The Policy Influence Capacity Advancement Process (PICA) Evaluation Overview

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1. Introduction

The Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Security Policy Research, Capacity and Influence (PRCI[1]) has been a five-year effort to "implement a global program of research and institutional capacity development that will enhance the ability of local policy research organizations to conduct high-quality food security policy research and influence food security policy more effectively while becoming increasingly self-reliant" (Michigan State University, 2019 p. 1). PRCI's capacity strengthening approach included *individual* capacity development, intended to enhance promising researchers' skills in policy analysis and outreach, and *organizational* capacity development, intended to improve the ability of selected centers to use the enhanced empirical evidence they generate to influence their policy environment.

Key Messages

1. Embrace change in your particular role to operationalize locally-led capacity strengthening successfully. This involves all parties—local partners, implementation partners, and donors.

2. Use diverse and interconnected approaches for strengthening individual, institutional, and systems capacities.

3. Flexibility is simple in concept, complex in implementation, and worth every effort to relentlessly pursue especially for local capacity strengthening.

4. Training for researchers is often prioritized over that for research support and administrative staff. However, neglecting the latter is harmful to system impact and sustainable organizational performance, affecting research quality and the ability to influence policy systems.

Consistent with USAID's local capacity strengthening principle of "strengthen(ing) diverse capacities through diverse approaches" (USAID, 2022), the Lab used multiple approaches to pursue its objectives. These included mentoring in which teams of researchers from participating PRCI centers were matched with mentors from Michigan State University (MSU), Cornell University, and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to conduct analysis and write a policy relevant research paper; online training in

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[1] This overview interchangeably uses PRCI, "the Lab", and "the program" to refer to PRCI.

technical research methods, research ethics, integrating gender into research, writing for peer review, and other topics; a research-to-policy (R2P) program in which researchers were trained on conceiving research topics with policy relevance in mind and in translating research findings into messages useful to policy makers; and institutional capacity strengthening. The **Policy Influence Capacity Advancement (PICA) Process** was PRCI's most comprehensive and flexible approach to institutional capacity strengthening and is the focus of this overview. PRCI conducted an assessment of the PICA process with participating centers. This overview provides a summary of the background, results, and recommendations from the assessment, which are described in detail in the (forthcoming) PRCI PICA Process Evaluation Report.

During the Lab's first year, three policy centers across Africa were competitively selected to participate in this full complement of PRCI programs[2]. The centers were the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) in Uganda, the Bureau d'analyses macro-économiques, or Bureau for Macro-economic Analysis (ISRA-BAME) in Senegal, and the Center for Petroleum, Energy Economics and Law (CPEEL) in Nigeria (in partnership with the Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development (DAERD) of the University of Ibadan. This assessment asks whether and how the leadership and staff of these centers perceive that PICA process, embedded in the multiple other approaches that PRCI used to achieve impact, has contributed to their success in achieving the goals laid out at the start of the program: to enhance their capacity to do applied policy research that influences policy thinking and practice in their country.

Other assessments of PRCI's impact include (1) an interview-based assessment, in the three countries and continentally in Africa, of policy makers' attitudes towards, and use of, empirical information and analysis and their familiarity with the three centers and with the African Network of Agricultural Policy Research Institutes (ANAPRI), a key PRCI partner; (2) a joint assessment together with supported Asian centers of the impact of PRCI support on their organizations; (3) a self-assessment by ANAPRI, based on numerous outside interviews, of the impact PRCI has had on its organization; (4) and a survey-based assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the PRCI technical training program. PRCI also surveyed leaders of centers where teams of young researchers won STAAARS+[3] fellowships on the impact of that fellowship on their organization.

