gender diversity is crucial in building a thriving and innovative ICT sector on the continent."[17] Third, the organization is based on a volunteer structure that enables it to adapt quickly by scaling up and down and rapidly expanding to new locations as-needed.[18] However, although AFCHIX has been in operation for 20 years and created a large membership of national chapters, its organizational structure, strategy, and policies have not evolved to keep pace with its growth. Therefore, when supplemental funding became available to support the organizational capacity of this unique organization, Digital Frontiers and USAID saw it as an opportunity to strengthen a strategic local partner.

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17   "Connecting and inspiring African Women in Tech," AFCHIX, accessed on March 22, 2024, https://afchix.org/.

18   This is, of course, also a major challenge for AFCHIX as it tries to evolve as an organization. How can this structure remain flexible while also being directed strategically? Moreover, it creates some unique risks around the sustainability of the work. What happens when a project ends, and volunteers can no longer be compensated for their work? This continues to be a challenge for AFCHIX in the aftermath of the WCC III project.

CONTRIBUTION

Prior to the capacity development support initiative, AFCHIX did not have a strategy to guide its work. It had a vision and mission statement, but these were—appropriately—high-level, aspirational statements, not tools to guide organizational decision-making. An organizational strategy, when done effectively, allows for a proactive posture, creates a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration, clarifies the roles and responsibilities within an organization, and serves as the foundation for tracking organizational progress. Without such a strategy— or other mechanisms to guide priorities and decisions)—an organization will remain in "reactive mode," constantly adjusting to the external operating environment. Moreover, while AFCHIX had some organizational policies in place prior to the capacity development initiative, these were generally limited in utility and there were several gaps in these policies. The grantee for the first workstream, AJW, took on the assignment with enthusiasm, a commitment to building a deep understanding of the organization, and the know-how to translate these insights into a robust, albeit ambitious, Strategic Plan. Following the Plan's development, the co- founder and CEO showed a clear commitment to the plan and, as pointed out by a Digital Frontiers team member, "talks about the plan as 'our plan.'"

It was also clear that the AFCHIX organization at large had previously relied too heavily on the board to not only set the Strategy, but also to implement it. There was a need, identified directly by the board members, to clarify their roles and responsibilities and to develop a clear vision and structure for the organization moving forward. The board trainings accomplished this and, most critically, built consensus around the need for the careful recruitment of a management cadre responsible for implementing the Strategy and managing AFCHIX's day-to-day operations. There was acknowledgment that the organizational model that had served AFCHIX well up until that point, was no longer viable to support further growth.

Unfortunately, the fundraising workstream did not go as planned. The persistent lack of fundraising expertise within AFCHIX may continue to be a hindrance to future growth. The Strategic Plan and the Board trainings provided key building blocks for AFCHIX's development, but without improved fundraising practices, the objectives agreed to under those workstreams may be difficult to put into action.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **The separation of the three support workstreams led to inefficiencies.** The workstreams were purposefully delineated and conducted separately. As such, the ability for the different support organizations to build on what others had done and ensure a consistent voice and message across workstreams was limited. A notable insight from the interview with Dorion Associates was that the staff were not aware that there had been other workstreams. Dorion Associates staff had, however, reviewed the new Strategic Plan and incorporated it into the new training modules. Still, the lack of awareness of and communication between support organizations was a clear limitation. Dedicated time and level of effort (LOE) for the support organizations to connect, brainstorm, and develop an overarching design that was mutually reinforcing would have improved the capacity development support effort.

- **Reducing the number of support organizations would have led to efficiency gains and improved continuity.** The topics of the three workstreams overlap significantly and working with one to two support organizations could have improved the continuity of the support effort. For example, it was noted that AJW, working on the Strategic Planning workstream, would have been best placed to also lead the fundraising workstream. This approach also would have reduced the need to

onboard multiple support organizations, which had resulted in additional demands on AFCHIX's time. There were two major reasons for selecting multiple organizations: 1) based on the results of an initial Expression of Interest (EOI), there were concerns that none of the identified organizations could take on all the workstreams, as they required different skillsets, and 2) USAID procurement rules encourage international implementers to engage a varied set of providers. Under ideal circumstances, a sequential process, where each workstream was brought to its conclusion prior to starting the next, could have been more effective in identifying the needs and synergies across workstreams.

