

SECTOR FORUM SUMMARY

The Realities of Local Partnership

The Event

On 26 July 2024, the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network co-hosted with DFAT's Diplomatic Academy a development sector forum to discuss '*The realities of local partnership*'. DFAT officers joined with NGO, Managing Contractor and academic representatives (including Pacific voices) to exchange ideas, experiences and perspectives. Twenty-three in-person participants in Canberra joined 39 online participants from across the region. Five panel presentations set the scene for a curated Q&A session, enabling a deep exploration of key issues by participants.

The Panellists

Gemma Porter | Head of International Program Management, *Oxfam Australia*

Peni Tawake | Partnership Broker, *Iceni Consulting*

Joanne Choe | Managing Director, *DT Global Asia-Pacific*

Kirsten Bishop | Assistant Secretary, Development Performance and Advisory Branch, *DFAT*

Dave Vosen | Assistant Secretary, Humanitarian Preparedness and Response Branch, *DFAT*

Current Perspectives on Local Partnership

DFAT's recently released Guidance Note highlights that while locally led development is not a new concept, it is an evolving field of practice¹. By "respecting and enabling agency, leadership and decision-making of diverse local actors", locally led development pushes *all* Australian development actors, from DFAT to NGOs to Managing Contractors, to build relationships with governments and local entities in ways that *locate the power* to design, deliver and evaluate development initiatives *locally*. DFAT's Guidance Note sets as a design priority the embedding of localisation intent into outcomes and program logics, and recommends design processes engaging with diverse local actors. It highlights DFAT's policy position that, by 2026, 80 percent of the design of new bilateral investments must include local participation.

The Australian Council for International Development's (ACFID) recently revised Code of Conduct also includes a range of locally led action requirements to be met by ACFID members. Measures that NGOs and Managing Contractors are working to implement include:

- increasing local recruitment efforts
- ensuring local people are recruited to management roles
- registering local affiliates
- "delegating" financial and programmatic decisions to local teams.

Academics in the international development sector have long been engaged in describing and interpreting the impacts of local involvement in development models; their findings are diverse. Broadly speaking, the academy supports efforts by the development sector to change the mechanics of development and humanitarian assistance to enable more locally led approaches. However, critiques of the institutionalised power imbalances are extensive. Power imbalances are difficult to tackle and are enmeshed in the systems, processes and structures of organisations in the sector. How power is distributed in design and delivery decision-making, and how success and impact are assessed, are two important questions for academics engaged in the sector.²

Highlights and Takeaways

Panel presenters and participants engaged in a wide-ranging and solution-focused discussion, some highlights of which are captured below.

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development>

² https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/RDINetwork_Locally-led-development-briefing-paper_July-2024-1.pdf

Locally led development has wide in-principle support but is not well understood. Across the sector there is a strong desire to support the shift toward locally led approaches. But this support is tempered by a desire for clarity – on what success looks like, how it can be achieved and how it will be evaluated. All organisational change is difficult, and this change presents a challenge to the long-held roles and rules of engagement in Australian-led development.

Out-dated views and processes are delaying change; act to reframe, recalibrate and refresh. Development approaches persist that frame local people and contexts as 'problems to be fixed' or 'full of needs to be met' by Australia. Institutionalised processes and mindsets that are a barrier to locally led development and partnering locally must change. Quantity output expectations must be replaced by quality process outcomes. More must be done to raise the Australian public's awareness of this approach. Reframing development activity is required to capture the rich perspectives of local partners.

Equity: Local partners are equal partners. It is critical to broker local partnerships *early* to determine what development support is necessary and viable. Local people know their context best and empowering local partnerships to make design and delivery decisions in their own communities is the best way to respect and recognise the primacy of local knowledge. Developing local leadership and partnerships must be invested in, budgeted and assessed for quality. To shift power to local people and partners, the staff and the boards of NGOs, Managing Contractors and donor organisations must be prepared to manage and accept new and reshaped roles.

Direct approaches that privilege local knowledge and leadership are working. NGO participants provided examples of approaches that work including: providing direct flows of funding in-country with the help of local partners rather than international mediators; using local knowledge and local leadership to generate research and evaluation with the explicit goal of decolonising knowledge; and emphasising knowledge sharing and learning exchange between regional partners – not focusing on one-way capacity development from Australia.

Valuing and not poaching local leadership. Critical perspectives on locally led development were raised, including the danger of 'local washing' international organisations by making targeted local hires instead of partnering with local organisations. This speaks to criticism that locally led development drivers may be used as an excuse to 'poach' skilled labour from civil society and government in already resource-stretched countries. Counterpoints suggested that we need to move beyond a zero-sum framing to recognise the value and benefit of smart people being employed in development efforts. Moving between different employers provides different insights and experiences. Local development practitioners, in the Pacific and elsewhere could be supported as "alumni" – they are the future leaders in the region.

The risks of being "Risk-driven". Risk was pointed to as a the single-most cited reason for avoiding or minimising locally led development and empowering local partners. Participants raised as examples, the potential for compliance to safeguarding policies to be a barrier to locally led development. The sector is keen for further guidance on how to support local organisations with limited capacity or resources to meet risk mitigation requirements. Overemphasising risk may keep all the aid dollars "safe" but result in weaker development outcomes. The risk of not acting is neglected in risk discussions.

There is a need for more research on local-led development and specifically longer-term research that aims to understand specific practices of progress. There is a need for deeper analysis of different approaches employed and the impacts and outcomes (intended or not).

Panellists shared key messages they wanted participants to take-away: be self-reflective, be vulnerable and listen; to effect change you have to fundamentally change the way you work; proactively focus on opportunities that are within your scope of influence; we each bring difference perspectives to this, contexts are also different, and we need to keep talking.

The RDI Network is a vibrant community of academics and practitioners engaged in international development research. We share knowledge and advocate for high impact, high quality, ethical research that matters. Join the network here: <https://rdinetwork.org.au>

The Diplomatic Academy is a specialist learning hub for Government officials working to advance Australia's interests internationally. Training covers geographic literacy, languages, negotiation and advocacy skills, global governance architecture, bilateral and multilateral agreements, foreign policy, security and trade diplomacy, with a strong focus on the Indo-Pacific region.