2. The PICA Process

The PICA Process uses the Kaleidoscope Model (KM) of policy change (Resnick, D., Haggblade, S., Babu, S., Hendriks, S. L., & Mather, D. 2018) to organize its work and as an evaluation lens to assess it. The KM, developed by the former Food Security Policy Innovation Lab, is a results framework that identifies sixteen variables that drive policy change, falling into five policy stages (agenda setting, design, adoption, implementation, and evaluation and reform). Using the KM, PICA works with policy research centers to

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[2] Partners in Asia and members of ANAPRI participated in various aspects of PRCI but not in the full complement of programs and not in the PICA process.
[3] STAAARS+ is the Structural Transformation in African and Asian Rural Spaces mentorship program run by Cornell University within PRCI, in collaboration with MSU and IFPRI.

define their policy goals, assess their capacity to achieve them, identify capacity gaps and needs, feed this thinking into an adaptable capacity development plan, and then monitor and evaluate the development of those capacities by co-creating and using indicators of institutional success. Each participating center designed a three-year action plan and received a flexible USD$300,000 grant to support the activities they defined through the PICA Process. The plan took account of the research mentoring and training offered by PRCI and identified additional avenues the centers could use to achieve their goals, using their flexible grant and other resources accessible to them.

Systems Analysis
- System Analysis (System Mapping)
- System Position + Impact Goals (System Mapping)
- Organizational Barriers and Opportunities (PDIA)
- Capacity Assessment (Kaleidoscope Model)

Organizational Capacity Development Plan
- Policy Impact Goals
- Organizational Objectives
- Action Steps
- Capacity Development
- Success Indicators

Organizational Capacity Development Process
- Plan Activation
- Accountability Mechanisms
- Oversight
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Adjusting and Adapting

PICA phases and activities

This approach put into practice key principles from USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy (2022): it started with the local system the center operated in (Principle 1), aligned its capacity strengthening with the center's priorities (Principle 4), and specifically identified, appreciated, and built on existing capacities (Principle 5). The PICA Process also operationalized several of the "14 Good Practices for Local Leadership" (USAID 2023) identified by the agency in its approach to measuring locally led development. This approach was crucial to PICA's ability to have impact. See recommendation section for further analysis.

The PICA Process consists of three phases: assessment, planning, and implementation. After Centers completed the assessment phase where they determine their unique baselines, all three identified objectives and particular capacities (e.g. skills in research design, research management, and analysis; technical writing; and communication of research results to various audiences; project management, relational influence with key stakeholders in the policy ecosystem) as part of their efforts to improve organizational performance.

3. Participating Centers

The Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC)[4] was founded in 1993 by three units under the jurisdiction of the Ugandan government, the Government of Uganda (GoU), Makerere University (MU), and the Bank of Uganda (BoU). The center's vision is to be a "center for excellence for evidence-based economic research," and its mission is to "foster evidence generation and uptake for sustainable economic growth and development for Uganda and the region."

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[4] See "Economic Policy Research Center" at https://eprcug.org/.

The Bureau d'analyses macro-économiques, or Bureau for Macro-economic Analysis (ISRA-BAME)[5] was founded in the early 80's by the government of Senegal with the support of MSU. It is a department of the Institut sénégalais de recherches agricoles, or Senegalese Institute for Agricultural Research (ISRA) which is Senegal's public agricultural research institute under the Ministry of Agriculture. BAME's mission is to undertake research in economics and social sciences; assist policy makers in the formulation and monitoring of agricultural policies; support professional organizations in the definition of their strategies; and to build the capacity of young researchers.

The Innovation Lab for Policy Leadership in Agriculture and Food Security (PiLAF)[6] became a PRCI and PICA partner after PRCI's original partners, The Center for Petroleum, Energy Economics and Law (CPEEL) and the Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development (DAERD) used PRCI funding to form a new research center focused on food policy.

4. Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation was conducted around the mid-point of PRCI's fifth and final year. It focused on four questions:

1. Has policy influence improved in the specific areas of the policy system identified through PICA?
2. Which capacity strengthening activities effectively supported the center to move closer to articulated organizational & technical goals?
3. Has leadership in centers improved? If yes, has this led to improvements in organizational performance and culture?
4. Has the PICA process been an effective organizational capacity development approach for African agricultural policy research centers?