- **The identification and design of capacity support initiatives should be collaborative between funding partner and local partner.** Initially, Digital Frontiers intended to give AFCHIX the space to identify capacity-building priorities, while Digital Frontiers monitored the process to ensure that some of the most pressing issues were addressed. A Digital Frontiers staff member described this approach as such: "We were trying to guide them through without telling them what to do […] We wanted them to guide it, but it was a real struggle. But also helping them understand as evaluators [of their proposal], that if you become stronger in these areas, more donors will be attracted to you and that could help the organization grow." It took months for the priorities to be defined, as part of a process informed by Digital Frontiers' inputs and AFCHIX's internal needs. For example, the new board training, suggested by board members themselves, was an initiative that Digital Frontiers had not considered. Meanwhile, the Strategic Planning workstream—which included the development of key policies—was an effort that Digital Frontiers pushed that was eventually adopted and supported by AFCHIX. Other ideas that Digital Frontiers had, such as prospective workstreams on Human Resources and Communications, were discarded as AFCHIX did not consider them priorities. Part of the challenge with AFCHIX leading the design process was that the AFCHIX team did not fully understand the objectives of the capacity support initiative, what its parameters were, and what could possibly be achieved through the support. Thus, it is important that the design of a capacity development initiative is collaborative, that its broad objectives are clearly communicated to partners, and that the process is streamlined so as to not lose time and momentum.

- **Capacity development initiatives need to be rooted in a deep understanding of the partner organization, its goals, and the path to achieving them.** In line with lessons learned from the AirJaldi case study, the AFCHIX support initiative clearly demonstrates the importance of taking time to establish rapport, build up a deep understanding of a partner organization, and tailor the capacity development effort to the features of an organization. For the Strategic Planning and Board training workstreams, this was done effectively. AJW spent significant time building up a picture by talking to a number of different stakeholders inside and outside AFCHIX and was therefore highly knowledgeable about the organization before starting the technical work. Similarly, Dorion Associates spent time interacting with the board and digesting the Strategic Plan developed in the first workstream; this allowed Dorion Associates to understand AFCHIX's needs and develop a curriculum that met the organization's priorities. For the fundraising workstream, the lack of consultations and information-gathering prior to and during the work effort led to a support effort of limited value. Building in the time to build rapport and gain understanding is critical to a successful organizational capacity development initiative.

