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Open government and US development co-operation in Colombia: Lessons for locally led development

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Abstract

Motivation: "Localization"—direct donor support for national organizations in aid recipient countries—has become a top priority for international development. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) pledged to raise the proportion of direct funding to national organizations to 25% and for 50% of funding to involve "locally led" input. Independently, USAID commits to proactive disclosure of project information. This study analyses sectoral priorities, access to project data, and localization trends to inform policy discussion about how USAID can reach its twin localization goals, with a focus on Colombia, the largest US aid recipient in Latin America.

Purpose: An open government perspective can shed light on whether and how development agencies are making progress towards localization. Moreover, user-centred information disclosure by donors is necessary to inform locally led development. The goals of this study are to document USAID's sectoral funding priorities, gaps in data disclosure, implementation actions, and direct local funding percentages to make patterns more visible to stakeholders. We ask: What are the strengths and limitations of public disclosure of data concerning US aid in Colombia?

Approach and methods: This analysis uses open-source data review methods to bring together different sources of publicly available data. These methods include triangulating government data disbursed across multiple sites, recoding government data to make trends visible, and identifying barriers to data access.

Findings: Public data indicate that US funding for peace-related projects increased in the years following Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord, though the security share of total US aid remains high. Funding trends demonstrate that USAID is far behind its localization goals in Colombia, though absolute funding totals to local organizations are increasing. Finally, publicly available project data are not user-centred, require technical acumen to access, and are fragmented across multiple sites.

Policy implications: User-centred disclosures are key to locally led development to ensure informed participation and accountability to stakeholders.

KEYWORDS
Colombia, development co-operation, localization, locally led, open government, USAID

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the field of international development co-operation, the goal of "localization" is increasingly recognized as a major priority. In practice, the term has different meanings for different actors. For USAID, "localization" signifies direct funding for national organizations in recipient countries, which is expected to strengthen local institutions (USAID, 2023a, 2023c).[1] The related term "locally led" development is an even more ambitious goal, involving donor power sharing to set agendas and includes, but is not limited to, the direct funding of in-country organizations (USAID, 2023b; Humentum, 2024). For USAID, the terms localization and locally led have distinct yet complementary meanings, while in the broader international development field the two terms are widely used as synonyms.

Donors and practitioners across the globe acknowledge that this turn to the "local" represents a paradigm shift, one that comes with challenges concerning oversight and institutional capacity (Baguios et al., 2021; Firchow & Wingender, 2023; Ingram, 2022; Venton & Pongracz, 2021; Vij, 2023). In 2021, the new leadership of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) impressed counterparts and observers with a pair of very ambitious goals—for direct funding for "local" organizations to reach 25% of its programme spending by 2025, and for 50% of its funding to be "locally led" by 2030.

This study's point of departure is that proactive public disclosure of user-centred USAID project information and sectoral trends is key if locally led development is to involve power sharing. In addition, open government tools can shed light on whether and how development agencies are making progress towards localization. However, development policy discussions have yet to bring open government and localization agendas together.

As the Open Government Partnership suggests, open government is essential for enhancing local agency, allowing civil society organizations to engage in informed participation, and to improve their capacity to manage larger amounts of funding (Hasan, 2023; Powell & Onigbinde, 2023). Yet, local organizations have identified a lack of relevant resources to develop competitive bids and unresponsiveness from USAID as challenges to realizing full participation in the localization agenda (USAID, 2023d). As proposed by a former USAID Chief of Staff, a "radical approach to transparency" could promote greater accountability to local stakeholders by reducing information asymmetry around a range of actions—from agenda setting to procurement to project assessment (Steiger, 2023).

This study takes stock of public disclosure of USAID project information by bringing together different, often disconnected, sources of publicly available data on US foreign assistance.[2] This exercise allows stakeholders to see both project specifics and broader donor funding patterns, enabling more informed participation by national and local stakeholders in the policy process. More user-centred public access to information about the flow of development aid allows stakeholders to follow the money, spotlight progress, and identify bottlenecks. Data collation and visualizations that provide information on progress towards localization goals, such as involved partners and total project funding, can make complex processes more legible for interested parties. Yet, key indicators and simple visualizations are frequently missing from official government sources. For locally led development to be truly collaborative, stakeholders in aid recipient countries need more user-centred information about where aid funding goes and how project decisions are made. In addition, third-party analysis of official public data can also identify gaps in official data, which can show where additional, independent, field-based investigation is

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[1]Scholars of international relations have advanced other conceptions of "localization," focused primarily on how aid-receiving governments appropriate and transform security agendas. Acharya (2004) developed the idea of *constitutive localization*, "a complex process and outcome" where local actors combine transnational norms with local beliefs and practices (2004, pp. 241, 252). Regilme (2018) advanced the concept of *strategic localization*, whereby states receiving foreign assistance for security goals exert agency by reinterpreting the donor state's "political discourses and preferences" in a process aimed at enhancing domestic legitimacy (2018, p. 346; 2021, pp. 35–36). This insight raises the empirical question of where and how development aid is driven by security agendas, which is partly addressed by this study's application of open government tools to aid that is officially categorized as peace-related, as well as the concerns raised by the persistent opacity of security funding.

[2]For institutional context, see Morgenstern and Brown (2022) for a detailed overview of US foreign assistance, including definitions of funding types and goals, oversight of aid, and which agencies manage and fund foreign aid.

warranted (Unlock Aid, n.d.). Without a user-centred approach to proactive disclosure of information about aid flows, there is a risk that official consultations will become box-ticking exercises, lacking the relevant information to make them usable by civil society and others.

The application of an open government perspective to US foreign aid is especially significant due to the historical legacy of the US government's role in Latin America. Analysis of USAID's current policy focus on localization and locally led development needs to take into account the long-standing legacy of geopolitics (Johnston & Lorentzen, 2022; Richardson, 1997; Schoultz, 2018; Taffet, 2007). During the Cold War, well-documented US government interventions to overthrow democratically elected governments, as in Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1970 and 1973), combined both overt and covert actions, which cast a long shadow over development and humanitarian efforts. In the 1960s, the US government's Alliance for Progress also combined political and economic support for moderate social and political reform with targeted efforts to weaken more radical challenges to dominant elites (Levinson & de Onís, 1970; Page, 1972). During the 1980s, critics of the US government's military and political intervention in Central America exposed multiple dimensions of its accompanying "soft war"—the use of humanitarian and development aid for counterinsurgency goals (Barry & Preusch, 1988). At the turn of the 21st century, the US counter-narcotic and, soon after, counter-terrorism strategies in the Americas channelled funding to Colombian security forces that committed widespread human rights violations against civilian populations.[3]

Independent analysts have also documented the winners and losers in terms of US aid that is categorized as humanitarian (Garst & Barry, 1990). For example, "food aid" from the US government is officially called "humanitarian," but that policy has long been influenced by domestic economic interests (such as commercial farmers and the shipping industry), while undermining food production in receiving countries. In this geopolitical context, official descriptions of the goals and impacts of US government development aid cannot be taken at face value.

Colombia is relevant not only because it is the largest recipient of US aid in Latin America, but also because the pattern of US aid there has shifted dramatically over the past two decades from a primarily military and police focus to an increased emphasis on development and the implementation of Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord (Kaplan & Young, 2019). When US bilateral aid boomed during Plan Colombia in 2000, humanitarian and development aid was subordinated to security agendas. Once US government policy shifted to supporting the peace process, the relationship between bilateral development and security funding became an open question (not only their relative amounts). One indicator that development aid was no longer associated with counter-insurgency is that human rights organizations invested substantial political capital to press the US Congress to allocate government funding for peace-related agendas (e.g., Latin America Working Group, 2023). Yet, US history suggests that independent follow-the-money analysis is needed to determine where the funds go in practice. The analysis that follows identifies both notable areas of open government progress and how fragmented and opaque official data limit user-centred access to relevant information about US government funding priorities and trends.

This study's open government perspective sheds light on the unevenness of the localization process. Section 2 provides an international overview of open government and development aid. Section 3 details the methods used in the study. The findings focus on USAID's disclosure of its Colombia project information through an analysis of changing sectoral priorities (Section 4), gaps in public data access (Section 5), and current progress in direct local funding (Section 6). The conclusion in Section 7 stresses the importance of open government as a tool to help meet both localization and locally led development goals.

