



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken

Pathways for Locally Led Change

Lessons & Recommendations from the 'Unboxing Localisation' Trajectory

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A Trajectory By

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Introduction

1.1 A learning trajectory: why and how?

‘Unboxing Localisation’ is a trajectory initiated by the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), supported by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL). It started in 2021 from the desire of making the amorphous concept of ‘localisation’ more tangible and actionable, and to translate this to what it means for the area of Security & Rule of Law support. Partners came together in six thematic sessions¹ for a participatory learning trajectory, unpacking some of the thorny issues related to the process of shifting the power towards more locally led development.

The need to work more locally led had already been written down in every evaluation for decades and after the pandemic there was particular momentum, as it forced the sector to work with fewer internationally posted colleagues. This was also a period with momentum for emancipatory movements (most prominently Black Lives Matter) calling for a more critical look at power relations, o.a. between the West and other parts of the world.

Although similar initiatives existed, this trajectory brought together INGOs, policy makers and local partners - so organizations or movements rooted in (post)conflict settings – that work around themes of peace, justice and inclusion (SDG16+). The trajectory is therefore more development focused, although it leaned heavily on experiences from for example the humanitarian sector.

In the spirit of its topic, the content of the trajectory was co-created by its participants. At the start of this trajectory, participants have set priorities within the many subthemes of this broad localisation concept, indicating most interest in sharing practical tools and practices to operationalize it.

¹ The sessions consisted of a kickoff event ([session I](#)), priorities within the wide scope of localisation ([session II](#)), financing and influencing ([session III](#)), measuring localisation ([session IV](#)), inclusive programming ([session V](#)) and innovative financing ([session VI](#)).

1.2 Goals of the trajectory

The goals of this learning trajectory were:

Goal	Result
Form a platform where local partners can communicate their needs regarding localisation to donors and INGOs	6 thematic sessions
Share existing policies, approaches, practical issues or bottlenecks to learn from each other on localisation initiatives	Many shared: see an overview on p.14-17
Explore what localisation means specifically in the context of SDG16+	Case examples from justice and peacebuilding, though also many cases borrowed from humanitarian sector
Develop a 2-pager of key themes and recommendations	See p.13-14, which will also be published separately
Identify key progress indicators on localisation	Potential frameworks discussed (p.10), without claiming universality
Identify key learning gaps	See p.12
Plan a joint (local partners, INGOs, NL MFA) learning and implementation pathway based on key recommendations and gaps	To be discussed during launch of this report

1.3 Content of this paper and potential follow-up

Below you can find the building blocks for Locally Led Development that derived from the six thematic sessions during this trajectory – content that is verified by the participants. The content of this paper are relevant for all working in the field of SDG16+, ranging from donors and multilaterals to INGOs and local actors.

We will follow up on the findings of this paper by (1) connecting this to parallel initiatives,² (2) discussing it with different international audiences (OECD-DAC, SDG community, Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, internal NL MFA etc.) and (3) continuing the conversation with this community on practice on the identified remaining gaps.

² For example Partos' Shift the Power [trajectory](#) or the range of conversations linked to the recent [Shift the Power Summit](#).

Findings from the six thematic sessions

1.4 Defining Localisation / Locally Led Development

During the second meeting, participants agreed to continue using ‘localisation’ as a term for the trajectory. They considered it imperfect due to its vagueness, lingering top-down implications and the seeming focus on instruments. But, the term is widely known and served its purpose, as long as this group defined what we meant by it:

- Locally led development with decision-making power at right levels
- The transfer of ownership from donors to local partners, moving from control-based to trust-based partnerships
- Transferring funding as local as possible.

Still, as discussions progressed throughout these two years, ‘locally led development’ became the more fitting and apt description. Localisation was associated with simply implementing donors’ designs at a more local level.

Participants also made clear what localisation should not mean: tokenistic participation or blindly transferring money and power to local levels. Although it is an end in itself to strengthen capacities of local partners and ensure ownership at that level, participants also recognized that not every SDG16 intervention benefits from funding or decision-making at the most local level. What is needed to realize locally led development is context specific. ‘Blind localisation’ can put partners at risk (especially in contexts of shrinking civic space), create distracting administrative burdens for those working directly with communities, or negatively disturb local power dynamics. Moreover, very localized interventions can be more sustainable or effective if accompanied by more (inter)national interventions or efforts to protect civic space - efforts that are of course still locally informed and supported. International organizations often have a complementary role to play.