- **Building in time and resources to evaluate medium-term outcomes of organizational capacity support efforts is pivotal to understanding how newfound knowledge does— or does not— translate into action.** This case study was conducted immediately after the end of the capacity support initiative. Two of the workstreams were well executed, and there is a clear commitment from AFCHIX's leadership to pursue a new direction. However, no direct actions or results have materialized from this work yet. While there is an accelerating global push for localizing development and building the capacity of local partners, it is not enough to provide resources to implement initiatives of this type—there needs to be a parallel drive to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts and build an evidence base around which approaches work and which do not.
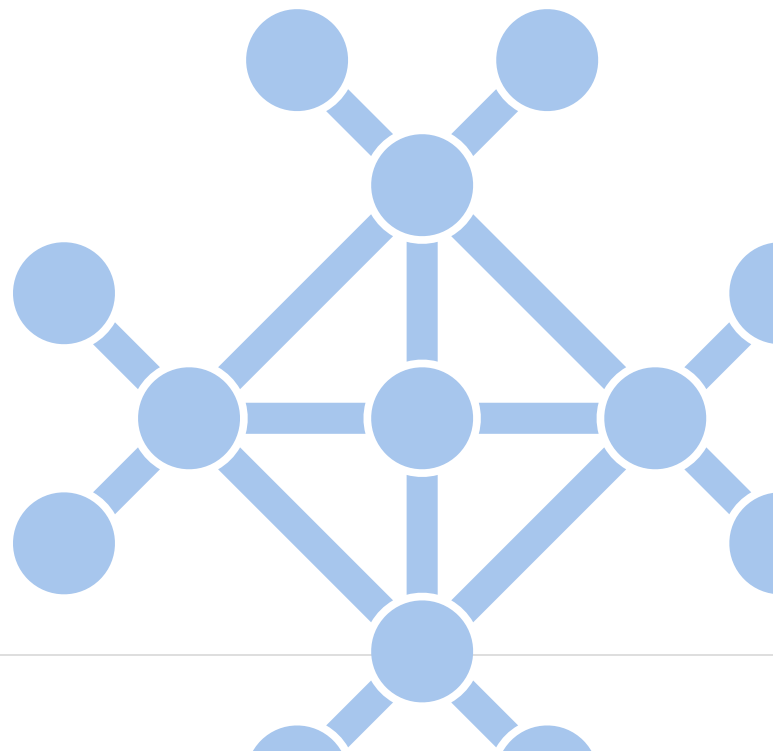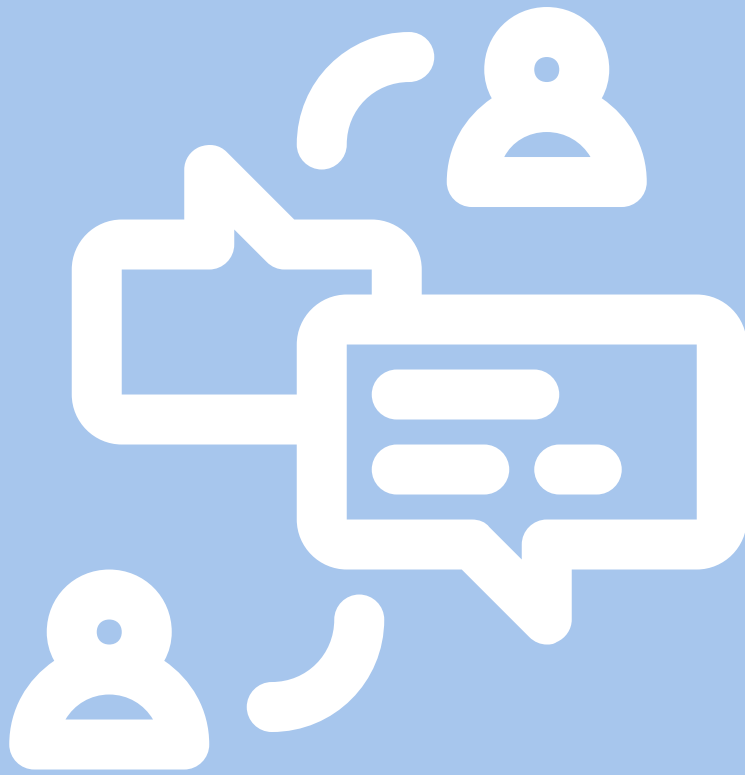
SARDI Co-Creation Symposium—**Facilitating new relationships and building capacity of prospective grantees**

SUMMARY

The Strengthening Women in Tech in South Asia Initiative was a project aimed at providing women entrepreneurs from across the region with support to expand their businesses. SARDI sought to support this initiative by soliciting qualified organizations or consortiums to submit a proposal to develop a regional entrepreneurial support network and capacity-building program for women entrepreneurs. As part of this solicitation process, Digital Frontiers pursued a range of applicants, including regional and country-based actors and applicants without prior experience with USAID. To level the playing field, all finalists were invited to join the Co-Creation Symposium that sought to build partnerships between regional organizations, provide direct feedback to participants' proposals, and imbue them with knowledge of USAID's practices and policies. This study seeks to understand the value of this approach to the specific solicitation process for The Strengthening Women in Tech in South Asia Initiative.

BACKGROUND, PROBLEM, AND APPROACH

The Strengthening Women in Tech in South Asia Initiative sought to enable women entrepreneurs from across the region—specifically, from across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—to expand their businesses by providing peer learning opportunities, mentorship, investment, and capacity-building support. The initiative's aims were informed by a scoping study conducted across the South Asia region. A core challenge from the outset of the solicitation process was to identify partners that could lead a regional project yet have a presence, deep connections, and local reach in each of the activity countries. Moreover, instead of focusing on women startup entrepreneurs, which is a common entry point for international development programs targeting MSMEs, the target group was women entrepreneurs running established, mid-level companies that needed additional support to grow. Finally, Digital Frontiers sought a range of applicants, including hyper-local organizations that had not received funding from USAID in the past, for the initiative. To identify organizations that would fit these qualifications, the Digital Frontiers team designed a three-stage application process. The first stage included an initial concept note submission, the second stage involved a co-creation workshop for short-listed organizations, and applicants would complete a final application in the third stage. Ten finalists were invited to join the Co-Creation symposium, which took place between February 28 and March 3, 2022.