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[3]For documentation of human rights abuses in Colombia connected to US foreign assistance, see Avilés (2008); Cendales et al. (2019); Fajardo-Heyward (2015); Human Rights Watch (2015); Isacson (2019); Lindsay-Poland (2018); Regilme (2018, 2020); Rosen (2014); Tate (2015); Tickner (2014, p. 6).
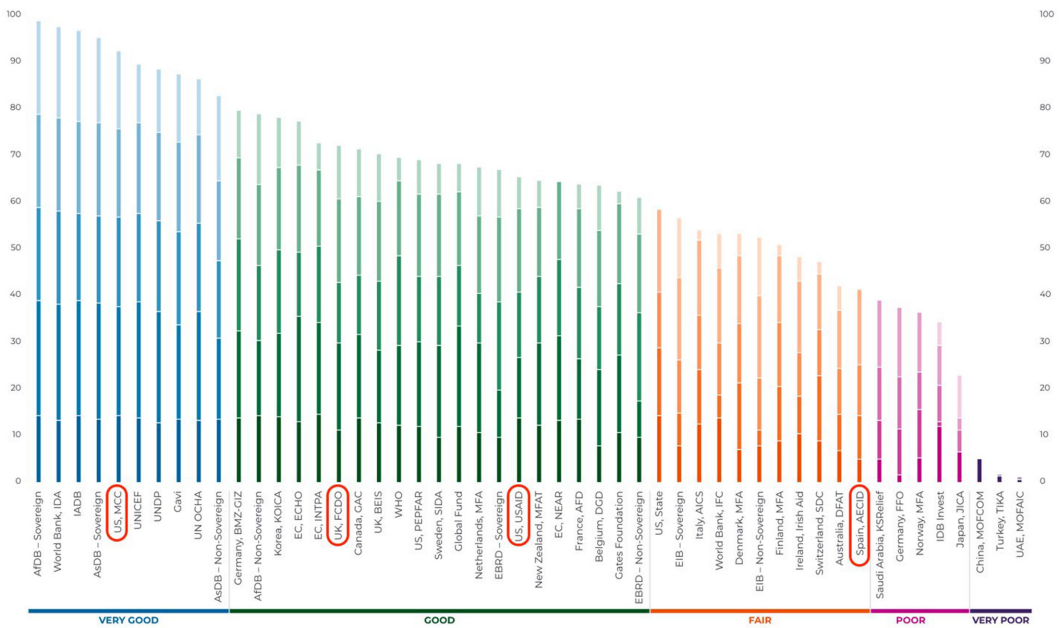
FIGURE 1 Aid Transparency Index 2022: Overall Scores and Ranking.
Source: Tilley (2022, p. 6).

2 | AID TRANSPARENCY

Open government initiatives are based on the premise that improved access to information, citizen engagement, and public oversight can improve governance outcomes (Ornelas et al., 2022). Yet the links in the causal chain between specific transparency measures and tangible changes in institutional performance are often assumed rather than spelled out (Fox, 2007; Peixoto, 2012). This holds for the application of open government to international development aid, as in other areas of governance (McGee, 2013). One of the many reasons for the ambiguous relationship between transparency and institutional change—including accountability—is that open government can take many forms, some more user-centred than others (see, e.g., Fung et al., 2007).[4]

In the case of aid transparency initiatives, there is a major difference between public disclosure designed for "upwards accountability" (to donor governments, their legislatures, and ultimately taxpayers) and for "downwards accountability" (to recipient governments, affected citizens, and ostensible beneficiaries). This distinction is critical—open government transparency initiatives may be limited to satisfying technical reporting requirements, while clear, timely information relevant to non-specialist stakeholder decision-making remains largely inaccessible or inscrutable (Fung et al., 2007).

In the field of international development finance, the World Bank pioneered systemic public information disclosure reforms, in direct response to pressure from transnational civil society advocacy campaigns that challenged the high social and environmental costs of many of its projects (Fox & Brown, 1998). Bilateral development agencies eventually followed, to varying degrees (see Figure 1). The multistakeholder International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) was launched in 2008 to collate and standardize development and humanitarian aid data.[5] The IATI Standard for data reporting, first agreed upon in 2011, requires that organizations provide consis-

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[4]On the distinction between transparency and right to know, and for further discussion of different understandings of related concepts to "upwards" and "downwards" accountability, see Fox (2022).

[5]IATI was part of a wave of international multistakeholder initiatives focused on governance. For a comparison, see Brockmyer and Fox (2015).
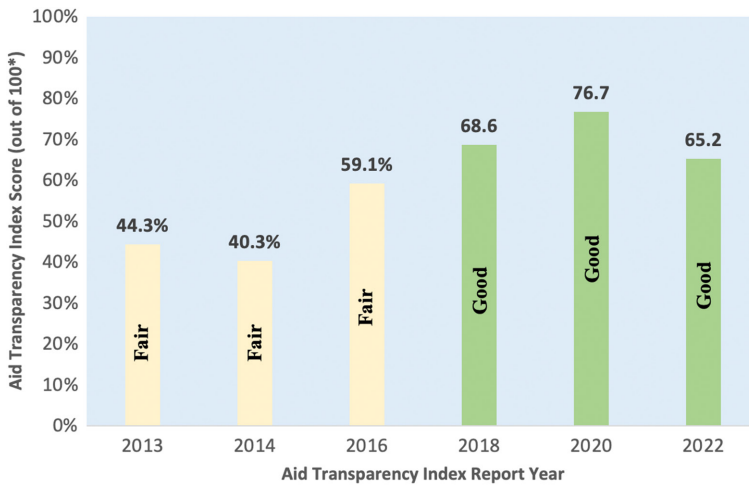
FIGURE 2 USAID Aid Transparency Index Scores: 2013–2022.
Source: Publish What You Fund (n.d.-b). Note*: PWYF updated the Aid Transparency Index methodology between 2018 and 2020, which accounts for the two number types on the Y-axis.

tent aid information that can "be easily exchanged, compared and combined" with other sources (IATI, n.d.-b). More than 1,500 organizations have published data to IATI, including the world's largest government aid agencies and international donor organizations. IATI and outside observers regard open access to aid data as key for governments in aid-receiving countries to plan and co-ordinate budgets effectively.

The global open government push has produced measurable progress towards more proactive disclosure of information about the budget priorities of international organizations and government agencies. One key theory of change—as in the case of the Open Government Partnership—is the idea of a "race to the top." In this view, if organizations are publicly compared and ranked together with their peers in their progress towards goals widely seen as laudable, laggards will make efforts to catch up, while leaders will look over their shoulders to maintain their lead. This is the approach behind the Aid Transparency Index, a ranking system that was launched during the same wave of open government reform as IATI.

The Aid Transparency Index is produced by the watchdog group Publish What You Fund (PWYF), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) founded in 2008 with the goal of ensuring 'that all aid and development data is transparent and available, usable and used' (Publish What You Fund, n.d.-a). The Aid Transparency Index primarily uses the standardized IATI data to measure different organizations and agencies' commitment to transparency goals established at the 2011 Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness (Tilley, 2022, p. 7). The seven Aid Transparency Index reports published between 2013 and 2022 allow comparative assessments of reporting practices both within and between countries and organizations. USAID's disclosure practices, for example, are middling compared to other bilateral agencies (PWYF, 2022). In 2022, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) was ranked at the higher end of "good,"[6] while Spain's Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID) was ranked as "fair," slightly above the demarcation of "poor" (Tilley, 2022) (see Figure 1).[7]

The improvement in USAID performance appears to have been driven by a race to the top, improving from "fair" to "good" on the Aid Transparency Index between 2016 and 2018 (see Figure 2). Honig and Weaver (2019)

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[6]For analysis of the FCDO's increasing shares of bilateral funding being spent within the UK, despite public commitments to supporting locally led development, see Hughes and Mitchell (2024).

[7]For other international aid transparency initiatives, see, among others, Development Initiatives (n.d.) and AidData (n.d.). For data on UK Aid, see the FCDO's Development Tracker (FCDO, n.d.), plus an evaluation of its public disclosure (ICAI, 2022). For Sweden, see Openaid (n.d.).

interviewed informants who credited the high levels of public disclosure of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) as driving improved USAID efforts to comply with IATI standards starting around 2013 (Honig & Weaver, 2019, p. 604). As part of its open government push, USAID began to improve its compliance with IATI, independently publishing data to IATI starting in April 2017 (IATI, 2017; USAID, 2016).[8] USAID's progress on transparency has been neither linear nor complete. Between 2020 and 2022, USAID's transparency ratings *fell* in both absolute and relative terms on the index. According to PWYF, USAID's rating regressed in 2022 as the result of lower performance across all five components of its Aid Transparency Index (PWYF, 2020, 2022).

The Aid Transparency Index is composed of multiple indicators, with some more relevant to locally led development than others. USAID receives high scores for the Aid Transparency Index category of "Joining-up development data," a technical indicator mainly of interest to global data analysts. In contrast, the Aid Transparency Index indicators show that USAID consistently falls short in publishing categories of information that are of greatest interest to in-country policy analysts and partners, such as budgets for country-level projects and key project-level performance-related documents (baseline, mid-project and final assessment reports and evaluations). When USAID publishes project implementation documents, they include project details and outcomes, though they rarely disclose information on their budget amounts and spending patterns and tend not to be in national languages. USAID's project reports and evaluations, when available, are also published on websites unlinked to USAID's online project descriptions. USAID's published project data also include little subnational information, which also contributed to the 2022 drop in Aid Transparency Index ratings (PWYF, 2022).

