

Executive Summary

Large organizations invest considerable resources in government relations and outreach. They recognize that intimately knowing the environment in which they operate can be critical to their long-term success. Indeed, some of the largest organizations—both for-profit and nonprofit—move beyond simply knowing their enabling environment to actively trying to shape it. At One Acre Fund, we go further still: we view collaborating with governments as the cornerstone of our work. Specifically, we believe that fostering respectful, cooperative relations with local government ensures our clients receive the best possible service.

Smaller companies and nonprofits are often so focused on their core work that they pay insufficient attention to government, until government really matters. “Flying under the radar” is a common description for this approach. While it may work in the short term, eventually the organization and government will collide. One Acre Fund believes in respectfully and openly engaging with the government at the outset of a project. Open lines of communication are the best way to ensure valuable knowledge sharing that will allow all parties to most effectively serve their clients or constituents.

While national government is also fundamental to the enabling environment of a company or nonprofit, this paper will focus on methods for engaging local government. One Acre Fund has found that local government is most relevant to early-stage organizations and programs beginning to scale. National government may only take interest in an entity that has a regional or national presence, whereas local government is more likely to be interested in the day-to-day operational matters of an early-stage organization given its close proximity to clients in the field.

In order to maximize opportunities for respectful partnership with local government, this paper recommends that early attention be given to local government relations. Further, as trials turn into programs and organizations look to expand, strong local government relationships become essential to future growth.

Using examples from One Acre Fund’s work in the agriculture sector in East Africa, this paper will explain that:

- **Understanding local government is vital to One Acre Fund field operations.** Understanding local government systems and realities reduces the risk of miscommunications that could potentially delay projects, and helps us plug in to exciting opportunities for partnership.
- **When beginning a trial, early local government outreach is important.** Explaining project plans to local officials up front means they are clear about One Acre Fund’s goals and intentions. Clear communication at the outset ensures that relationships will be easier to build in the future.
- **A specialized local government relations team can rapidly establish goodwill.** Local government relations officers help ensure that One Acre Fund is transparent about its field work and is willing to participate in local government activities.
- **Integrating local government relations into field work is important.** At One Acre Fund, we do this by training field staff, maintaining a single point of contact for local government, and emphasizing the importance of regulatory approvals across departments.

The Importance of Local Government

The ecosystem in which local government operates is complex. Officials must juggle implementation of government programs and initiatives while monitoring the activities of numerous different stakeholders, from donors to nonprofits to private sector. They often operate with significant budget constraints.

Businesses and nonprofits are purveyors of services that are sometimes seen by government officials as public functions. There may be a feeling that the private sector is less effective than government at serving smallholder farmers, or simply that any non-governmental intervention must flow through the local administration. If local government isn't approached respectfully as a partner, officials may be reticent to share information or may obfuscate the process instead of helping to simplify it.

One Acre Fund's Approach

One Acre Fund has discovered a number of effective methods for fostering excellent relationships with local governments. Winning the support of local officials can be achieved through:

- Understanding how local government operates
- Knowing who the key people are and building relationships with them
- Demonstrating how local government and the organization's goals are aligned

One Acre Fund has a dedicated local government relations team that invests time in the above three areas. We build relationships with agriculture officials at all administrative levels (for example, at the county and subcounty level in Kenya) through regular meetings and phone calls that share information about One Acre Fund's work. The local government relations team focuses on the ways that One Acre Fund's operations support the government's agriculture development strategy. This approach frees our field staff from being sidelined because officials are unsure of what One Acre Fund is doing. Because our local government team encounters many of the same issues across geographies, they are able to develop specialist skills in local government work.

Proactively engaging officials in the agricultural sector is mutually beneficial. Officials want to feel confident that One Acre Fund has smallholder farmer interests at heart. One Acre Fund's local government relations team illustrates our commitment to farmers by sending quarterly reports on field activities, demonstrating farmer trainings, hosting field visits to celebrate farmer successes, and submitting to quality inspections of seed and fertilizer. All these tactics, particularly field visits, provide clear information on One Acre Fund operations and serve to educate local government while building relationships. With trust established, local government can take some credit for the good work One Acre Fund does with farmers by highlighting the positive role they play as both partner and regulator. Meanwhile, One Acre Fund can more easily obtain licenses and permits, and has better visibility of regulatory approval processes.

Sharing program information and being open to regular consultations with local government ensures officials are partners in the process of program development. This increases their commitment to One Acre Fund's success. Additionally, demonstrating to farmers that One Acre Fund works in partnership with local government gives farmers greater confidence in our program.

Operational Considerations

A phased introduction of local government relations needs to begin at the early stages of operations, ideally during the trial stage. Based on our experience, One Acre Fund recommends the following initial steps:

1) Obtain local support through courtesy calls to priority local officials. These serve as an introduction to the trial being planned and are critical in understanding how local government works. They can also be useful for measuring the support and influence of local officials, and to solicit feedback on where the trial might be best suited. The strength of local support should be able to inform whether or not a trial progresses. It also allows time for rethinking the nature of an approach, or may indicate that allocating a longer period for local government relationship building is needed.

2) Designate a local government relationship manager. Strengthening local government contacts once the trial is underway is easier if there is a designated local government relationship manager in place. This phase of local government relations is an ideal opportunity to understand the scope of administrative and regulatory demands affecting operations. Building goodwill through transparency and openness with government will make this process easier. Equally, sharing information and informally collaborating with non-government stakeholders will further support this.

3) Create mechanisms to manage local government relations. In the long term, such mechanisms allow for relationship building to be done routinely and systematically. This is more scalable as the trial expands. Examples include:

- Establishing a team of local government relations specialists
- Submitting quarterly reports that share trial metrics, stories, and future plans
- Prioritizing key contacts through a stakeholder matrix to manage relationships
- Organizing regular field visits for key stakeholders that highlight the positive impact of the intervention
- Participating in local government events such as stakeholder committees, field days, and policy platforms

4) Establish internal systems that incorporate local government relations. Relationships with local governments are strengthened if they are incorporated into the organization's day-to-day work:

- Training field staff on how to interact with the local administration builds confidence on both sides
- Having an internal point of contact centralizes local government matters and enables tracking of activities
- Processing regulatory approvals is easier when specialists have been through the process before and have government contacts who can offer advice

KEY CONCLUSIONS

- It's important to engage local government at the very beginning of operations. "Flying under the radar" is a short-term approach that will lead to long-term challenges.
- Dedicated staffing allows specialists to develop long-term positive relationships with local government, and allows field staff to focus on serving their clients instead of attempting to balance government relations and operational priorities.
- Hosting local government officials on field visits is a useful way to build relationships and clearly demonstrate field operations and the benefits it offers clients.