1.5 Partnerships as a goal in itself

The trend for donors to set development policies through the lens of domestic interest is ongoing and unlikely to stop. This makes it even more crucial for local partners to find ways to **claim space to advocate for context specific needs in donor spaces**, and

to challenge the effectiveness of such top-down prioritization. Everyone within the 'chain' has a role to play to identify such opportunities to influence different layers of the sector (or even within organizations) to better enable local leadership. Look 'up' the funding and decision-making stream to advocate for the partner 'down' the chain.

Creating such spaces and enabling partners to occupy them demands a different approach to international partnerships. Realizing locally led development means that **partnerships that lead to more capable, resilient and recognized local actors should be seen as a goal in itself** for development cooperation, instead of focusing on a technocratic project approach. Having local partners merely implement programs would actually erode resilience, as it makes them dependent on donors and INGO without proper exit strategies anchoring this within local leadership. Meanwhile, international support will not be there forever, so identify partners' strengths (for example through 'capacities self-assessments') and subsequently assess how an international partner can complement those to address context specific needs.

Tools for assessing partnerships

USAID developed a [Community Led Development Assessment tool](#). Partners within this trajectory had good experiences with such tools (see 'Takeaways' for others). They can help organizations in reaching their goals to define the - constantly changing - complementary roles in a partnership and assess in a participatory manner how community-led a program or initiative is. Using such tools creates concrete opportunities for dialogue among stakeholders through participatory reviews.

In such new forms of partnerships, the **exchange of competencies and value** – and linked to that the non-linear character of constantly evolving partnerships plays a more central role. This goes both ways: INGOs and donors learn more about the context and local solutions to SDG16+ challenges, while local partners learn how to navigate the sector better and might develop specific technical skills through training. To shape this very concretely, one can think of 'sustainability plans' with partners, describing how to chart the possible pathway for this evolving partnership over time – depending on constantly

changing circumstances.

Building such partnerships and trust takes time, so one should not expect immediate results. That trust is key to establishing **strong feedback loops**, which in turn is essential for locally led development. Partners should feel open to exchange what is working in their context, how needs are changing over time and truly grasping the local context in general.

In a more abstract sense, thinking in terms of **social contracts** helps from a policy perspective to be critical of one's own positionality and to see interventions not only as technical problem-solving but assess interventions sustainably fit into a local system: how to support agency of local partners to seize opportunities that could strengthen their social contract and how to create space for such opportunities as an international actor?

1.6 Locally led decision-making and design

In such ‘true’ partnerships with local actors, it is often important for international partners to look for ways to **include those most affected** (or those closest to them) into development of policies and programming, moving from mere consultation to true leadership. Jointly assess needs and subsequently help provide access, while communities shape the direction and content.

A current pitfall is that such partnerships are formed with ‘**usual suspects**’: a small and at times privileged (which by no means implies less dedicated) circle of local partners that simply have access to the international community. Especially in the rush of putting together a program, donors and INGOs often engage and collaborate with the already known partners in a specific country. In the same vein, international partners should actively seek to **amplify marginalized voices in global spaces**. This could mean reserving budget for them to travel and speak at a conference.

To avoid this, international partners should **invest in permanent dialogue frameworks with CSOs and representatives**, or at least exchange contacts across donors. It might also require taking the realities of struggling for livelihoods into account better to enable local leadership for SDG16+ interventions, and to reach those who don’t have the luxury of participating.

For donors, it is not easy to reach those levels of locality, due to their institutional nature and for example (spatial) security restrictions. It should be done carefully and in **conflict- and culturally sensitive** ways. When engaging with marginalized groups and amplifying their voices with authorities on sensitive topics, it might be beneficial to do this in less ‘in your face’ ways to prevent backlash (e.g. closed door meetings), while engagement with grassroots organizations in general shouldn’t jeopardize their local legitimacy. Lastly, engagement with one group might imply disturbing local dynamics between groups.

There are also many practical barriers to such involvement, of which an important one is language. Too often, policies, funding opportunities, meetings and tools are not accessible to those who don’t speak English (the dominant language), French, Arabic

Inclusive programming for Transitional Justice

The area of Transitional Justice is an intuitive entry point for thinking about involving those with lived experiences, as those affected play a key role in finding solutions.

[WIPC](#) shared examples of (1) jointly assessing justice needs, (2) providing access (to other victims and associations, to juridical knowledge and processes etc.) while (3) those partners shaped the direction and content (e.g. commemoration ceremonies with a priest).

By supporting communities to organize autonomously, WIPC prevents the imposition of external agendas and communities identify their own needs and priorities, leading to more meaningful influence on policymaking.