USAID's public disclosure of project data does not prioritize enabling stakeholders to follow the money. Tracing disbursed funds to specific contracts, organizations, activities, and goals often requires complex cross-referencing of separate data sources. For example, in 2018, an Oxfam "follow-the-money" report was able to trace only 7% of USAID funding that had arrived in Ghana using IATI data (Parrish et al., 2018a, 2018b). From a user-centred perspective, large contracts appear extremely opaque, without disclosure of spending patterns within them. The US government mandated contractors to publish their subaward spending data on a separate government-wide website, called USAspending.gov (US Department of the Treasury, n.d.; Zients, 2010). Yet, compliance with these reporting requirements is patchy at best across the US government, and oversight of mandated disclosure is lacking (US GAO, 2023). Public reporting on USAID contracts is no exception. Data quality and transparency issues limit the capacity for independent assessment of USAID progress on localization goals, requiring analysts to reconstruct and estimate figures (Adomako & Cohen, 2023; Tilley & Jenkins, 2023).

2.1 | Localization of aid: USAID initiatives

During the same wave of international transparency initiatives that included IATI and the Open Government Partnership, USAID initiated a reform agenda called USAID Forward in 2010, with a focus on strengthening local partners through capacity building, joint programme monitoring, and trainings on how to better work with USAID (USAID, n.d.-b). After modest progress towards an ambitious target of 30% local funding, the policy reverted after the 2016 election. International NGOs continued to advocate for localization (Ahmad & Wainer, 2016). That agenda gained renewed momentum at USAID with the new targets announced in November 2021 (Power, 2021).

USAID's new goals have two distinct components—increasing the share of direct funding to local organizations and increasing the share of funds to practices considered "locally led." So far, independent research on USAID

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[8]By comparison, MCC began independently publishing to IATI in February 2018, the UK's FCDO began in August 2020, and the US State Department in January 2023.

TABLE 1 USAID Indicators of "Good Practices" for Locally Led Programmes.

Category	Indicator	Authors' assessments of power-sharing implied by the indicator
Direct Local Funding	1. Partnering directly with local or regional partners	Low
Creating Effective Local Partnerships	2. Co-creating with local or regional partners	High
	3. Making descriptive, not prescriptive awards to local and/or regional partners	Medium
	4. Helping local and regional partners achieve full cost recovery	Low
Recognizing, and Investing in Local Capacity	5. Using demand driven capacity strengthening approaches	Medium
	6. Advancing local and regional actors' readiness to work directly with USAID	Low
	7. Measuring programmatic success using locally defined measures	Medium
	8. Making local subawards and subcontracts	Low
	9. Including the transition award process in prime assistance awards	Low
	10. Conducting evaluations with local evaluation experts	Low
Engaging Communities Directly	11. Conducting listening tours to inform activity design	Medium
	12. Co-creating with stakeholders, including local communities	High
	13. Institutionalizing feedback and accountability with local communities	High
	14. Implementing participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning	High

Source: The table's categories and indicators are as set out by USAID (2023b, p. 4).

Author coding: Rated "High" when there is a substantial, operationalized process of co-creation or participation explicated in the indicator; rated "Medium" when local partners are consulted as part of a hierarchical process; rated "Low" when local partners are included in or trained to navigate hierarchical processes.

localization trends has focused on its direct funding (Adomako & Cohen, 2023; Tilley & Jenkins, 2023). USAID progress towards the broader process of locally led development has yet to garner much empirical or analytical attention (Ainsworth, 2023; Feit, 2023). This analysis assesses USAID's direct funding trends, while also taking stock of its sectoral priorities and public access to project data that would be necessary for informed participation in locally led development.

Localization and locally led development can sound like synonyms, yet they sometimes involve different actors with different agendas. Experienced observers note that direct USAID funding implies a high degree of upward accountability to the US government that may be in tension with leadership accountability to broad social constituencies (Levine, 2023; Feit, 2023). Direct funding is only an option for "implementing partners" with substantial administrative capacity, while, in principle, the goal of local leadership could involve a much more diverse range of stakeholders, including social and civic organizations that represent broad-based constituencies.[9] Indeed, the goal of being locally led would be more robust if it included consultations and power sharing with social and civic organizations that are *not* dependent on USAID funding. Yet, as noted in Table 1, only four of USAID's 14 operational criteria for defining locally led involve robust power sharing with independent voices (including monitoring and evaluation).

One of the key obstacles to USAID Forward's first localization effort involved addressing its own institutional constraints, notably its procurement policies and staffing. In March 2023, USAID announced a new Acquisition

[9]Note that USAID's standard term "implementing partner" implies that the role of local organizations is to carry out USAID's agenda, which is in tension with the new goal of power-sharing.
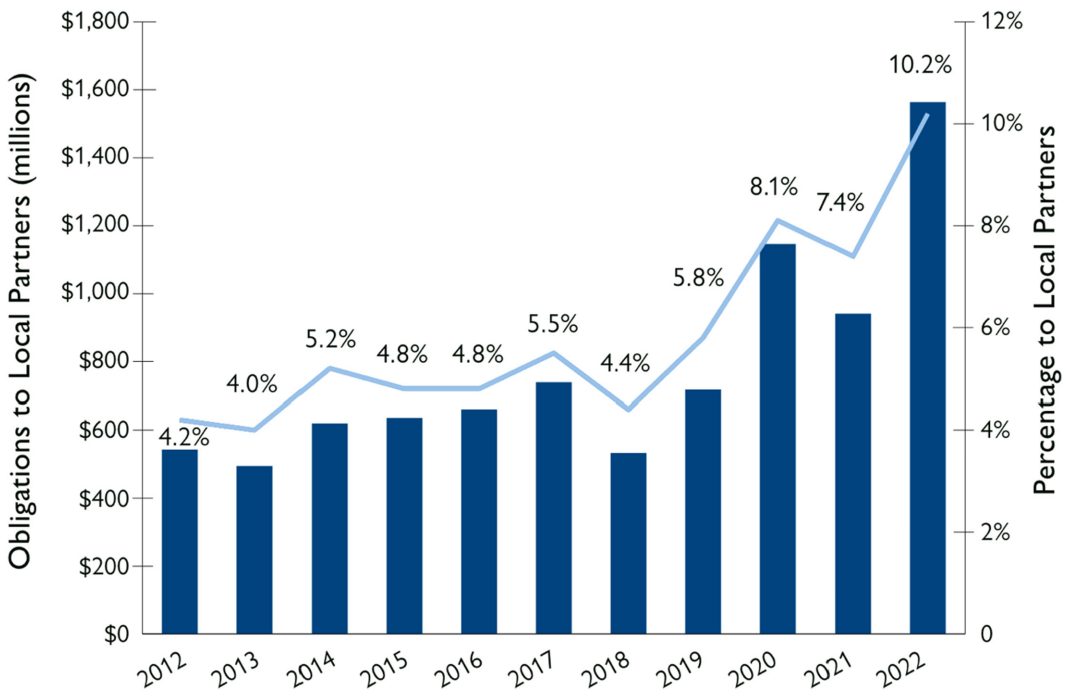
FIGURE 3 USAID Direct Local Funding Over Time, Funding Commitments, and Percentage.
Source: USAID (2023c, p. 6).

and Assistance Strategy to enable greater responsiveness, and in April 2023, the agency provided key performance indicators and definitions for direct local funding (USAID, 2023a, 2023e). National organizations in aid-receiving countries also experience these institutional constraints, such as difficulty navigating USAID's complex application processes and data management systems, as well as limited operational capacity to meet USAID's elaborate accounting and reporting requirements (Castillo Castillo et al., 2023; USAID, 2023d).

In June 2023, USAID published its first update on localization, acknowledging slow progress towards its own goals, with only 10.2% of its total funding commitment going directly to national organizations in 2022 (USAID, 2023c) (see Figure 3). This progress report also revealed stark differences in the countries and sectors that received the largest direct local shares of funding. African countries averaged a 23.8% direct local funding share in 2022, while Latin America and the Caribbean was far behind at 13.2% (down from 14% the year before). In some countries, the proportion of local funding went down rather than up between 2021 and 2022 (e.g., Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines). Progress towards localization also varied significantly across sectors. USAID funding for health, its largest sector, had a 20% share of total funding commitments going to local organizations, while local organizations received around 6% of aid in the sectors called "Peace & Security" and "Democracy, Human Rights, & Governance" (USAID, 2023c, p. 7).

