LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT: THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW[1]

In recent years, there has been growing momentum within the development sector for more locally driven approaches. This has prompted widespread reflection among donors, managing contractors and international non-government organisations on their roles and how they operate. Although there are some differences in how localisation and locally led development are understood, they share a common concern with shifting power from international organisations to the people whom development is intended to support. Here, we use the term 'locally led development,' as a more outcome-focused, thoroughgoing effort to ensure local people are in the driver's seat, in contrast to 'localisation,' which remains focused on processes led by international organisations to divest power.

This briefing paper provides a short summary of what locally led development is, why it has emerged, what different approaches to implementing it look like, and outstanding challenges.

What is locally led development?

DFAT defines "locally led development cooperation" as "sustainable and effective development co-operation that supports locally led development by respecting and enabling the agency, leadership and decision making of diverse local actors in framing, design, delivery, resourcing and accountability, in given local and operating contexts (DFAT, 2024). USAID defines locally led development as 'the process in which local actors – encompassing individuals, communities, networks, organizations, private entities, and governments – set their own agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality' (USAID, n.d.).

However, 'local' can mean different things. For donors, 'local' often refers to country-level governments, while for international NGOs, it is often interpreted as referring to civil society organisations, or locally based national affiliates. There is also a tendency to oversimplify 'local' in a way that ignores important variations in capacity, and power relationships within and between local communities, civil society organisations, local and national governments and other actors (MacGinty, 2015).

Why is locally led development needed?

There are three main arguments put forward for why locally led development is needed.

Effectiveness
One of the main arguments is that locally led development supports the achievement of development goals and objectives. This argument is reflected in global commitments such as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) and the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (2011) which recognise that development assistance is more likely to be relevant, effective, sustainable and 'value for money' when it is aligned with a country's own priorities and uses local systems,

---

organisations and capacities. In the humanitarian space, commitments to localisation, for instance in the 2016 Grand Bargain, have similarly been made on the basis that local responders are better positioned to deliver efficient and effective humanitarian response.

Power and politics

A second rationale for locally led development contends that issues of power and politics are at the heart of development. Interventions therefore need to work in ways that navigate power relationships to facilitate progressive change. These arguments draw on participatory development and empowerment (Chambers, 1986) and have more recently focused on ideas of politically smart, locally-led development and on the central role that local actors – often working collectively – play in facilitating lasting change that works in specific local contexts (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017; Booth and Unsworth, 2014; DLP, 2018). Development interventions therefore need to put local people in the driving seat, with aid organisations playing more of an arm's length, facilitative or supporting role (Booth, 2013; DLP, 2018).

Decolonisation

A third argument for locally led development focuses on the importance of decolonising the development sector. This strand argues that aid and development is characterised by structural inequalities, racism and the concentration of power in the Global North (Escobar, 1995; Pailey, 2019). Decolonisation of development is necessary to rectify historic and continuing inequities that undermine local agency and get in the way of genuine development forged by local people. From this perspective, locally led development is therefore 'the right thing to do' from an equity point of view.

What does locally led development look like in practice?