The evaluation consisted of qualitative data collection methods including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, to gain insights into the impact and outcomes of the program. Three focus group instruments and one semi-structured interview protocol were employed. Participant selection (n=35) considered factors such as organizational role (leadership, researcher, research support staff, administrator, research/student assistant), years of experience, and active involvement in at least one of the three phases of the PICA Process. This approach aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences. The findings synthesize evidence from centers and strive to reflect their voice and views.

5. Key Findings

The following section summarizes key findings with a few illustrative examples; comprehensive evidence of these findings is available in the (forthcoming) PRCI PICA Process Evaluation Report.

Has policy influence improved in the specific areas of the policy system identified through the PICA Process? How/why? What are mitigating factors?: All three centers perceived that their policy influence improved due to increased visibility, stronger relations with and trust by stakeholders, and the perceived high quality of their research by stakeholders. First, visibility increased. This occurred through greater and

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[5] See "Bureau for Macro-economic Analysis" at https://www.bameinfopol.info/le-bame.html?lang=fr.
[6] See "Innovation Lab for Policy Leadership in Agriculture and Food Security" at https://pilafui.org/.

sustained efforts at policy communication with the use of diverse outreach methods. Findings show that the consistent emphasis on policy engagement throughout PRCI was one important factor in driving greater effort in this area. Funding and training under PRCI allowed for additional outreach activities such as improving websites and holding seminars. All centers reported that the number of requests for their services from policy makers increased, with centers being asked to conduct new research and additional related activities, and invited to new spaces of policy dialogue that they had not previously been active in.

Second, centers started new relationships and increased trust with stakeholders over the course of PRCI. Centers engaged with new ministries and higher levels of government. New stakeholders were brought into policy dialogues as a result of the centers' efforts, increasing the perception of the centers' neutrality and thus trust.

Third, and interlinked with trust, is the quality of research. Respondents indicated that the increased quality of research was what brought about trust and continued to increase visibility. Research quality comes about through having the right capacities, personnel and tools; the PICA Process helped centers to identify both what was needed and a prioritized timeline to achieve their research goals, while PRCI more broadly provided support through mentored research and technical training.

> "The moment the presentation [on the PRCI supported sugarcane research] was made we started getting calls from ministries. They started to listen because of the evidence….we are sure now we are in the good books of the Ministry of Agriculture." ~ EPRC Participant

One example the showcase all three of these findings is EPRC's work in Uganda's sugarcane sector. EPRC recognized there was a breakdown between sugarcane policy design and implementation. Leadership from EPRC allocated funding and top researchers to conduct additional research in this sector. Specifically, EPRC conducted a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA), (Mwesignwa, 2023) inviting stakeholders from various parts of the value chain to participate and provide feedback. EPRC's work has generated a commitment by Parliament (Mwesignwa, 2022) to use the evidence shared by EPRC to inform new policy decisions for the sector. EPRC's commitment to listening and learning from farmers and millers built trust with stakeholders in the sector and strengthened relations with community groups and policymakers. EPRC's commitment to provide research-informed recommendations to strengthen the sugarcane sector are further elaborated in this **video produced by EPRC**.

Which capacity strengthening activities effectively supported centers to move closer to articulated organizational & technical goals?*:* Despite their shared policy influence goals, the centers faced distinct challenges and adopted unique strategies to meet their organizational and technical objectives. Through the PICA Process and the development of action plans, centers identified strategic activities that could propel their centers towards a more sustainable and impactful future. For example, under human resource needs, EPRC increased the number of researchers under its Volunteer Research Program and utilized faculty from Makerere University. BAME prioritized a need to add communication specialists and policy and data analysts. BAME recruited for these positions through a public call, leveraging PRCI funds to pilot new positions while simultaneously securing a commitment from ISRA to sustain the positions after PRCI funding expired. BAME also shifted its staff to a new campus, supported through a cost-share with ISRA

which provided dedicated office spaces and a conference room for staff which they stated contributed to improved research activities.