Identifying and bringing together victims is a clear example of the crucial need for specific local knowledge and initiative, as these are sensitive topics and they are widespread in rural areas with no access to information.

or Spanish. This means international partners miss out on interaction with local partners and their knowledge, while local partners miss out on access to viable funding and partnership opportunities, or simply accessing information that is relevant to them. **Language justice** requires resources for translation in every step of the process of designing and implementing policies and programs. Utilizing Artificial Intelligence could potentially be a (cost-)efficient opportunity for this matter.

1.7 Financing and infrastructure

Possibly the most prominent factor associated with localisation is **localizing funding**. After all, funding makes things possible and it is a tangible, concrete indicator that was for example included in the (humanitarian) Grand Bargain. The assumption: more direct funding and grant decision-making at lower levels stimulates ownership and context specificity. Again here, we should be careful to localize funding without eroding local dynamics. Another factor is that local partners, by definition, are better at navigating their constituency than navigating the international development assistance sector, so drowning them in paperwork and requirements would be counterproductive.

The most straightforward change is of course for donors to **change requirements for funding**. An example was requiring the participation of local NGOs in bigger consortia. Often, donors and INGOs have assumptions about what is (dis)allowed, while there is a lot more space to simplify requirements if one would actively look for that flexibility. Another change is to make more **space for informal organizations or activities**, as informality plays a central role at the local level. Two concrete suggestions were for donors and INGOs were to actively ask for (qualitative) feedback on the process, and to simply go through your own forms and administration as a donor through the eyes of an applicant - and then remove unnecessary parts.

Still, requirements will be there, so **supporting competencies to deal with requirements** is also a way forward. If programs and policies become more participatory and capacity exchange becomes more central, overhead costs are undoubtedly going to rise, so making deliberate space for that is necessary (and opposed to sole 'direct funding' interpretations of localisation).

Umbrella or network organizations can play a role in bridging the required bureaucracies and capacities from donors. Or **locally-governed financing mechanisms** such as a global humanitarian response fund whereby local actors are the primary decision-makers in design, governance, and decision-making around funding (see

Measuring localisation

NEAR's Localisation Performance Measurement Framework ([LPMF](#)) is a useful tool that has been used by a range of actors, local and international, to assess progress on localization goals (e.g. capacity sharing, more equal partnerships, more direct funding). In addition to proposing a menu of specific indicators to track your progress, it guides you in how to contextualize this framework to your

Annex 1). This fund pilot showed that funding can remain timely while also being locally-led and managed: the fund could declare a new acute crisis, request, receive, and review applications and ultimately award grants within eight days.

We have already established that local actors should be involved in designing a program or policy, but this is also true for **participatory development of funding structures and processes**. This way, one takes into account possible unforeseen legal or contextual difficulties for certain groups, such as particular limitations for women in a region that might require to set up a specific type of partnerships to access the available funding. What helps is designing proposals at the national level instead of at headquarters and actively reaching out to marginalized communities once it's out – again working around the language barriers.

Increasing the accessibility of funding

[Women's Fund Asia](#) is a feminist organization that supports human rights of women and transpeople in Asia. They invested heavily in accessibility for communities that normally do not navigate the development sector. They did this a.o. by actively reaching out to marginalized communities and accepting proposals in 14 languages, with grant requirements and

This participatory aspect can also be applied to **monitoring the results**. To create more horizontal accountability, community based monitoring that goes beyond the activity's lifespan creates a stronger and more equal feedback loop.

In general, such innovations are best implemented through pilot projects with potential to scale, where possible combining grants with loans for maximum sustainability.

1.8 Measuring locally led development

We've already identified the gap between written words and practice of locally led development. How do we hold ourselves accountable and

capture progress on our ambitions? This can be done with the help of a measurement framework on relevant domains like capacity sharing, funding, participation and partnerships.

Important is to not simply use prefabricated indicators, but first contextualize those to your organization by defining what locally led development looks like in your context and partnerships. This contextualization takes a (joint) investment. One should make sure the conversation is in the end not about the scores of the indicators, but about what they say about practices, power relations and progress.

For donors and INGOs, such frameworks can help to guide the conversation internally and with partners on locally led development, in communicating your ambitions and to make your plans concrete. For local NGOs, such frameworks help to identify your gaps in finance and capacity together with your international partners – and thereby in more effectively lobbying for support to address those gaps. It also provides useful information for management information.

Takeaways

1.9 Key takeaways

The unique aspect of 'Unboxing Localisation' was that local organizations, INGOs and donors jointly unpacked this multi-faceted concept of localization (or as it was renamed throughout: locally led development). So apart from concrete recommendations and many cases presented and shared on how LLD is already being implemented, this format brought about interesting conversations beyond siloes and opportunities for joint agenda setting. Instead of being discouraged with how big and complex it is, this trajectory showed many concrete ways forward and connected partners in doing so.