There is no one way to advance locally led development. Locally led development requires changes to practices and ways of working, as well as changes to relationships, power structures, values and attitudes, as illustrated in the diagram below. This has been described by some commentators as working across systemic, organisational and individual levels (Tawake et al. 2021).
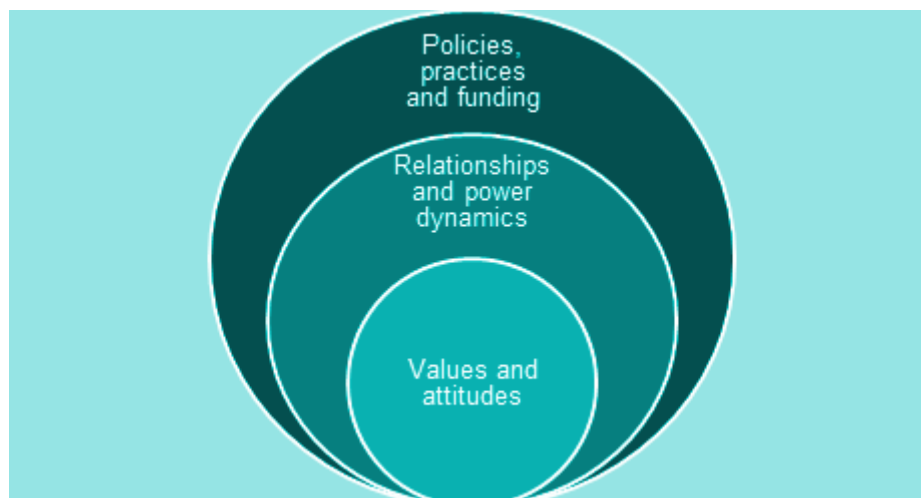
Systemic change involves work to redress the structural inequities that have been built into the international development and humanitarian system. This often feels abstract and out of the control of individuals or organisations. Examples of work at this level include reimagining funding so that greater flows are transferred from the Global North to the Global South without relying on intermediaries; or shifting from charity models of development to movement, solidarity-based models. Systemic change is 'transformative, where the goal is for local actors to be the shapers of their own destinies, and with external actors providing support in different ways that enable this' (Baguios et al. 2021: 48).

Organisational change involves internal reforms to diversification, remuneration and advancement of staffing and boards, processes for consultation and engagement, more meaningful partnership development and a review of design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation processes to consider how to transfer decision-making authority and 'whose knowledge counts' at each stage. Many donors, INGOs and managing contractors are undertaking internal organisational reforms to varying degrees. These are often seen as most politically possible and practically meaningful (Teskey and Chattier, 2022: 8-10) but are also critiqued as insufficient on their own.

Individual change relates to personal and professional values and identity. It involves questioning motivations and willingness for non-local staff to play less visible roles in support of local staff and challenging personal biases around knowledge, capacities and privilege (Tawake et al. 2021: 9-11).

Given entrenched interests that maintain the status-quo, progress towards locally led development among donors, managing contractors and international non-government organisations varies considerably. While some organisations are focused on reforming policies and practices, for example around project design and staffing, others are undertaking more in-depth exploration of their ways of working with local partners and the implications of this for their organisational and personal and professional identities. In practice, most organisations have made greater progress on the organisational mechanics of funding, staffing and policies, and less progress on the systemic issues of power and racism and the individual issues of values and attitudes (Baguios et al. 2021: 48; Tawake et al. 2021). Thus, while there has been some progress towards changes to organisational policies and practices, without a more fundamental shift in how organisations perceive the role of local actors in development processes – and their own role in supporting these actors – genuinely locally-led development will not be possible (see also Khan, 2021). This requires development actors to engage with their values and attitudes at individual, organisational and systemic levels.

What are the challenges?

Locally led development presents a range of challenges for donors, managing contractors and international and local NGOs. Locally led development requires a rethinking of approaches to designing, delivering and evaluating programs, as well as relationships with local organisations and governments in ways that shift power from international organisations and donors to local entities. For donors primarily oriented towards accountability to elected Ministers and domestic taxpayers, shifting power to local actors presents both a logistical and ideational challenge. It also raises questions about how prerogatives to be more locally led sit alongside a stronger focus on aligning development assistance with the national interest and issues of national security.

For many international NGOs, calls for more locally led development prompt questions about their legitimacy and what role they might usefully play as an intermediary. The challenge is that being seen to be legitimate 'locally' – for example by peers or local civil society organisations – is often at odds with being seen as legitimate by donors or supporters, from whom funding is often derived. This tension between 'top down' versus 'bottom up' legitimacy is at the heart of what has been referred to as international NGO's legitimacy and identity crisis (Walton et al., 2016; Gabazira, 2015). As a result, many international NGOs are grappling with what locally led development means for their identity, purpose and practice.

For managing contractors, the principal-agent relationship between them and the donor as their client creates challenges in creating genuine partnerships with local organisations (Teskey and Chattier 2022: 7). This makes sharing or yielding power particularly challenging.

Finally, while many international NGOs and managing contractors have embarked on processes of more local recruitment including into management positions, registration of local organisational affiliates, and delegation of financial decision making to more local levels, there has been less emphasis to date on reorienting mindsets and organisational identity. This matters because while changing the mechanics of development and humanitarian assistance can support more locally led approaches, it is not sufficient to shift entrenched power imbalances that are ingrained in professional and organisational identities.