Communication resources were identified by all centers as a key need to increase their visibility and engage a wider audience. Both BAME and PiLAF hired communications specialists, implementing communication plans aligned with strategic goals. Examples that showcase effective strategies and products aimed at increasing public awareness include the following: BAME's "Mardi du BAME" (Tuesdays with BAME) events **(showcased in a video produced by BAME)** and social media posts; PiLAF's one-page policy reports; EPRC revamped its strategic outreach and began targeted outreach out diverse stakeholder groups such as millers and farmers in the sugarcane industry.

Personally, I think… the Mardi du BAME had a very huge impact in… the visibility of ISRA-BAME.…because after every session of Mardi du BAME, people know BAME better, and people recognize its place in policy recommendation and policy building. So I think it's a very good impact. ~ BAME participant

Partnerships were crucial for all centers as they increased their engagement with stakeholders. Both PiLAF and ISRA-BAME used the PICA Process to expand their partnerships by joining the African Network of Agricultural Policy Research Institutes (ANAPRI), which was a core partner in PRCI. Also, BAME utilized its media presence for international conferences while PiLAF engaged stakeholders early via workshops and targeted meetings **(illustrated in a video produced by PiLAF).** EPRC conducted forums and led targeted meetings with technical teams, community groups, and policy-level actors.

All three centers found PRCI's technical trainings that focused on cross-cutting topics such as improving academic writing for publishing, doing effective research presentations, writing policy briefs, and avoiding unintentional plagiarism, to be very helpful. The trainings proved particularly valuable when centers were able integrate new skills immediately into their workstreams. All centers also described the valuable benefits of the systems mapping process facilitated by PRCI's PICA team at the outset of the PICA Process which helped inform their action planning process to develop greater policy influence.

A key conclusion regards the interdependence and synergy across capacity strengthening activities. BAME's robust communication strategy facilitated funding partnerships, which, in turn, attracted applicants for vacant positions, thus contributing to their HR objectives. The interconnectedness of diverse organizational strengthening activities highlighted the need for a multifaceted approach to achieve organizational goals, which was a key part of PRCI's design.

Has leadership in centers improved? If yes, has this led to improvements in organizational performance and culture?: An example of the flexibility that was central to PRCI's approach was the introduction early in Year 4 of an 18-month leadership coaching program built around the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) 360 Assessment Tool (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). All centers participated in this effort and all of the active participants (10) believed they had improved in their leadership practices at least somewhat with specific examples of behavioral and mindset change highlighted in the following section. A key component of the program was inviting African leaders from diverse backgrounds to group meetings where they

"It [the culture of appreciation] was before, maybe it was there, but it has been rekindled. It has been revived." ~ EPRC Participant

shared their own leadership journey, specifically connecting their learnings to one or more of the five LPI Practices. Participants shared that this component of the leadership program was very useful and thought provoking: they noted that they were able to take practical ideas from the guest speakers that PRCI arranged back to their work.

When it came to applying lessons from the leadership program within their institutions, center leaders stated they are seeing an organizational culture shift around leadership. For example, a mindset change in leaders around staff appreciation (captured as "Encourage the Heart" in LPI) and entrusting more responsibilities to junior staff ("Enable Others to Act") is slowly leading to a mindset change in the rest of the staff. Their behavior, in short, has "Modeled the Way" – another of the five key leadership practices emphasized by LPI - for others to change their own leadership style(s). In addition, LPI participants directly stated or implied that their level of consciousness around the five leadership practices and corresponding behaviors increased. As a result, they became more intentional about demonstrating leadership behaviors and/or evaluating their actions through a leadership lens.

An important consideration when developing and implementing any leadership programming is the potential unintended consequences. With LPI, participants noted that those who were not participants in the program may find it frustrating to see change or feel excluded in shifting cultural or organizational norms. There is a need to support institutional leaders in engaging others in the leadership development process and identifying shared "wins".