Technical issues influence how to measure localization trends, which involves specifying precisely "what counts" as a local partner. The convention for calculating localization shares of donor funding is to divide the total amount of direct funding to national partners (numerator) by a specified set of total project funds for a given year (denominator). One complication of this metric is that different official organizations and NGOs use different definitions of "local" (Saldinger, 2022). These differences are not merely academic, as changing the methodology can result in millions of dollars and multiple percentage points of difference in the final funding figures. The NGOs Oxfam and PWYF make a case for excluding branches of international entities in the numerator to avoid an inflated number that would suggest that all included recipients are locally grounded organizations (Hirschfeld, 2024;

Tilley & Jenkins, 2023). Indeed, the meaning of the concept of "local" is inherently relative, depending on the positionality of the user (Fox, 2022, p. 78).

After its early emphasis on direct funding, USAID published highly detailed information about the agency's 14 locally led programme indicators, or "good practices" that will guide its own evaluations (see Table 1). USAID will consider a programme locally led if it "demonstrate[s] the use of" two of the 14 indicators in two of the four different categories in a fiscal year (USAID, 2023b, p. 2–4). In practice, this is a low bar when contractor subawards to national organizations or hiring individual local evaluators (currently common practices) would each satisfy half of the locally led requirement (see Cardin, 2024). Ultimately, ensuring locally led development in practice requires hitting more than two of these important benchmarks, as well as providing timely public information on progress.

Notably, USAID's guidance for its staff makes few references to user-centred open government measures that would contribute to the locally led agenda or informed participation of local constituencies. While there is wide variation in actual power sharing among the 14 practices (see Table 1), four of the indicators specify tangible steps towards sharing power with local organizations (only one of them explicitly references power sharing). The most ambitious are the practices of "institutionalizing feedback and accountability with local communities" and "implementing participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning" as part of USAID's effort to directly engage communities.[10] Moreover, even the most participatory elements of the operational guidance are implicitly limited to exclusively micro-level community engagement regarding project implementation details, without encouraging the inclusion of scaled-up social and civic organizations that would have both the independent views and bargaining power needed for power sharing over broader agenda setting.

3 | METHODS: OPEN GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE ON US FOREIGN ASSISTANCE DATA

This study uses a combination of open-source data collection and coding methods to analyse three issues that contribute to understanding USAID's progress towards locally led development in Colombia: (1) Making sectoral priorities in USAID Colombia's programme more visible by recoding ForeignAssistance.gov data[11]; (2) Assessing gaps in public disclosure of USAID's Colombia project information by triangulating data on the Colombia country mission website[12] with relevant reports and evaluations on the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse,[13] and subaward data reported on USAspending.gov (US Department of the Treasury, n.d.); and (3) Enumerating USAID's direct local funding in Colombia by analysing expenditure trends between 2012 and 2022, applying PWYF's direct local funding calculation methods to IATI data.

For each of these issues, we developed replicable search terms, diagrammed data access pathways, and created indicators to set benchmarks for basic data about USAID projects (e.g., the names of implementing organizations, total project budgets). Two of our methods, recoding official project labels for all agencies in 2021 and recoding USAID project objectives between 2012 and 2022, required more robust methodological processes (see Hallock, 2024). We followed PWYF's guidance on calculating direct local funding using both PWYF's narrower definition of "local" as well as the estimate of how USAID calculates direct local funding (Tilley & Jenkins, 2023).

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[10]The most significant possible open government measure involves institutionalizing feedback to communities, which includes "clos[ing] the loop: update actors who are directly and indirectly affected about actions USAID and the Implementing Partner(s) have made in response to information provided" (USAID, 2023b, p. 36).

[11]This data analysis used the official source ForeignAssistance.gov (n.d. -a), the flagship US government site created to comply with the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 (FATAA). The site makes data downloads available in several data formats with highly customizable filters. It offers a legible, user-centred interface, where interactive maps and country profiles provide top-line figures (though few project specifics).

[12]Each USAID mission has a country-specific site with information about projects and opportunities for collaboration. A preliminary review of USAID country pages shows a high degree of variation in data quality across different missions.

[13]The Development Experience Clearinghouse is the primary repository for "USAID-funded technical and project materials," meaning it houses implementation reports, evaluations, and other pertinent documents for USAID projects (USAID Data Services, n.d.).

While a large quantity of data is publicly available on US foreign assistance to Colombia, it is fragmented across multiple unlinked sites, and access requires technical proficiency and sometimes prior knowledge of where to look.[14] Methodological challenges involved not only the accessibility of data but also ambiguity in how to interpret technical terminology.[15] At times, we found that the same USAID project could be listed under different names across official government sites, requiring intensive cross-referencing to ensure that the same project is under review.[16] Gaps and data inconsistencies are highlighted in our analysis of the findings for each of the three issues.

4 | TRENDS IN US FOREIGN ASSISTANCE TO COLOMBIA

After the end of the Cold War, starting in 2000, the USD 1.3 billion Plan Colombia continued the pattern in which geopolitical priorities dominated official development aid, combining the "war on drugs" with counterinsurgency (Angelo, 2024; Avilés, 2008; Bartilow, 2019; Lindsay-Poland, 2018).[17] This bipartisan US policy combined assistance to the military and the police with economic development and humanitarian aid. Colombia's military and police collaborated with paramilitary forces in intensive, well-documented, large-scale repression and forced displacement of civilians. Among the gravest human rights abuses of the period, the "false positives" scandal revealed a systemic pattern in which the Colombian military murdered thousands of civilians, dressing them in guerrilla fatigues to fake reports of combat success (Evans, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2015). Plan Colombia even budgeted for humanitarian aid for civilians expected to be displaced by the same policy (Lindsay-Poland, 2018). In the name of local economic development, USAID funds reached paramilitary front groups—such as oil palm companies associated with forced displacement of smallholders (Ballvé, 2009, 2020). This legacy underscores the relevance of raising open government standards to enable independent monitoring of international aid flows—ideally in real time, not only retrospectively.

Over two decades, US aid flows have prioritized military and police support over broader development funding at a nearly 2 to 1 ratio (see Figure 4). Isacson, an analyst with the independent human rights organization Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), has painstakingly constructed estimates of US military and police funding to Colombia from multiple sources due to lack of funding transparency (WOLA, 2023).[18] The US government continues to regard Colombia as a critical strategic partner for security and trade in the western hemisphere (Atlantic Council, 2019; Biden & Petro, 2023).

The mix of US military and police funding versus economic and institutional aid has shifted significantly over time, but even under the Biden administration the security share requested was almost half of the total. Military and police funding hit a 16-year low of USD 174 million in 2015, but slightly increased in subsequent years. Indeed, 66% of the 2021 Presidential Budget Request for Colombia (prepared during the Trump administration) was for security-related assistance. During the Biden administration, the annual Presidential Budget Request for Colombia

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[14]For example, the Colombian government has begun to publicize foreign aid data. The Presidential Agency for International Cooperation (*Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación Internacional de Colombia*, APC) publishes data on aid to official Colombian entities, but user access is cumbersome and not all USAID funding is covered (APC-Colombia, n.d.).

[15]Several funding sites provide glossaries, but they are not always easy to navigate and sometimes have limited follow-up information.

[16]For example, on the ForeignAssistance.gov database, the Colombian anti-corruption project "Partners for Transparency" is mislabelled as "Leverage Local Partner'S [sic] Expertise To Promote Transparency And Accountability In Colombia." Interested parties would not be able to find the project using the English or Spanish language project name on the U.S. government's flagship foreign assistance website. The project is properly labeled on other sites, such as USASpending.gov and the USAID Colombia mission site.

[17]Within the US, investigative journalists used transparency tools to reveal campaign donations from helicopter manufacturing companies to national legislators who advocated for arms "aid" and sales to the Colombian military (from both political parties) (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2012).