The objectives of the symposium were three-fold. First, it would facilitate relationships and partnership- building between organizations with a regional scope and country-specific focus. Second, it aimed to strengthen the organizations' abilities to develop strong final proposals for this grant opportunity. Third, the symposium was designed to build participants' knowledge of USAID's practices and policies "that will be sustainably beneficial to the applicants, even if they do not win the award." In eight hours split over four days, the finalists participated in virtual sessions focused on the requirements for the Strengthening Women in Tech in South Asia Initiative bid;, individual feedback sessions on concept notes; navigating the USAID grant process; USAID Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning; USAID communications; and the role of government advocacy in social change initiatives.

OUTCOMES

This activity was unlike the two others discussed in this report. The symposium's abbreviated timeframe, relatively limited resources devoted for it, and comparatively narrow scope, necessitated lower expectations for its outcomes. Thus, this section is focused on the extent to which participants were satisfied with the

symposium, the extent to which new partnerships were built, and the extent to which proposals were strengthened relative to initially submitted concept notes. In addition, given the time that has passed since the symposium ended, the study sought to identify any signals that participation had led to additional benefits beyond the solicitation process.

Participant Satisfaction: A post-event survey was completed by a total of 12 participants from nine organizations in attendance. The respondents were asked about how they would rate four different elements of the Symposium: discussion time, interactivity, topics, and speakers. Their feedback, displayed in the following visual, was overwhelmingly positive. None of the respondents indicated below an "average" satisfaction level for any of these elements. Nearly every respondent rated their experience with all of the elements, except for "discussion time," as "above average" or "exceptional."

How would you rate the following?

The survey results also included several open-ended responses that confirmed these sentiments. One participant wrote: "I just wanted to say thank you for running this. We have done work with other governments, NGOs, DFIs, banks through an RFP process and really appreciate you taking the time to step through everything and set expectations, give insight into what you're looking for. I feel like oftentimes, grants are awarded to much bigger organizations simply because they know how to navigate the process and through this symposium, you have made it more equitable for other organizations to participate."

These opinions were supported by interviews conducted with participants. Another participant noted: "I think that it [the symposium] made the process a little bit more collaborative versus the typical case with these proposals, where you often work in the dark. You're just dealing with the funder and that's kind of it." Yet another participant shared this sentiment, saying "It was very good to hear from the other side. From the people that we try to create these things for, to get their perspective on it."

New Partnerships: Some participants came into the Co-Creation Symposium with an already-formed consortium. Others had submitted a bid as individual organizations and were seeking partnerships for the submission of the final proposal. One respondent, whose organization was already part of a consortium coming into the event, said that the symposium allowed them to explore other potential relationships as well. The respondent reported that they pursued a potential collaboration with another consortium until the final stages of the proposal process, but ultimately decided to stay with their original group. The respondent, who ended up participating in a winning bid, noted that they had stayed in contact with the consortium partners and had been looking at other opportunities to continue this collaboration. At least two of the organizations from the winning consortium had not previously worked with USAID, speaking to the initiative's success in attracting new local partners to work with USAID.

Another interviewee, whose organization did not have consortium partners prior to the symposium, successfully identified partners to bid with during the event. Although this consortium did not win the award, the interviewee has continued to stay in contact with their consortium partners. However, these new connections have, so far, not led to new business opportunities. Digital Frontiers also established a WhatsApp group for all participants to continue connecting with each other after the symposium, but there was very little activity in that group.
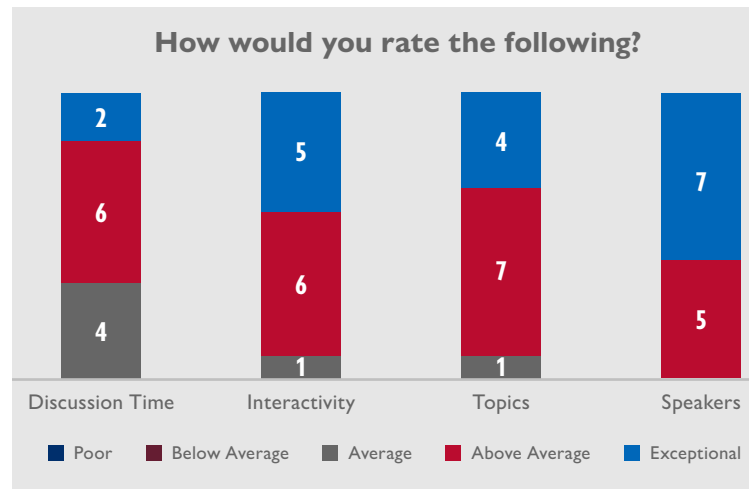
However, most respondents reported they thought the symposium had succeeded in this partnership-building objective, which was a significant achievement given its virtual nature and short timeframe.