The whole sector has been thinking about these challenges, so many conclusions have been discussed in other papers and fora too. There were some elements that were a particularly useful contribution to the broader debate though:

- The sector's conception of what 'results' are is still too narrow. SRoL interventions change local dynamics through their direct goals (e.g. access to justice or mediation), but also through the exchange of skills and ideas, the network this collaboration establishes, the agenda setting in the donor countries etc. **How partnerships and complementary roles develop over time should therefore be considered a goal and result in itself.**
- Too often, local partners are drawn into the design of programs when fundamental decisions have already been made, while collaborating within the framework of an 'ongoing train' with tight deadlines. Donors should invest in more **permanent frameworks for dialogue at country or even more local level**, to constantly reflect on ongoing work and proposals for new initiatives.
- Due to capacity reasons and regulatory realities, it is not easy for donors to work directly with small local organizations. The role of (supporting to set up) **network organizations** should be utilized better to bridge this gap.
- There are also some concrete tools and practices that recurred throughout the trajectory:
 - o It should be common practice to work with **sustainability plans and partnership assessment tools** to constantly monitor whether the local partner is supported in the most effective and sustainable way by its international partners.
 - o Language is a key barrier, so investing in **translation** is a concrete improvement that should be common practice for international organizations. Reserve budget for translators and utilize the opportunities AI offers.
 - o The large ambitions on LLD should be accompanied by **monitoring progress on LLD goals**. There are frameworks and indicators available that can help to track progress.

1.10 Key learning gaps

This trajectory and many others (see ‘Shared case examples’) have documented the technical side of implementing LLD: funding mechanisms, partnership assessments, context analysis methodologies. Although these should continuously be further developed, spread and implemented, the elephant in the room remains the political side of **dealing with tensions when interests diverge between donors (and therefore domestic priorities of tax payers) and local organizations and communities**. Where do local and donor priorities overlap, what should locally led collaboration on those shared priorities look like and which for a are most apt to discuss these perspectives and priorities? While answering this question, we should constantly dissect long- and short-term priorities and whose priorities we're talking about (context and power).

A second gap to follow up on, is the body of evidence for **how LLD reforms such as the ones proposed in this paper have concretely led to more effective and sustainable interventions** (acknowledging the key recommendation of this report that our concept of effectiveness needs to change in any case).

1.11 Recommendations

Recommendation	Concrete actions
Remove the language barrier for local organizations	Make sure translation is available for all policies, funding opportunities, meetings, tools etc.
	Invest in translators, or utilize workable solutions from Artificial Intelligence.
Regard partnerships and the accompanied capacity sharing as a goal in itself	Donors should create room for overhead costs for local partners in the budget, so partners have more time and possibilities to share capacities and learn.
	Make a joint development plan with your partner(s) on goals to improve capacities over time. Take into account that your complementary roles will change, depending on evolving circumstances (e.g. shrinking or opening civic space).
Rethink the requirements to access funding with the goal of simplifying them	Actively look or ask for flexibility within your (partner) organization's systems, as there is usually more space than one assumes.
	As a donor, multilateral or INGO, simply fill out your own forms and administration - and then remove unnecessary parts.
	As a donor, multilateral or INGO, actively solicit (qualitative) feedback on your funding and reporting processes.
	During the application process, support partners less familiar with these procedures (e.g. webinars to ask questions).
	Provide thorough and useful feedback to smaller local organizations after a proposal rejection.
	Pilot projects at a smaller scale, to they are more accessible to smaller organizations. Then scale up after success and building trust.
Develop and implement grants as participatory as possible	Make sure Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) is done in a participatory fashion, to create vertical (incl. downward) and horizontal accountability.
	Evaluate proposals at the level of the country it concerns.

Go beyond the usual partners and include those affected by the intervention	Set up a local framework of representatives to have a permanent dialogue, reflecting on ongoing and upcoming policy and programming.
	International partners should actively seek to amplify marginalized voices in global spaces, instead of merely speaking on their behalf. This could mean reserving budget for them to travel and speak at a conference.
	Engage with network organizations, that can form a bridge to (and between) smaller organizations. This also includes supporting the institutionalization of informal ones.
Stimulate locally led development in a conflict sensitive way	As an international actor, do a thorough political economy analysis and context research in collaboration with local actors before starting partnerships.
	As an international partner working on sensitive matters that risk backlash, consider collaborating in less 'in your face' ways through e.g. closed door meetings – and if not putting partners at risk, here marginalized voices lead the conversation.
Track progress on increasing locally led development	Make use of existing frameworks and indicators, such as the Localisation Performance Measurement Framework .