[18]Department of Defense (DoD) funding disclosures are frequently "not reported" or "partial or incomplete" across years, as stated on ForeignAssistance.gov's website and its "reporting robustness by year" data (ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d. -b). The Security Assistance Monitor (CIP, n.d.) is another civil society organization that publishes independent estimates of US military funding (securityassistance.org). For an overview of the obstacles to public disclosure of data on US "security cooperation," commissioned by the DoD itself, see Grill et al. (2017).
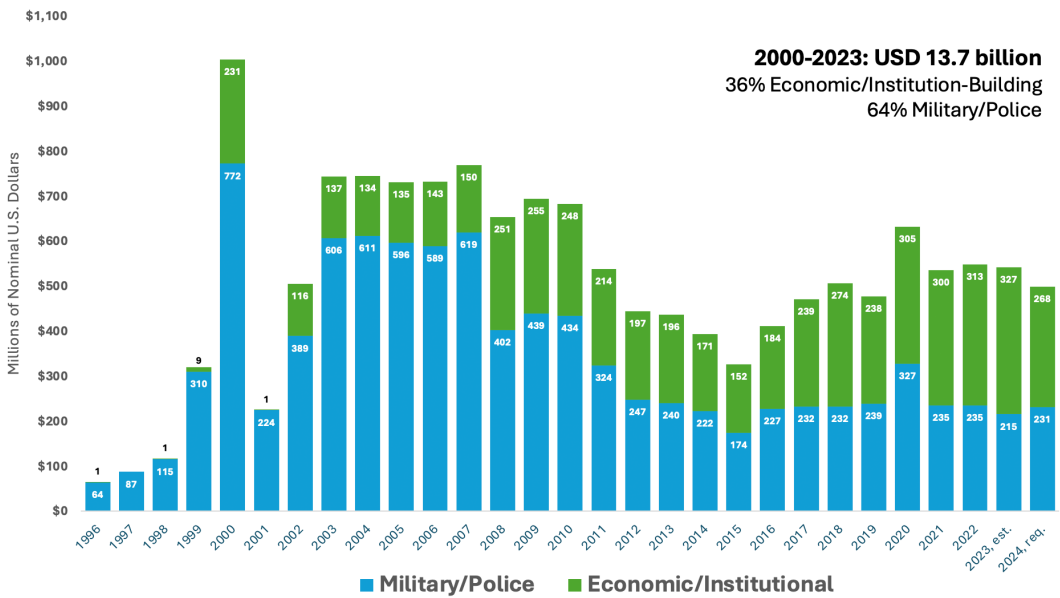
FIGURE 4 US Aid to Colombia.
Source: WOLA (2023).

security funding dropped to 52% in 2022, 49% in 2023, and 47% in 2024.[19] Between 2016 and 2023, WOLA's estimates roughly correspond to these figures by showing near parity between "economic/institutional" aid and funding for the "military/police," with slightly more going to development versus security. However, without more complete and up-to-date proactive disclosure of military funding patterns, any external estimate must be regarded as provisional.

4.1 | US foreign assistance to Colombia: Findings

The flows of US development aid to Colombia were also the largest in the region. Colombia's USD 538 million annual aid average—covering all funding – represented 26.6% of all country-specific funding in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2001 and 2022, and the Biden administration's 2023 budget request continued this pattern (Meyer, 2023). The Obama administration provided diplomatic and economic support for the 2016 Peace Accord between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP). Following the pivot under the Obama administration, the US government claimed that it contributed more than USD 1.5 billion towards the implementation of the Peace Accord (US Embassy Bogotá, 2023). This open government analysis takes a first step towards independent assessment of this claim, following the money to identify sectoral trends and specific projects. Further verification would require field-based analysis of specific projects and more granular funding data than is publicly disclosed, methods that go beyond the scope of this analysis.

Because of the controversial historical legacy of US government aid to Latin America, independent observers may wonder how to *interpret* the reported data, especially the categories for describing its distribution across

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[19]These percentages are calculated dividing the security-focused 'Activity Descriptions' of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, Foreign Military Financing Program, Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs, International Military Education and Training, and Ministry of Defence Advisor 332 budgets by the full President's Budget Requests for Colombia by year (ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d. -c).

sectors. When one of the main categories of official US aid is labelled "Peace and Security," observers may wonder how much of that funding was for peace, how much was for security, and what kind of security was actually involved (especially where the security forces are responsible for human rights violations). These questions underscore the relevance of unpacking the official categories to see how they are defined and applied in practice. Rather than accepting the official categories at face value, we recoded publicly disclosed data with disaggregated criteria based on project-specific goals to determine changes in the sectoral distribution of aid.[20] Projects focused on supporting vulnerable Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities or reintegrating child soldiers are very different from military hardware transfers and training—yet all have some disbursements categorized under "Peace and Security." At the same time, some projects do involve *both* peace *and* security—consider demining, for example, which received approximately USD 68 million since the start of the Peace Accord.[21]

Recoding all reported US aid to Colombia for "Peace and Security" in 2021 into the two different categories of "Peace" and "Security" shows that security funding continues to be a high priority with USD 142 million in funding compared to USD 151 million for peace-related funding (see Figure 5).[22] This finding is notable, given the public emphasis on supporting the peace process (United States Department of State, 2023; US Embassy Bogotá, 2023). Further, it should be repeated that these security figures do *not* include funding from the Department of Defense (DoD), since their 2021 spending was not yet publicly reported as of early 2024.[23]

In contrast to the DoD, the State Department does report its spending for 2021, but its opaque categories limit consistent fine-grained recoding to identify priorities.[24] Some of the State Department's largest projects are not possible to evaluate in any detail due to redacted information or vague activity descriptions, while others provide extremely detailed data, with specifics such as nine separate line items for the same cell phone plan.[25] In brief, the official data disclosure process provides some specific individual "trees" without providing a clear picture of the "forest."

This exercise in unpacking and rethinking official sectoral categories finds that a substantial majority of USAID funding in Colombia is targeted to either humanitarian or peace-related goals. In contrast to the State Department, USAID provides consistent, detailed project descriptions, which can be cross-referenced with reports and fact sheets listed on other sites to obtain preliminary insight into project objectives. Such detail allows for recoding the publicly available data based on stated funding objectives and contextual country knowledge to analyse funding trends. For a country like Colombia, there is value in identifying not only a general category of "Peace" to account for Peace Accord implementation funding, but also to examine the *relative weight*s assigned to funding within sub-categories. These categories include, but are not limited to, the intersection of peace with environmental conservation, humanitarian support, and land rights.

Another important US government priority in Colombia is ethnic inclusion, in response to many years of congressional advocacy for peace and human rights by US and Colombian public interest groups. The 2016 Peace Accord's innovative Ethnic Chapter stressed the cross-cutting nature of support for ethnic rights, to contribute to addressing underlying causes of the conflict (Quiñones Mendoza, 2022). The US government reiterated its commitment to

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[20]The coding criteria are available in Hallock, 2024.

[21]The effectiveness of demining aid was limited by the US government's ban on any funding for demobilized guerrillas, whose recollections about where they planted them would make demining efforts much more efficient.

[22]ForeignAssistance.gov (n.d.-a) uses both Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and US definitions to categorize data. Examining crosstabs on these different methods does not always produce consistent funding totals for seemingly related categories. Notably, differences in peace-related funding totals change drastically depending on the method used. For example, using OECD's "International Purpose" coding, only 4% of the USAID Colombia budget went to "Civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution," standing in stark contrast to the USD 1.5 billion in peace-related funding reported by the US government for Peace Accord implementation.

[23]The FY2021 data provides two items labelled as military spending implemented by the DoD, but both are managed and funded by the State Department.

[24]For example, in 2020 the State Department's largest amount of funding was for "International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement: Unspecified Law Enforcement Activities" and in 2021 and 2022 the largest amount of funding was for "DOS Miscellaneous Goods, Services, and Operations Maintenance." The vague nature of these project titles limits recoding consistency. Recoding typically requires some level of detail in the descriptive data to allow for a coding schema that captures the aims of a given project and larger funding totals that indicate year-over-year project consistency and commitment.

[25]All nine cell phone bills are listed as "Activity Project Number: 1105 M065" (ForeignAssistance.gov, n.d.-c; see Hallock, 2024).
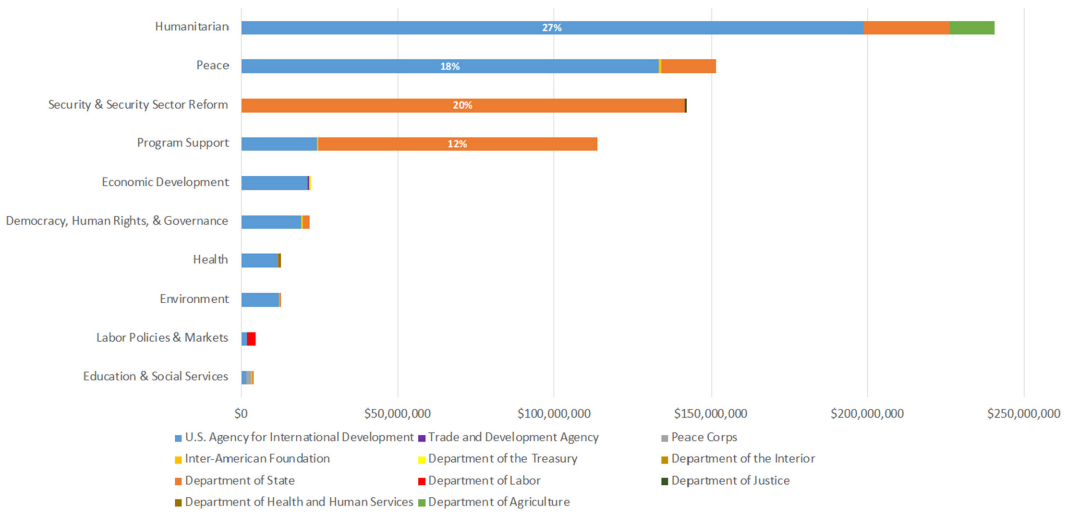
FIGURE 5 US Foreign Assistance to Colombia—Sectoral Trends: FY2021 (excluding Department of Defense Funding*).[26]
Source: ForeignAssistance.gov (n.d.-a), accessed October 15, 2023. Note*: This dataset is incomplete because it does not list DoD-funded or managed projects. Two projects in this dataset funded and managed by the State Department are implemented by the DoD.

supporting implementation of the Ethnic Chapter in July 2023 (US Embassy Bogotá, 2023). However, the available project data do not permit consistent identification of projects that contribute to ethnic inclusion (notably, limited subaward reporting). USAID internally tags projects as fitting under their indigenous peoples initiative, but does not make the information publicly available. Therefore, to see the degree to which US aid supports ethnic rights projects requires recoding the data, as can be observed in Table 2. Analysis of hard-to-find official implementation reports and subaward data from US contractors is also relevant, since that shows whether or not they reported funding Colombian ethnic rights organizations (ACDI/VOCA, 2023). Evaluation of aid delivery and impact would require independent field-based analysis of the specific organizations and activities that are funded in practice.