Has PICA been an effective organizational capacity development approach for African agricultural policy research centers?: All of the participants involved in the day-to-day program operations across all three centers rated PICA implementation as highly or somewhat effective. Participants identified the following as key factors for success:

- *A highly participatory, flexible approach* that enables organizational leaders (in coordination with MSU) to adapt the capacity development action plan in light of unexpected challenges and new opportunities within their policy environments;
- *Project management training and software* that was utilized over the life of project; and
- *Accountability checkins* with the MSU organizational strengthening team that included complementary, synergistic aspects (accountability, organizational learning, brevity, pragmatism, collaborative relational trust). One center did, however, identify challenges scheduling frequent check-ins and all recommended more extensive program management training.

> *"Our [original] goal was just the poultry farmers…the marketing, the processing, and consumption. So because of the flexibility that was incorporated into the PICA process, we were able to move and add those worlds [of new stakeholder groups]. And they have been very, very, very instrumental to some of the progress we can claim to now. ~ PILAF Participant*

All three centers identified extended benefits of PICA Process implementation that rippled across and beyond their organizations. EPRC and BAME observed a stronger organizational culture of planning, complemented by the adoption of Smartsheet as a center-wide program management tool. PILAF

incorporated the PICA project management training into a graduate course. PiLAF also provided a series of free, virtual trainings in quantitative research software (STATA and R) as part of their strategic plan developed through the PICA Process to add value to peer researchers, expand their network, and increase their local and global reputation as a new policy center; over 450 individuals from more than seven countries participated. EPRC has extended the check-in model of accountability and learning to other research projects in the center. Notably, BAME's European partners have expressed interest in the collaborative model used in the PICA Process implementation because of BAME's testimonies and outputs from the program.

BAME and EPRC rated PICA indicators somewhat effective for measuring the progress of their capacity development action plans, while PILAF ranked them as highly effective. Participants valued co-creating indicators with MSU and observed how their agency in the process improved buy-in and ownership. All three centers recommended better integration of PRCI-wide monitoring and evaluation to avoid redundancy with indicators unique to the PICA Process.

Centers' organizational performance improvements across the indicators varied. Each center demonstrated progress on indicators for most goals, though many of the intended targets were not reached. Reasons for not reaching targets included: setting overly ambitious targets or establishing too many indicators (most common reason), staff turnover (e.g. staff who had been trained left the organization or took leave), and challenges with schedules and heavy workloads that inhibited availability for capacity development trainings.

Center perceptions varied regarding which organizational goals and activities were the best return on investment. A majority of BAME participants believed that investing in personnel (namely communication specialists, statisticians, and a political scientist) and improved communication efforts yielded the best return on PRCI investment. Findings from PiLAF evidenced a shared perception that efforts to strengthen relationships and reputation with policymakers was the best use of resources. EPRC participants thought the best return on investment were initiatives that improved research productivity, relevance, and quality.

6. Recommendations

Building on the findings, the recommendations incorporate perspectives of the evaluation team, which consisted of five members: three from Michigan State University, one from Purdue University, and one from the International Food Policy Research Institute. Findings and recommendations were reviewed and validated with centers. The recommendation section also draws connections between the findings of this study and USAID localization policy and practices, particularly because the Lab's approach was deeply rooted in the thinking that led to USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening Policy in 2022[7] and its development of targets, indicators, and good practices for localization in 2023[8]. Accordingly, this section references USAID's "seven mutually reinforcing principles for effective local capacity strengthening" (found in the Local Capacity Strengthening Policy) and the "14 Good Practices for Local Leadership" (USAID, 2023).

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[7] See "Localization" at https://www.usaid.gov/localization.
[8] See "Measuring Progress on Localization" at https://www.usaid.gov/localization/measurement.

Recommendations are organized into the following categories:
1. For future USAID individual, institutional, and systems strengthening initiatives for agricultural research policy centers
2. For implementing partners
3. For agricultural policy research centers

A comprehensive list of recommendations can be found in the (forthcoming) detailed PRCI PICA Process Evaluation Report while a synthesized list of those findings are shared within this overview.