Strengthened proposals: The initiative sought to work with a unique target group. Contrary to most development programs, the target audience was established entrepreneurs that would benefit from regional partnerships, market expansion. While one of the purposes of the symposium was to clarify and hone proposals that focused on this target audience, this did not fully translate to the participating organizations. A Digital Frontiers staff member noted, "The applications we got in the second round still leaned towards the startup segment […] We continued to have to emphasize this [the correct approach] even in implementation." However, other elements of the proposals, such as the ability to demonstrate local reach through partnerships, a strong understanding of local context in each of the countries, and detailed descriptions of how projects would adapt to those circumstances in each of the contexts, greatly improved during the symposium. Participants reported they found the co-creation event helpful in strengthening their proposals, and noted some practical tips that they had applied. However, it was pointed out that organizations that had to form consortiums on the backend of the event ended up having limited time to develop their proposals in collaboration with their new partners.

Long-term capacity to engage in USAID solicitation processes: Despite the relatively short timeframe, one of the stated objectives of the symposium was to impart longer-term, sustainable capacity to all participating organizations to engage in future USAID solicitation processes. During the symposium, in addition to providing targeted support for proposals, the team also provided more general training aimed at building a broader understanding of policies and procedures within USAID. The rationale was that building this general understanding would improve organizations' ability to engage with future USAID solicitation processes. The team also provided the organizations with additional resources and guidance to where to obtain additional information on successfully navigating the solicitation process.

Although not all of the participating organizations interviewed for this study had successfully secured funding from USAID after the symposium, they all pointed to valuable insights that they had picked up during the event that they *believed* would be valuable as they pursued USAID funding in the future. The overarching notion expressed by respondents was that learning more about the solicitation and grantmaking processes, as well as USAID's approach to MEL and communications, had been helpful. From a methodological perspective, this study lacks the diversity of perspectives to make a conclusion about the symposium's progress on this objective. However, it is worth noting that the symposium only provided participants with a short glimpse into USAID policies and practices, and should therefore be considered as an initial step in these organizations' capacity-building journeys.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

As the international development community's localization agenda and focus on local capacity-building gathers steam, a broader range of prospective partners are engaging international development actors. One of the stated objectives of the symposium initiative was to attract applicants that had not engaged with USAID in the past. This necessitated a rethinking of the traditional solicitation process that favored actors with previous, relevant experience to draw on. For this reason, Digital Frontiers designed a phased solicitation process that sought to build the capacity of all prospective partners and create a cadre of organizations better-placed to submit strong final proposals and compete for future awards.

The evidence clearly identifies several short-term outcomes from the symposium. Event participants were highly satisfied; they developed new relationships and strengthened their proposals. Interviewees also viewed the event as novel and innovative in that it allowed them to engage and co-create with a broad range of actors operating in similar spaces as well as with a major international donor. Moreover, the opportunity to receive direct feedback on proposals prior to final submission was appreciated. None of the interviewees had experienced this type of approach in the past. Most commonly, capacity-building or project design support is given individually to finalists in a solicitation process, or—frequently—only to the awardee after selection.

There are several reasons why this study could not, and perhaps should not, seek to ascertain any medium and longer-term outcomes from the symposium. First, the event lasted for a total of eight hours and was limited in scope. Second, although enough time has passed since the event's conclusion for potential longer-term outcomes to be realized, it is impossible to isolate the effect of the event on any observed outcomes. Nevertheless, networks and partnerships established at the symposium have persisted. Although these partnerships have not resulted in new business for participants, they could nevertheless spur future opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **The symposium provided a "proof of concept" for engaging new actors during a solicitation process.** Although the symposium required meticulous planning and a significant level of effort, the overall costs were relatively low and were clearly outweighed by the benefits to participants. Despite the virtual nature of the symposium, participants were satisfied with the event as it allowed them to establish new relationships and left them better-equipped to develop strong proposals. Moreover, interviewees noted that the event made them feel supported in ways that they had not experienced in past solicitation processes. When engaging new actors, USAID and implementing partners should consider similar phased approaches for building the necessary capabilities of prospective grantees early in the solicitation process.