Recoding the data allows for the observation of changes—and relative continuity—in priority issue areas that would otherwise be invisible and reveals several important trends. First, the proportion of spending for anti-corruption and good governance stands out for its small share relative to other categories, representing an average of 3.9% of the annual USAID Colombia budget between 2012 and 2022 (though there was a large increase in 2022 funding, seemingly aligned with USAID's global focus on combating corruption). Second, despite persistent high rates of abuses and impunity, human rights projects received the least amount of funding among major project objectives between 2012 and 2022 at USD 8.7 million per year and averaging only 3% of the total budget in the 2020s. These two categories are a priority concern for human rights advocates who call for more US funding to support the peace process (Latin America Working Group, 2023). Third, this data analysis shows uneven progress towards funding ethnic inclusion. Ethnic inclusion-related aid dropped from an annual average of USD 11.8 million between 2012 and 2015 to USD 11.1 million between 2016 and 2022, although funding increased to USD 18 million in 2021. While much of this funding is publicly described as supporting the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Accord, the Year 2 implementation report of USAID's largest Afro-Colombian and Indigenous project contractor states the ethnic component of the peacebuilding agenda will only receive 1% of its total budget (ACDI/

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[26]This analysis uses independent criteria, informed by the official US Category and Sector, to differentiate sectoral spending and make relative weights more visible to non-specialists. For example, "Peace and Security" was disaggregated into peace and security. "Peace" includes explicit peace-related education projects, land and environment projects in conflict-affected areas aiming at fostering peace, and demining projects, among others.

TABLE 2 Primary Objectives of USAID Colombia Spending by Budget Percentage: FY2016-2022.

Objective	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Peace	$44 m (33.1%)	$73 m (47.0%)	$85 m (49.1%)	$98 m (54.4%)	$90 m (55.6%)	$99 m (61.4%)	$100 m (56.4%)	$113 m (48.8%)	$103 m (35.2%)	$118 m (27.9%)	$110 m (25.9%)	$1bn (41.1%)
Humanitarian	$15 m (11.4%)	$6 m (3.9%)	$6 m (3.5%)	$7 m (3.8%)	$6 m (4.0%)	$3 m (1.7%)	$6 m (3.7%)	$42 m (18.2%)	$106 m (36.1%)	$195 m (46.1%)	$193 m (45.1%)	$586 m (23.3%)
Environment	$8 m (5.7%)	$10 m (6.2%)	$14 m (8.3%)	$15 m (8.1%)	$8 m (5.1%)	$11 m (7.0%)	$14 m (7.8%)	$15 m (6.3%)	$16 m (5.5%)	$15 m (3.5%)	$12 m (2.8%)	$137 m (5.4%)
Ethnic Inclusion	$5 m (4.0%)	$14 m (9.2%)	$16 m (9.0%)	$12 m (6.7%)	$14 m (8.6%)	$5 m (3.1%)	$14 m (7.9%)	$7 m (3.0%)	$13 m (4.3%)	$19 m (4.4%)	$7 m (1.6%)	$125 m (5.0%)
Good Governance	$31 m (23.2%)	$10 m (6.4%)	$11 m (6.5%)	$7 m (3.7%)	$5 m (3.0%)	$6 m (4.0%)	$1 m (0.8%)	$2 m (0.9%)	$1 m (0.4%)	$7 m (1.5%)	$18 m (4.1%)	$99 m (3.9%)
Human Rights	$5 m (3.4%)	$10 m (6.4%)	$9 m (5.5%)	$9 m (4.9%)	$5 m (3.0%)	$7 m (4.6%)	$8 m (4.5%)	$8 m (3.3%)	$9 m (2.9%)	$13 m (3.1%)	$13 m (3.1%)	$96 m (3.8%)
All Other Funding	$26 m (19.3%)	$33 m (21.0%)	$32 m (18.2%)	$33 m (18.3%)	$33 m (20.7%)	$30 m (18.3%)	$34 m (19.0%)	$45 m (19.5%)	$46 m (15.6%)	$57 m (13.5%)	$75 m (17.4%)	$443 m (17.6%)

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov (n.d.-c), accessed January 11, 2024. Note*: All the above categories contain at least one project that overlaps with "Peace." The above coding decisions were determined through assessment of the main project objective. The full coding schema can be found in Hallock, 2024.

VOCA, 2023, p. 4). Finally, US government humanitarian aid to Colombia grew rapidly in response to Venezuelan migration, representing more than 45% of all USAID disbursements in 2021 and 2022.

An important concluding note is that USAID, and the US government as a whole use global categories due to multi-country portfolios that require standardized tools for comparison. Some of the coding categories constructed for this study are specific to the Colombian context and would not apply to other cases. This indicates a tension between USAID's administrative imperative as a global funder and disclosure of information in ways that would enable locally led development.

5 | PUBLIC DATA DISCLOSURES: PROJECT INFORMATION, EVALUATIONS, AND SUBAWARDS

Gaps in access to important project information remain, even as topline USAID project funding figures are widely available. Despite the attention to estimating, debating, and assessing USAID's progress on direct local funding using public funding figures, this goal is only a part of the more ambitious 50% funding for locally led programming. As outlined earlier, USAID uses 14 practices to evaluate when projects are "locally led." While many of these 14 practices are hard to independently verify, we examined preliminary public access to information related to two of them, project evaluations and subaward data, as well as proactive disclosure of topline project information.

The first step in carrying out this verification was to assess the degree of public access to basic project information. The USAID Colombia mission website provides fact sheets for individual projects, but constructing a fuller picture of a single USAID project required accessing at least five different sites. The indicators of public access to user-centred project data used here include: naming the "prime" contractor (lead project implementor), project budget, email contact, access to information in the national language, reported subaward information, and access to the project's progress reports and evaluations (see Figure 6).

Analysing USAID Colombia's 45 unique project fact sheets, only 16% listed the project budget total.[27] Annual funding totals are available on ForeignAssistance.gov, while reported project subaward data are housed elsewhere, on USASpending.gov (United States Department of the Treasury, n.d.). Factsheet project descriptions provide simple text with basic details, with more than 80% available in Spanish as well as English. Most USAID Colombia project fact sheets do not name the contractor. In some cases, contractors create dedicated sites for their project, but links to these project pages are not always easy to find and are rarely, if ever, available via the USAID site. Constructing complete profiles for USAID Colombia projects requires visits to multiple sites to supplement the abridged information provided on the mission page.

The second step involved examining publicly available project evaluations. Understanding if local communities or partner organizations have been involved in project evaluations requires assessing whether USAID's completed Colombia projects have final performance evaluations. Final project evaluations are located at USAID's Development Clearinghouse (DEC), a comprehensive but unwieldy USAID repository with high sensitivity to search terms.

Among the 20 largest USAID Colombia projects completed between FY2012 and FY2022, only seven had independent final evaluations posted to the Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC).[28] Of the 20 projects, 14 had some type of project-related reports, but they were typically quarterly or final project contractor reports mandated by USAID. Three of these 14 projects were labelled on ForeignAssistance.gov with project names that produced zero hits on the DEC and required triangulation using the IATI database. The six projects without

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[27]Accurate as of August 2023. The total number of current project fact sheets listed on any USAID mission site is subject to change.