Recommendations for future USAID individual, institutional, and systems strengthening initiatives for agricultural policy research centers:

- *Use agile approaches in capacity strengthening design and implementation.* The traditional planning and budgeting culture of most donor agencies seeks planning processes where deviation from the original proposal is often challenging and sometimes discouraged. Such approaches often assume a static environment and overlook dynamic systems. Alternatively, findings from the PICA Process evaluation strongly support elements of USAID's recently released local capacity strengthening policy, principles, and practices, as well as existing approaches such as Collaborate, Learn, and Adapt (CLA). The PICA process used agile management approaches (Association for Project Management, 2024) that focus on iterative and incremental deliverables throughout the life cycle. An agile approach allowed for continual assessment and adaptation of the articulated plans and corresponding budgets. Changes in context were considered and freedom was given to admit that certain assumptions were wrong or that circumstances had changed to the extent that original plans were no longer valid. All centers emphatically correlated this flexible approach with their organizational accomplishments. This finding affirms a key practice for creating effective local partnerships: "Making [*and managing!]* descriptive, not prescriptive awards to local and/or regional partners" (Good Practice #3, emphasis added). One salient insight from the evaluation is that flexibility is simple in concept, complex in implementation, and worth every effort to relentlessly pursue for local capacity strengthening. Our recommendation echoes advice from USAID's conversations with over 300 local and international organizations and partners and 22 USAID Missions to develop the Locally Led Programs Indicator: "'Flexibility' doesn't stop with the type of award instrument. Flexibility can and should be incorporated in implementation through adaptive management—which requires open-mindedness and a degree of risk tolerance on the part of USAID staff" (Brady, Ford, Elele, & Mbawuike, 2023).
- *Identify opportunities to scale and adapt the PICA process to new country contexts.* Invite institutional leaders, researchers, and faculty alumni from the first cohorts of PRCI and the PICA process to serve as peer coaches in the design and implementation of additional cohorts. Designing these opportunities would "appreciate and build on existing [and new] capacities" (Equitable Partnership Principle 5). In this approach US university roles remain important though shift in emphasis to better "align capacity strengthening with local priorities" (Equitable Partnership #4) via networking, organizational coaching, peer mentoring, and targeted interventions.
- *Develop more robust organizational strengthening metrics for policy leadership centers.* Parallel with recent USAID efforts to develop a suite of methods and metrics to measure localization progress, PRCI paid close attention to measuring progress at the organizational and systems levels. This experience

surfaced the need to use a blend of standard and custom organizational capacity strengthening indicators with more nuance. For example, PRCI utilized USAID's institutional capacity strengthening indicator (CBLD-9) and yet realized its limitations. Organizationally, PRCI's institutional capacity strengthening team co-created criteria with local partners (Effective Programming Principle 3) for more carefully considered use of CBLD-9. Centers valued co-creating contextualized indicators and observed how their agency in the process improved buy-in and ownership, which affirms the importance of "measuring programmatic success using locally defined measures" (Good Practice #7). At the systems level, PRCI tracked "policy process milestones" that centers contributed to in their local policy system.

Recommendations for implementing partners

- *Trust local partners to know their own context. This trust takes different forms in various stages of the project (design, planning, implementation, evaluation).* Implementing partners are rewarded for their "expertise." Awards are often made to those who most effectively make the case for why their expertise is the best fit for providing local solutions. Thus, there is a tendency to assume that implementing partners should have the requisite solutions for local partners. Although this approach may help in winning awards, it is doomed to fail in the implementation of local projects. Even under the best of circumstances, where implementing partners have extensive knowledge of local circumstances, there is no substitute for the lived experience and knowledge of local partners who are embedded in that space and have insights that implementing partners may superficially understand. The PRCI experience and PICA process evaluation findings affirm the importance of co-creating and partnering directly with local and regional partners (Good Practices #1 and #2).

