

- Network-based capacity strengthening
- Collaborating, learning, adapting

USAID Civil Society + Pro Bono Activity:

A case study in locally led development

Between August 2020 and December 2023, USAID/Mexico funded the Civil Society + Pro Bono (CSPPro) Activity, implemented by Appleseed Mexico. The activity's main objective was to increase the legal literacy and compliance of civil society organizations (CSOs) by providing them with essential legal support and by leveraging a pro bono network of legal firms. CSPPro's success was grounded in both USAID and Appleseed's understanding that a robust civil society is instrumental to a thriving democracy. This case study provides an overview of tools utilized by the CSPPro project that are representative of this understanding and helped to enable locally led development. Highlights from this case study include:

- » **Strength in numbers:** collective action is more easily achieved when it is undertaken by a **network of actors**. In this case of CSPPro, that has meant creating a pro bono network of local actors, which has allowed for the multiplication of resources available to support the work of CSOs.
- » Ensuring that the organizations that make up a network that is designed to provide assistance to CSOs are **diverse in their areas of expertise** allows for a more comprehensive level of support. For CSPPro, that has meant developing a network that includes law firms, universities, accountants, and local authorities.
- » Tailoring the processes of **collaboration, learning, and adapting** in such a way that recognizes that local partners' journeys start before and extend beyond the contract period helps ensure a successful working relationship and supports the sustainability of the network.

BACKGROUND: In recent years CSOs in Mexico have found their operations complicated by reductions in funding and increased legal requirements. Thus, equipping them with legal support to better respond to these requirements is of crucial importance to ensure the vibrancy of Mexico's civil society landscape. In August 2020, USAID launched the four-year Civil Society + Pro Bono (CSPro) activity, implemented by Appleseed. CSPro, through the Pro Bono Network convened by Appleseed, strengthened CSOs' legal awareness and provided legal support to CSOs to help them comply with legal requirements and dedicate more time and resources to promoting objectives in target areas. CSPro increased the accessibility of high-quality legal advice to CSOs by eliminating associated costs, improving Appleseed's online platform, and expanding the geographic coverage of the Pro Bono Network to reach more CSOs, including through the pilot of the Nuevo Leon Pro Bono Ecosystem initiative.

The Nuevo Leon Pro Bono Ecosystem aimed to address the local CSO capacity challenges identified by Appleseed in the state of Nuevo Leon by developing a formal network of legal firms, academia, CSOs and government representatives in the state. The advantages of a network-based approach that emphasized diversity to capacity-strengthening under the Nuevo Leon Ecosystem were two-fold: the network provided local CSOs with easy access to a range of legal services that were essential to support their sustainability and it allowed new legal firms in the area to learn from experienced firms to be able to improve their assistance to CSOs. The Nuevo Leon Ecosystem was also designed to support locally-responsive collective action activities through the establishment of local working groups closer to and familiar with the local context and its challenges.



ACHIEVEMENTS: CSPro was highly effective at enabling the expansion and growth of Appleseed Mexico and thus, in turn, of expanding the reach and breadth of legal support to CSOs across the country.¹ Focusing on achievements related to the Nuevo Leon Ecosystem initiative, CSPro helped enhance collaboration among local stakeholders, including CSOs and service providers; cultivated and engaged local expertise to support the unique needs of local CSOs and local firms; and improved access to and sustainability of the pro bono services offered by firms to local CSOs.²

More specifically, by formalizing a network in Nuevo Leon and holding three in-person events, which offered in-person legal advice to CSOs and workshops led by Pro Bono Network members, the Ecosystem was able to reach 319 local CSOs with their assistance. This support has had tangible results, including, for example, the official registration of CSOs such as Contagiamos Arte. Within 20 days of attending one of the three events organized by the

1. An in-depth analysis of Appleseed's achievements as part of the CSPro project is available via the *CSPro Experience – Analysis of General Process and Good Practices* report. The report was developed by USAID's Learning Activity, implemented by LINC. For more information, contact Karely Alvarado: kalvarado@usaid.gov.

2. The *Monterrey, Nuevo Leon Ecosystem Experience: An Innovative Model for Strengthening Local Capacities* brief provides more information about the Ecosystem pilot and its results. For more information, contact Karely Alvarado: kalvarado@usaid.gov.

Nuevo Leon Ecosystem, this CSO had already initiated the registration process to become an officially recognized CSO, allowing them to receive donations as an authorized donee. Accompanied by the legal firm Deforest, they are in the process of preparing all of the necessary documentation, including updating their Articles of Incorporation and Letter of Accreditation to certify the specific activities for which they are seeking authorization.