[28]In some instances, project evaluations may have been completed but require a Freedom of Information Act request to access (Wise, 2021).
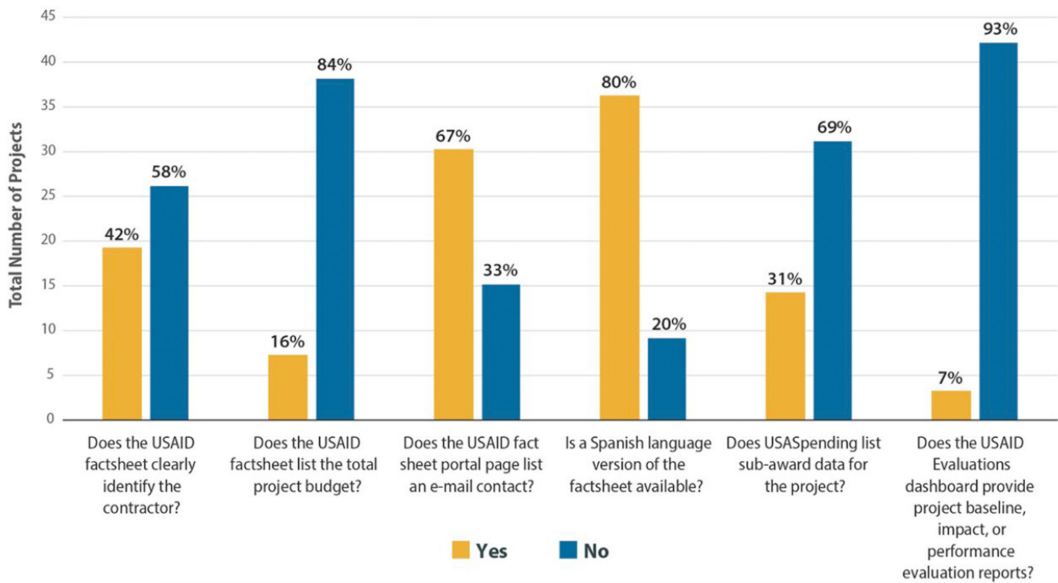
FIGURE 6 Open Government Indicators: USAID Colombia Fact Sheets.
Sources: USAID Colombia (n.d.), ForeignAssistance.gov (n.d.-c), USAID (n.d.-a). Based on 45 available fact sheets as of August 2023.

specific reports were all related to humanitarian assistance. These projects are likely to be addressed in aggregate reports published by USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs.

As an alternative to the DEC, the USAID Evaluations project dashboard is a more recent effort to collate project evaluations. Colombia's dashboard contains a haphazard mix of 18 baseline, mid-term, and final project reports (starting from 2016), all of which indicate local partner participation (USAID, n.d.-a). Assuming that the dashboard is managed and maintained, it would represent a significant upgrade on the DEC as regards user-access. The dashboard does not appear to be widely publicized beyond a sidebar link on the official "Evaluations at USAID" landing page on USAID.gov.

Finally, USAID contractors who lead projects ("prime award recipients") are required to disclose subaward data for publication on the USASpending.gov site.[29] The site is not user-friendly and requires a high degree of technical sophistication to navigate. External review of USASpending.gov finds that the data are incomplete and contain a high degree of errors (US GAO, 2023). Data quality issues on this vast site typically appear to be human error and the use of antiquated data systems that limit the review and editing of faulty input (US GAO, 2023). Further explanation of non-compliance and issues with accurate data reporting would require interviews with contractors—who are responsible for informing the public of their subcontracts.

Systematic analysis of the published USAID Colombia subaward data revealed a picture of unreliability due to apparent data lags, errant data inputs, and various download options capturing different underlying data, even when using consistent search filters. For an important ethnic inclusion project, a lead contractor uploaded multiple subawards using a funding code from an entirely different project. Although it is possible that the funding served a dual purpose, such accounting could lead to an overcounting of "local" indicators, especially when there is no accompanying information to explain the funding code discrepancy. Projects can satisfy USAID's "local" practice if at least 50% of their subawards go to national branches of international organizations or private sector firms. The 50% figure does not need to meet a minimum share of project funding (USAID, 2023b, p. 26). This is a low bar for defining "locally led."

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[29]Subawards below USD 30,000 or assessed to be a risk to the subawardee are exempt from publication.

6 | USAID LOCALIZATION TRENDS IN COLOMBIA

Independent recoding of official data can also provide further insight into patterns of "local" project funding. In Colombia, USAID directly funds very different types of national organizations, ranging from community-based civil society organizations and human rights organizations that support the forcibly displaced to private sector-oriented economic development enterprises. For example, part of USAID's support for ethnic inclusion includes direct funding for a joint project involving the national civil society organizations Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados (AFRODES) and the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC); as well as the Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (COCOMACIA), a broad-based Afro-Colombian membership organization comprised of 124 local community councils that defend territorial rights and local development. At the same time, USAID still maintains its traditional emphasis on funding consulting firms and foundations associated with the private sector under the rubric of economic development (see Table 3). Moreover, contractors' implementation reports presented to USAID (almost exclusively in English) show that projects that present themselves with a primarily rights-based discourse continue to emphasize private sector activities in practice (ACDI/VOCA, 2023).

Analysis of public official data is not sufficient to disentangle continuity and change in terms of which kind of Colombian organizations receive the most direct funding. Colombia's many high-capacity NGOs can face competing pressures between upward accountability to donors, engaging in the public sphere, and project design and implementation at the local level (Wingender & Méndez, 2023). Only further independent field research will be able to determine the actual on-the-ground development impact of these different national organizations.

USAID's progress towards meeting its 25% direct local funding target shows two very different trends in Colombia. Absolute levels of direct funding are going up, while the direct share for national organizations is going down (see Figures 7 and 8). Granted, the 25% goal is an agency-wide average rather than a fixed target that applies equally to all its country programmes, but Colombia's robust civil society organizations would lead one to expect more progress. Moreover, global analysis of USAID's reported country-level localization rates shows that they do not correlate with indicators of national civil society strength—as indicated by the contrast between high rates of progress in Africa and lags in Latin America mentioned above.[30] This puzzle underscores the need for additional research to determine the drivers of varying USAID country-level localization rates.

Specifically focusing on the *share* of funding for local organizations can overshadow the distinct increase in the annual amount of direct aid USAID provided to Colombian organizations between 2012 and 2021 (see Figure 7). In 2012, direct local funding totalled USD 1.3 million. By 2021, after years of steady increases, that figure reached USD 15.2 million. The divergence between the declining *share* of direct local funds as a proportion of the larger portfolio and an increase in the total *amount* of funding for local organizations is noteworthy.

Direct local funding shares peaked at 10.9% in 2017 and have steadily dropped since then to 3.8% in 2022, following a combination of the USAID measurement method designed by PWYF and self-reported USAID funding totals.[31] Both measurement methods show the same pattern of increasing before declining to near-decade lows in 2022. These trends again underscore the ambition of the 25% goal and the gap between aspiration and measurable progress.

One possible explanation for the divergence between localization shares and total funding is that the higher annual aid totals in the USAID Colombia portfolio starting in 2018—caused, in part, by new humanitarian funding in response to Venezuelan immigration—minimized the appearance of absolute gains in local funding. Although this position provides a partial explanation, a rough estimate accounting for spikes in humanitarian assistance still places direct local funding lower than 15% in 2021.

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[30]Correlations between USAID's public localization figures and V-dem's Core Civil Society Index for 2021 and 2022 are .243 and .255, respectively, indicating a high degree of independence between the variables (USAID, 2023c; Varieties of Democracy, 2014; see Hallock, 2024).

[31]For comparison, our calculation estimating the USAID figures for 2021 and 2022 were 6.3% and 4.1%, respectively. USAID's June 2023 report states Colombia's 2021 figure was 7.3% and the 2022 figure was 3.8%.

TABLE 3 Colombian-based USAID Contractors: FY2021.

National Contractor	Funding Total USD (2021)	USAID Project	Type of Organization
Asociación Nacional de Afrocolombianos Desplazados (AFRODES) & Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC)	$2,750,000	Inter-Ethnic Alliance for Peace	Social Organization(s)
Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES)	$1,777,214	Victims Participation and Collective Reparation (VPCRP)	NGO
Fundación Luker	$1,599,784	The Cacao Effect	Private sector-oriented NGO
Bancamía	$1,514,990	Productive Entrepreneurships for Peace (EMPROPAZ)	Private Sector
Corporación Manos Visibles	$1,329,411	Pacific in Progress	NGO
Cooperativa Colanta Ltda	$757,859	BitterCasava for a Sweet Milk	Private Sector
Centro de Estudios Médicos Interculturales	$659,490	Strengthening the Integral Tenure of Collective Titles	NGO
Fundación Carvajal	$639,740	Activa Buenaventura	Private sector-oriented NGO
Jaime Arteaga & Asociados	$619,450	Women of Gold	Private Sector
Fundación Arcángeles	$519,702	SportPower2	NGO
Fondo Patrimonio Natural	$504,628	Environment Peace Initiative for Colombia (EPIC)-Fondo Patrimonio Natural (FPN)	NGO
Corporación Interactuar	$477,824	Let's Go BajoCauca	Private sector-oriented NGO
Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (COCOMACIA)	$450,000	Victims of War	Social Organization
Universidad de Los Andes	$399,251	Public Opinion Activity	Academia
Federación Nacional de Comerciantes Empresarios	$347,681	Disaster Readiness	Private Sector
Fundación Barco	$336,121	Safe Steps	NGO
Fundación Ideas para la Paz	$231,043	Cacao Connects	Think Tank
Asociación Probienestar de la Familia Colombiana (Profamilia)	$123,901	Protection, Assistance and Solutions	NGO

Source: IATI (n.d.-a) accessed May 31, 2023. Total disbursed USAID Colombia funding in FY2021: USD 423.7 million.