- *Incorporate an organizational life cycle framework (new/birthing, growing, maturing, declining/stagnating) into institutional strengthening programming.* Organizational research shows there are predictable crises determined by an organizations' developmental stage rather than their size, market share, or sophistication. Furthermore, those crises can be mitigated by good leadership and management. If leaders can understand how an organization evolves in time in each stage of the organization's life cycle, they can shape organizational design to more effectively achieve goals. To experiment with this recommendation, center leaders were introduced to this framework in the leadership development program. They found it a meaningful lens to assess their current organizational situation and future desired trajectory. They welcomed further application of this framework to enable more nuanced tailoring of design, implementation, and evaluation of organizational strengthening initiatives. This component of the PICA Process, utilizing an organizational life cycle framework, exemplifies another way to "strengthen diverse capacities through diverse approaches" (Effective Programming Principle #2).

- *Prepare for success.* Implementing partners often spend significant time preparing baseline indicators, programmed interventions and established targets at project inception. Projects using agile management practices and/or human centered approaches take it a step further by preparing for setbacks. However, when projects do well or exceed expectation, there can be a failure to identify new challenges that arise. For example, at the onset of PRCI, EPRC which was already a respected policy center in Uganda. With additional support from PRCI and through their strategic planning

process and successful implementation, EPRC encountered rapid increased demand for its services: the center needed to continue to be responsive and agile while simultaneously maintaining its reputation as a high-quality research institute. Implementing partners must consider how their support can be adapted and leveraged to meet evolving and future needs, not just current ones.

- *Prioritize problem-based, real-world, hands-on technical AND administrative training.* Deliver training in-person where possible, and with longer-term mentorship. Offer trainings in accessible language for local partners (i.e. French for francophone countries). Furthermore, there is a common trend where training for researchers is prioritized, but training for research support and administrative staff is often undervalued. This is detrimental to system impact and sustainable organizational performance, including research quality, because multiple types of capacities are necessary to create an environment that allows institutions to operate efficiently enough to influence policy systems. Such feedback from center personnel affirms the importance to "be mindful of and mitigate the unintended consequences of our support for local capacity strengthening" (Equitable Partnership Principle #6).
- *Value diversity and interconnectedness across all phases of capacity strengthening*. During assessment and planning, identify organizational strengthening activities that are both diverse and synergistic. During the implementation phase, intentionally revisit and leverage the diversity and synergies to strengthen performance. This approach affirms the strategy of "strengthening diverse capacities through diverse approaches" (Effective Programming Principle #2).

Recommendations for policy research centers / local partners
- *Ensure sufficient reflection time and room for adaptation in center action plan to achieve goals:* Setting lofty goals is not difficult but achieving those goals is a challenge. In the process of achieving organizational goals, it is vital to understand the contribution of what might appear to be trivial daily activities to the long-term achievement of goals. Daily practices are essential to changing assumptions and cultures. Having a process in place that evaluates the importance of those daily practices and their contribution to creating a culture of intentionality is key to making positive organizational changes.
- *Take full advantage of the stakeholder network(s) an innovation lab like PRCI can offer.* Along with funding and additional technical resources, there is monumental value in the network of knowledge centers are exposed to. Look to other centers and networks like ANAPRI to help find contextualized and creative options to address challenges. Building and maintaining these relationships can prove critical to sustainable, influential policy centers.
- *Use baseline (and ongoing) assessments as opportunities to view growth potential rather than highlight success.* There is a tendency in many organizations (donors and implementing partners, included!) to highlight what works and avoid looking closely at what is not working, broken, and underperforming. Furthermore, recognize that certain types of training needs or organizational challenges can be difficult to surface due to workplace context, power dynamics, and cultural values. For example, organizational leaders themselves and junior staff can be hesitant to identify the need for leadership development or more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations due to (perceived

or real) risks. Candid organizational assessments are vital for setting goals, making reasonable benchmarks toward achievement of goals, and ensuring "demand-driven capacity strengthening approaches" (Good Practices #5). All parties (donors, implementing partners, and local partners) need to be willing to acknowledge shortcomings if we collectively are to make it into something different by learning together and "practicing mutuality" (Equitable Partnership Principle #7).

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