- **The timeframe from the symposium to final proposal submissions was too compressed.** One participant, from an organization that established a consortium after the event, noted that the time allotted to bring participating stakeholders together, clarify roles and responsibilities, and co-write a proposal was too limited. There was a sense that if organizations that did not enter the symposium with consortium partners would have had more time after the event for these activities, they would have operated on more equal footing with organizations that did.

- **The focus on a unique target audience required consistent messaging. Many** of the participating organizations were most comfortable designing projects for women startup entrepreneurs. It turned out to be difficult for them to pivot and design support activities for women entrepreneurs running mid-level organizations, even after receiving consistent messaging about this requirement throughout the symposium. One approach that could have helped in getting this message across more clearly could have been to provide specific examples about how a set of activities and associated objectives would differ when tailored for startup entrepreneurs as compared to the target segment.

- **The long-term nature of capacity-building necessitates realistic objective setting.** Most of the event objectives were realistic and successfully achieved. However, the final objective—sustainable capacity to engage in USAID solicitation processes—was likely unattainable within the symposium's short timeframe. Instead, the symposium was able to successfully provide participants with an introduction to and resources on USAID policies and processes, which was considered valuable. Avoiding lofty objectives and being specific about the change that one seeks to achieve is critical in

designing (and measuring) effective capacity-building activities. With regards to future symposiums, for example, a realistic objective focused on introducing USAID policies and practices can allow for more time to be spent walking through relevant guidance, templates, and policies—as opposed to providing those resources at the end of capacity-building sessions. This could help the participants understand the guidance and prepare them to further engage with these resources in the future.
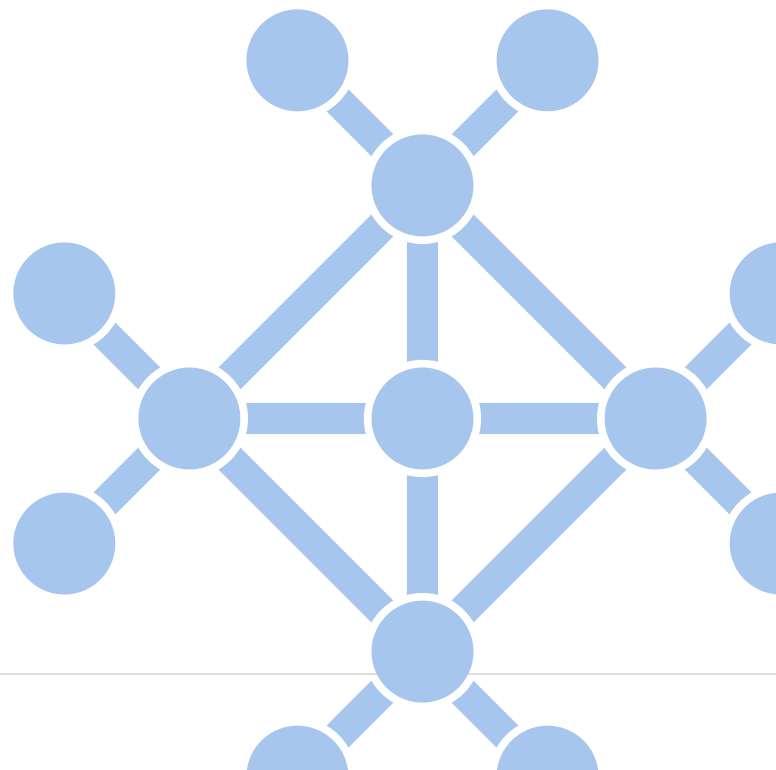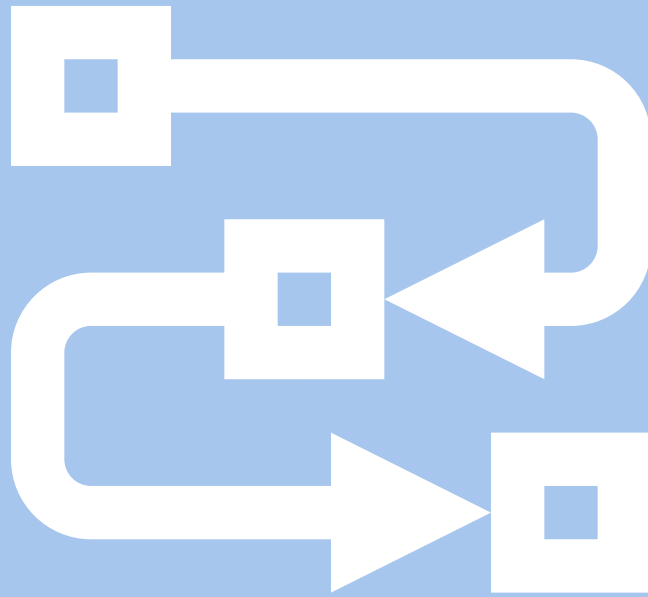
Annex: **Methodology**