Additionally, through the Ecosystem, large law firms such as Chevez Zamarripa and Holland & Knight have transferred knowledge, skills, and tools to local firms to improve their assistance for CSOs. Similarly, Appleseed and large firms have supported local universities to raise awareness of the values of pro bono services. As a result, local network members are gaining experience and expertise in supporting local CSOs. The CSOs that participated in the events feel confident in the advice and support that they receive, thus increasing their trust in local leaders. This has been particularly valuable for small CSOs, as they receive access to high-quality professional services that they typically could not afford.

Finally, the collective action efforts undertaken by local stakeholders prior to and after joining the Ecosystem have contributed to the enactment of a new law in Nuevo Leon that promotes CSO activities. In June 2022, the “Law for the Promotion of Organized Civil Society of Nuevo Leon” was enacted. This was made possible by close collaboration between civil society and local authorities. The law defines the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the social sector, including government authorities, CSOs or groups not currently registered as legal entities, and other actors, providing citizens a pathway to organize around social causes and allowing state and municipal authorities to encourage more civil society participation.

“The event provided us with a clear roadmap for registering our CSO. At each booth, they walked us through the specific steps to address various issues. We’re thrilled ... we were unaware such a resource existed, and it’s free!”

-Contagiemos Arte staff member



ENTRY POINTS FOR PROGRAMMING THAT SUPPORTS LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

NETWORK-BASED CAPACITY STRENGTHENING



Appleseed Mexico is not new to the business of network-building. In fact, it is part of a broader network of 18 justice centers in North America, working to reduce poverty, combat discrimination, and advance the rule of law. In terms of their Mexico-based work, Appleseed has developed a network of legal firms to provide pro bono support to CSOs across Mexico, though, prior to CSPPro, network membership was highly concentrated in Mexico City. USAID's support to Appleseed as part of the CSPPro project focused on the expansion of Appleseed's network in terms of size, geographic reach, and diversity. This effort was driven by the understanding that change is more robust and sustainable when it is achieved through collective action: "When we started working on expanding the Pro Bono work in Nuevo Leon, we found that there were a lot of organizations working in the same space, but that they weren't communicating [...] What we did was bring them all together to make their ideas stronger and have a greater impact" (Appleseed

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: NETWORK-BASED CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

- A sustainable local network requires well defined roles and processes with a central body that keeps the network on track.
- Diversity in a network supports a more nuanced understanding of the issues on the ground that network members can work together on to address. It can also allow for a more comprehensive level of capacity strengthening between partners and in service of any stakeholders the network may be organized to assist.
- Aim to develop a network composed of members who show a high level of commitment and cooperation to provide sustained support. If an actor considered for membership is not in a position to commit fully when initially approached, revisit the possibility of their membership at a later date when their situation may have changed.



“Networks, like the ecosystem that we have developed in Nuevo Leon [state in Mexico], is the way that you can connect the social sector, private sector, and government. Having all the stakeholders present is so important when you build a network, or work on a collective effort.”

-Appleseed staff member

staff member). In addition, pursuing a more diverse network that extends beyond legal firms to include universities, accountants, and local authorities, has helped the Ecosystem to gain momentum, supporting sustainability. Likewise, Appleseed has been able to provide a more comprehensive level of support to local CSOs and gained a more nuanced understanding of the issues on the ground that the network members can work together to address.

Additionally, the CSPro project has been instrumental in helping Appleseed formalize its internal processes and strengthen its monitoring practices. This gains in efficacy supported by these improvements are particularly important for Appleseed’s role as a network convener. As explained by Appleseed, a sustainable network requires a strong nucleus that takes on a project management role on an ongoing basis, ensuring that timelines are respected, and objectives are met.

Other elements Appleseed cites as key to a strong and lasting network include:

- A well-defined long-term goal for what the network hopes to achieve.
- A map of potential networks members. The members need a clear understanding of how they can contribute to the network with their expertise and some of their own resources. Once partners formally become members of the network, their roles in the network should be clearly defined.
- Guiding documents, such as memorandums of understanding, to formalize and outline the expectations associated with collaborative efforts. These documents should specify both the expected

services provided and benefits received as part of the partnership.

- A high level of commitment and cooperation from network members, ensuring they can provide sustained support. If an organization initially identified as a potential partner lacks excitement about the project or is not in a position to commit fully, it is important to feel comfortable changing directions.
- A network identity that is independent of that of the convener. Wins achieved as result of the network should be understood as a collaborative effort with no entity, including the convener, taking sole credit for it.

COLLABORATING, LEARNING, ADAPTING



TIPS FOR SUCCESS: COLLABORATING, LEARNING, ADAPTING

- Create an ecosystem of learning that will help strengthen partners’ capacity to respond to their country’s development challenges beyond the scope of the project.
- Active listening, both through formal channels (like co-creation and pause and reflect sessions) and informal channels is key to a truly collaborative relationships with local partners.