Further reading and resources

Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A. and Pinnington, R. (2021). 'Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: Models, approaches and challenges,' London: ODI, https://odi.org/en/publications/are-we-there-yet-localisation-as-the-journey-towards-locally-led-practice/

BOND (2022) 'Becoming Locally Led as Anti-Racist Practice: A guide to support INGOS,' https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Bond_LocallyLedDevelopmentGuide_Version2-1.pdf.

DFAT (2024) 'DFAT Guidance Note – Locally led Development,' Canberra: DFAT, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development.pdf.

Tawake, P., Rokotuibau, M., Kalpokas-Doan, J., Mua Illingworth, A., Gibert, A. and Smith, Y. (2021) 'Decolonisation and Locally led Development,' La Trobe and ACFID Discussion Paper, https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/ACFID%20Decolonisation%20and%20Locally%20Led%20Development%20Discussion%20Paper.pdf.

RDI Network, 'Decolonising Research,' https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/skills-for-development-impact/decolonising-research/

Reference List

Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2017) *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A. and Pinnington, R. (2021) 'Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: Models, approaches and challenges,' London: Overseas Development Institute.

Booth, D. (2013) 'Facilitating development: An arm's length approach to aid,' Working Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Booth, D. and Unsworth, S. (2014) 'Politically smart, locally led development,' London: Overseas Development Institute.

Chambers, R. (1986) *Putting the last first*, Abingdon: Routledge.

DFAT (2024) 'DFAT guidance note: Locally led development,' Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development.

Gabazira, A. (2015, February 20) 'The INGO crisis of identity*,' Gabazira's Blog: The effectiveness lab*. https://gabazira.com/2015/02/20/the-ingo-crisis-of-identity/.

Hudson, D., Mcloughlin, C., Roche, C. and Marquette, H. (2018) 'Inside the black box of political will: 10 years of findings from the developmental leadership program,' Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Khan, T. (2021, January 15) 'Decolonisation is a comfortable buzzword for the aid sector,' *OpenDemocracy*, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/decolonisation-comfortable-buzzword-aid-sector/.

MacGinty, R. (2015) 'Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding,' *Third World Quarterly.* 36(5): 840-856.

Nelson, N. (1995) *Power and participatory development,* Rugby: Practical Action Publishing.

Pailey, R.N. (2019) 'De-centring the 'white gaze ' of development,' *Development and Change* 51(3): 729–745.

Tawake, P. Rokotuibau, M. Kalpokas-Doan, J. Illingworth, A. Gibert, A. and Smith. Y. (2021) 'Decolonisation and Locally Led Development: A Discussion Paper,' La Trobe & ACFID https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/ACFID%20Decolonisation%20and%20Locally%20Led%20Development%20Discussion%20Paper.pdf.

Teskey, G. and Chattier, P. (2022) 'Localisation: what could it mean for contractors?,' Abt Associates Governance and Development Working Paper Series, https://abtgovernance.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/abt-associates_localisation-what-could-it-mean-for-contractors.pdf.

USAID (n.d.) 'What is locally led development?' Fact Sheet, Washington, DC: USAID.

Walton, O. E., Davies, T., Thrandardottir, E., and Keating, V. C. (2016) 'Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy: Integrating top-down and bottom-up perspectives,' *Voluntas*, 27(6): 2764–2786.

RESEARCH FOR
DEVELOPMENT
IMPACT NETWORK

About RDI Network

RDI Network fosters collaboration between universities and the broader ecosystem of private, not-for-profit and public sector organisations engaged in research for development. We support collaborative partnerships to improve the uptake and use of evidence in policy and practice. We provide a platform for sharing and shaping international development research insights, methods and tools.

Our members connect with each other to learn, to share expertise, and to amplify the impact of important research. While Australian-based, RDI Network welcomes members from around the world, most especially the Oceania region, South-East Asia and regions across the Global South.

RDI Network is a registered Australian charity.

E: admin@rdinetwork.org.au | W: rdinetwork.org.au | ABN 26 665 207 107