Through three case studies of Digital Frontiers' formal capacity development support efforts, this report sought to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. What were the approaches to capacity-building of local partners?

2. What approaches worked (and which were less effective) in building partner capacity?

3. What were the results of improved capacity among local partners (e.g., application of new knowledge, ability to implement programming more effectively, or ability to attract future funding)?

4. What are the main lessons learned from the capacity development initiatives?

APPROACH

Identification of Core Outcomes: For each of the selected case studies, the MEL team started the process with a desk review of core documents. These included project descriptions, SOWs for the capacity development support initiatives, status updates, and final reports from support organizations or personnel. This was followed by "intake" interviews with Digital Frontiers staff to identify the core outcomes from the support efforts. For each of the case studies, the outcomes identified ultimately aligned quite closely with the objectives set out at the start of the capacity development support effort. Subsequent steps in the process aimed to validate these outcomes and highlight areas in which the initiatives had fallen short. The term "outcomes" is used liberally in this report, pertaining to actual achievements, short-term outcomes, products produced, and activities conducted. There are two main reasons for this, highlighted throughout the report: 1) the dosage of the intervention (how much capacity was built), and 2) the amount of time that has passed since the intervention concluded.

Data Collection:

- ***AirJaldi:*** The MEL team consulted three Digital Frontiers staff members, including the consultant that led the capacity development work; three AirJaldi staff members, including leadership and training staff; and a Microsoft Airband representative.

- ***AFCHIX:*** The MEL team consulted two Digital Frontiers staff members; an AFCHIX board member; two of the three support organizations;[19] and a USAID representative.

- ***SARDI Regional Co-Creation Symposium:*** The MEL team consulted two Digital Frontiers staff members and three participating organizations. Unfortunately, the team was not able to set up an interview with the relevant USAID representative. In addition, a post-event survey was analyzed to assess the participants' immediate post-event reactions.

The interviews focused on 1. validating the support efforts' results, based on individual respondents' knowledge and perspective, and 2. interrogating areas for improvement that could have led to a more successful support effort. Prior to the finalization of this document, it was reviewed by relevant Digital Frontiers team members, and their inputs were incorporated.

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19   The third support organization declined to sit for an interview, but provided brief thoughts in an email.

MAIN LIMITATIONS

- *Timeframe:* The AFCHIX support effort concluded just prior to this study, which did not allow for capturing any medium- to long-term outcomes. Digital Frontiers seeks to conduct some additional primary data collection in 2024 to capture any medium-term outcomes. Conversely, the SARDI Co-Creation Symposium ended about two years prior to this study and given the short-term nature of the symposium (its objectives were mostly focused on the solicitation process), data collection in the immediate aftermath of the event, when participant recall would have been clearer, would have more effectively captured its short-term impacts. The AirJaldi case study is the only instance referenced in this report where sufficient time had passed since the completion of the capacity development support to allow adequate recall of the work and the activities and allow the capture of medium-term outcomes from the support.

- *Limited sample:* Across the three cases, most relevant key stakeholder groups were consulted. The individuals the MEL team spoke with were identified as the most critical informants qualified to speak about the capacity support initiatives and the projects. However, obtaining a broader perspective from each of the stakeholder groups—and from the local organizations in particular— would have provided a richer data set that could inform future capacity development support initiatives in a more detailed manner.

Photo Credit: Mosa'ab Elshamy for DAI