The culture of learning that permeates the USAID/Mexico Mission creates an incubator-like environment where local partners are supported as they work to rise to the challenges that they are aiming to address. This culture is rooted in the understanding by USAID/Mexico staff that work with local actors should be understood as true partnerships that are part of a greater journey that extends before and beyond the life of the contract. Put otherwise, USAID's work should not just be about achieving specific programmatic objectives, rather, it should also be about ensuring that local stakeholders, whether CSOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists, government actors, or other, be robust, resilient, and effective in meeting Mexico's development challenges.

USAID/Mexico's culture of learning starts with an emphasis on listening. This means first and foremost listening to partners and recognizing their experience and expertise. This is done through formal channels like co-creation during the activity design stage, or through pause and reflect sessions intermittent throughout activity implementation. Additionally, this is done informally during everyday interactions, helping to create an environment where partners can feel comfortable with expressing their ideas, supporting a more bottom-up approach to programming. This also means that partners are less shy about asking for help when they need support or training related to financial reporting, monitoring, or other essential aspects of USAID programming. For example, when CPro began implementation, Appleseed turned to USAID for support on strengthening the program's indicators. At that time, USAID/Mexico had a monitoring and learning platform in place where partners could access support. Through this platform, Appleseed

"Every time that we have a question – if it is related to the contract, if it is related to financial management, if it is about how to write our annual reports correctly – our AOR has been very helpful."

-Appleseed staff member

was able to receive the guidance they needed to strengthen CPro's indicators. Appleseed also requested assistance with revising a budget modification. In response, the USAID Financial team conducted several virtual and face-to-face sessions to guide and mentor Appleseed through this process. In addition, the Office of Contracts and Agreements conducted sessions with Appleseed to support them as they implemented the required modifications.

Importantly, Appleseed has noted that this collaborative and open relationship has been much easier since becoming a direct partner of USAID's. Appleseed previously served as a sub-partner under a prior USAID activity. While Appleseed described this relationship as constructive, they emphasized that being a direct partner with USAID has made a big difference. Namely, participating in a co-creation session and being in direct contact with USAID allowed Appleseed to be totally clear on what USAID's expectations were of them and to respond to these expectations accordingly, supporting the success of the project. Additionally, it meant that Appleseed was more easily able to ask questions and request assistance, to which Appleseed attests to USAID always responding to with openness and flexibility.

Next, the Mission also complements its culture of learning with the use of systems-level thinking, that is, the understanding that local partners are part of a wider system extending well-beyond a singular USAID-funded program, and their impact on Mexico's development outcomes depends on their being able to operate effectively within this system. With this in mind, the Mission organizes monthly partner peer-learning meetings focused on a specific topic previously identified by partners as something they would like to learn more about that may or may not be pertinent to their USAID-funded activity. (e.g., gender integration, private sector engagement, or locally led development). These sessions generally take the form of one partner showcasing their work followed by a group discussion during which other partners can share their experiences and ask questions. USAID/Mexico has also provided follow-up trainings to partners interested in learning more about specific topics covered in the trainings. For example, USAID provided a training on network

analysis to a partner who expressed interest in the topic following a meeting focused on locally led development, which highlighted network analysis as a useful indicator. To ensure that partners are benefiting from these sessions, the Mission recently launched an indicator that monitors whether partners mention instituting a change as a result of these sessions (and any follow up support), and whether they have indeed instituted said change after a period of six months.

Also indicative of this culture of learning combined with systems level thinking is the Mission's use of the USAID Monitoring and Evaluation Support of Adaptation (MESA) activity. This mechanism allows USAID Missions to request support in the conduction of a study, or other monitoring and evaluation-related activities. While USAID/Mexico utilizes this mechanism to support their own learning, they work closely with partners to understand how studies might best be framed to meet their needs beyond the scope of the contract. Thus, in the case of CPro, USAID/Mexico utilized the MESA mechanism

to commission a study that aimed to both support USAID learning, including in its efforts to better understand opportunities for similar support in the future and to improve its institutional memory for local organization capacity strengthening, and Appleseed learning, including in relation to potential opportunities to adapt their processes and gain specific information to serve as a foundation for their business plan and sustainability efforts.

“We’ve been connected with other USAID programs—like MESA that helped us with the case study—and also, we have received a lot of training and capacity building, which has been very helpful for us. I can tell you that Appleseed is not the same before and after USAID. Our capacity has really increased a lot over the years that we’ve been collaborating.”

-Appleseed staff member