1.12 Shared case examples

Source	Example	Organization
Papers & guidelines	<p>Publication series on locally led peacebuilding and systemic change (Conductive Spaces for Peace). It includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Chains of Influence Framework on using your power within the donor-practice chain to create space for local partner. - A learning note with an overview of localisation practices and initiatives 	Conductive Spaces for Peace
	- Innovators Hive : an online library with tools and resources and a community space to connect on innovations for strengthening local leadership.	Conductive Spaces for Peace

	Guidance note on 'Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders in Humanitarian Settings'. Accompanied with pilots for longer term funding.	EU (DG ECHO)
	Paper on 'Effective Options for Financing Local Peacebuilding'.	GPPAC & RFF
	Guide on 'Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries', a.o. on strengthening local ownership.	OECD-DAC
	Recommendations on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus	OECD-DAC
	Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance	OECD-DAC
	Donor statement on Supporting Locally Led Development.	Most OECD countries
	Paper on 'Race, Power and Peacebuilding'	PeaceDirect
	Publication on 'Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation'.	PeaceDirect
	Catalogue of research and evidence on locally led development.	Save the Children
	Book called 'Reimagining Civil Society Collaborations in Development' and a related research article , describing ways to support the smaller, innovative CSOs and putting them in a leading role, instead of fitting them into the international system.	Wageningen University
Tools	Toolkit for tracking organizational capacity development	EU
	The Localisation Performance Measurement Framework (LPMF) to assess progress on localisation across various components (e.g. capacity sharing, coordination and complementarity, partnerships, funding) plus a guide how to contextualize the framework to your organization.	NEAR

	The Power Awareness Tool to understand power in partnerships	Partos
	Toolbox on innovative financing.	RFF
	Capacity Development Plan formats	UNDP
	Community Lead Development Assessment tool to asses in a participatory manner how community-led a program is.	USAID
	Organizational Capacity Assessment tool to self-assess capacities.	USAID
Other trajectories	Decolonising Advisory Community	RINGO
	Permanent Forum on People of African Descent	UNHCR
	Redefining equitable Research Partnerships: a Southern led Action Agenda.	Southern Voice, IDS, IDRC
Funding frameworks	Enhanced Response Capacity instrument promotes design and piloting on a.o. localisation and financing.	EU
	The Innovative Peace Fund provided financial support and technical assistance to women-led peacebuilding organizations in FCAS.	ICAN
	Knowledge Management Fund is an accessible small grants facility for SRoL initiatives with a central role for knowledge.	KPSRL
	The NEAR Change Fund is a global humanitarian response fund that is locally designed and managed. The Change Fund was designed to provide quick allocation of funding to NEAR members who are responding to worsening crises in their communities. .	NEAR
	Civic Space Fund enables Dutch embassies to directly support local civil society in their lobby & advocacy and capacities, while linking it to CSO's in OECD countries.	NL MFA
	VOICE is a grantmaking instrument for grass-root groups and representing organizations that have difficulty accessing funding. The grant is requested through an intermediary that takes	NL MFA

	care of the administrative workload (funding, reporting).	
	Local Action Fund is a flexible way to reach grassroots organizations to directly support “frontline peacebuilding efforts”.	PeaceDirect
	Trust Fund for Sustaining Peace in Colombia is a multi-partner trust fund to centralize and bridge the gap between large sums by big donors and smaller organizations.	UNDP
	Women’s Fund Asia reaches out actively outreach to marginalized communities and accepts proposals in 14 languages, with grants always positioned in a context to take into account local barriers.	Women’s Fund Asia
Highlighted cases during the trajectory	Global Impact Framework links high-level conflict frameworks with expertise and insights from local experiences.	Search for Common Ground
	UN Peacebuilding Fund implemented more direct funding (25%) to CSOs directly, national level selection of proposals, more small grants, community based monitoring. It also contains an Impact Hub that can be helpful in tracking impacts of localisation.	UNDP
	WIPC engaged those affected by providing victims access (to other victims and associations, to juridical knowledge and processes etc.) and jointly assessed their justice needs while these organizations shaped the direction and content (e.g. commemoration ceremonies with a priest).	WIPC
	Community-Led Refugee Investment Vehicle is a migrant community-informed investment mechanism for social enterprises and businesses in Colombia, who jointly prioritized (1) institutional capacity, (2) innovation & risking new initiatives and (3) scaling up proven concepts. It combines grants and loans for maximum sustainability.	RFF & Innpactia & Latimpacto



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