7 | CONCLUSION

As the localization agenda gains ground among the world's leading development donors, so must open government practices that allow national stakeholders to engage in informed participation—including stakeholders that may not already be USAID funding recipients. If the new emphasis on localization and locally led development is to diversify the mix of organizations that choose to *seek* USAID funding, then those organizations need better access to relevant information in order to make informed decisions. Given the legacy of US government use of aid for geopolitical purposes, timely and clear open data are needed for national civil society organizations and
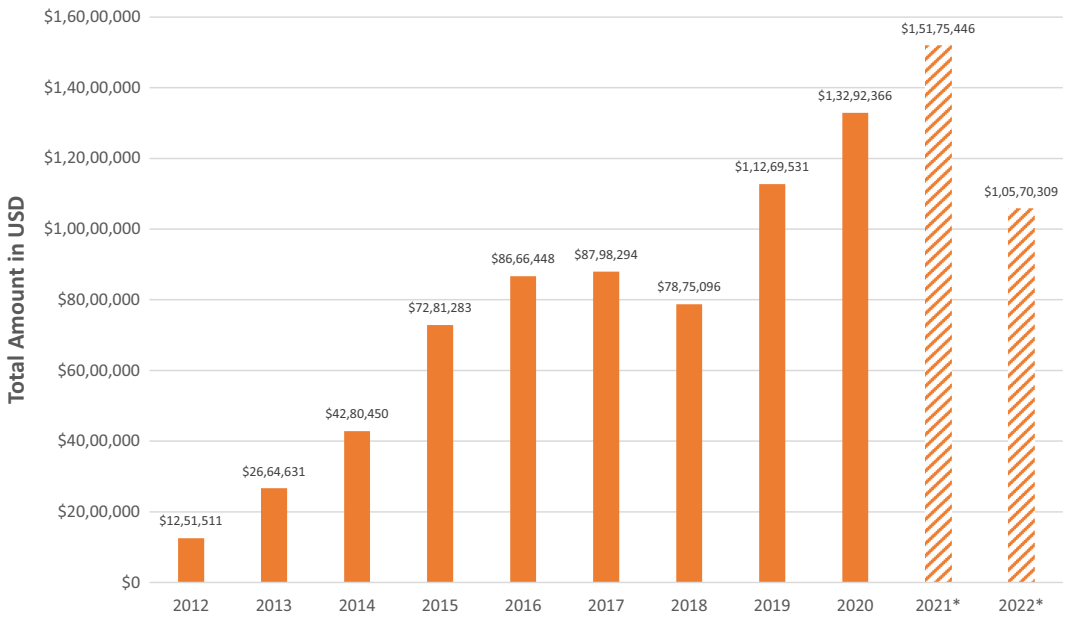
FIGURE 7 Direct USAID Funding Amount to Colombian Organizations: 2012–2022.
Source: IATI (n.d.-a) accessed May 31, 2023. Note*: An asterisk on the year denotes that public data were reported as not complete when accessed. Colombian organizations are scoped using the PWYF method. International denotes the recipient organization's primary headquarters is not in Colombia; Colombian denotes that the recipient organization's primary headquarters is in Colombia.

policy-makers both to be informed participants in USAID's locally led development agenda, and to reduce possible risks in their national context.

This study's methodological and empirical focus on public access to user-centred, country-focused information about aid flows makes possible more precise and informed debates on the winners, losers, and impacts of US aid. From political and normative perspectives, in the Colombian context, it matters whether and how the composition of US aid flows has shifted in practice from prioritizing the security forces to funding the Peace Accord and development. Moreover, the methodological insights shared here about resource allocation can inform more fine-grained, independent, field-based analysis of whether funding that is officially labelled as intended for peace and development really reaches those goals in practice.

The open government perspective developed here has shed light both on historical funding trends and the localization agenda in Colombia by connecting the dots on public data currently fragmented across different official sources. Notably, this study shows that military and police funding remain a central part of US foreign assistance to Colombia, despite public diplomacy elevating its commitment to Peace Accord implementation. This study also found that long-standing priorities to improve social and governance outcomes, including upholding human rights, anti-corruption, environment, and ethnic inclusion, have not received consistent increases in their share of USAID funding over time. USAID's Colombian localization efforts also tell a mixed story. While the absolute value of direct funding to local partners has increased year on year, the share of direct funding to local partners has greatly declined between 2017 and 2022.

Finally, important gaps remain in public data access. Very relevant information is not readily accessible for a significant share of projects in Colombia, notably involving budgets, subawards, project implementation reports, and evaluations. In principle, third-party monitoring and evaluation could help to enable informed stakeholder participation if the findings are published in a timely manner and in relevant languages.
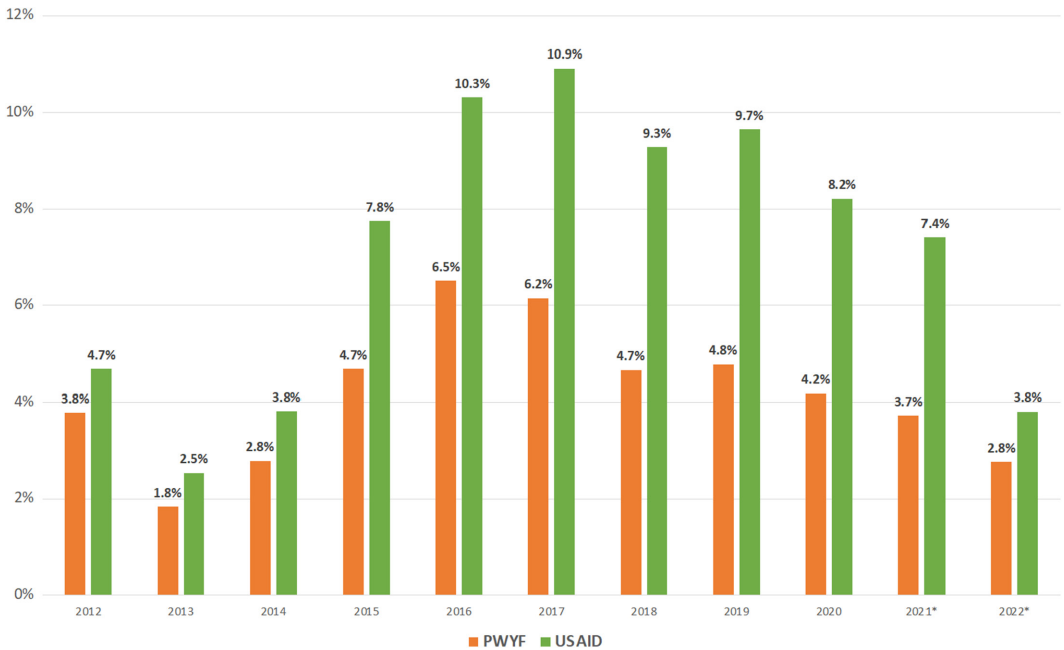
FIGURE 8 Share of Direct USAID Funding to Colombian Organizations: PWYF and USAID Methods Compared.
Source: IATI (n.d.-a) accessed May 31, 2023. Note*: An asterisk on the year denotes that public data was reported as not complete when accessed. USAID figures for 2021 and 2022 are from USAID (2023c). PWYF and USAID define "local" organizations differently. Local denotes that the recipient organization's primary headquarters is in the recipient country for PWYF, while USAID includes nationally incorporated branches of international entities.

In conclusion, more user-centred public access to information can help stakeholders identify how development aid is being used, by whom, and to what end. User-centred transparency can help reduce information asymmetries and make possible more power sharing. Greater institutional attention to making relevant project information available, accessible, and legible to local stakeholders can enable progress towards locally led development and offset inertial tendencies to relegate "locally led" to a box-ticking exercise.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jonathan Fox advanced the framing and conceptual underpinnings of the project. He designed the pilot open government research that generated findings for the paper. He co-wrote the paper and provided substantive editing inputs.

Jeffrey Hallock undertook data collection, analysis, and management. He co-wrote the paper and provided substantive editing inputs. He performed copy-editing and bibliography management.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the American University Research Archive at https://doi.org/10.57912/25274497.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper reports analysis of primary data. The ethics of data collection and analysis were approved by the Institutional Review Board, American University.

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