June 2026
SECTOR RESOURCE

From Intention to Action:
Practical Insights for Locally-Led Development

Co-created by the 2026 Cohort of:
Bridging the Gap Between Communities and Funders

Co-facilitated by:
Cooperation Canada and Salanga

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About this Resource

This resource was co-created by practitioners across the Canadian international development sector who participated a five-session learning journey facilitated by Salanga and Cooperation Canada from February to April 2026. It synthesizes practical guidance, lived insights, practitioner experience, and emerging operational practices shared across the cohort into practical guidance for organizations that want to move from visioning locally-led development (LLD) to genuinely putting it in practice.

It is aimed primarily for Global North–based intermediary organizations — whether NGOs, consulting firms, funders or faith-based organizations — that recognize the power they hold in the development system and are seeking concrete ways to shift it towards local actors.

We express our thanks to all the cohort participants who contributed their knowledge, experience and time: Alisa Quillah (World Renew), Barbara Nzigiye (Cooperation Canada), Cinthia Heanna (Cowater International), Daniela Tudela (Children Believe), Delia Gordon (ERDO), Deo Imani (MCIC), Émilie Roy (Mission Inclusion), Florence Allard-Buffoni (CARE Canada), Indrani Barron-Illescas (Oxfam Québec), Jenny Gutzmann (FH Canada), Jerome Laycock (CARE Canada), John Ery Joseph (Mission inclusion), John Popiel (Presbyterian World Service & Development), Khodeza Hossain (Children Believe), Maggie Zeng (World Renew), Maria Carmona (Presbyterian World Service & Development), Megan Botha (Horizons of Friendship), Olga Ndione (Cooperation Canada), Sarah Johnson (Kinvia)

This learning journey was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.

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1 Shared Foundation: Understanding Locally-Led Development

1.1 What is Locally-Led Development

Locally-Led Development (LLD) is about recognizing and supporting the agency of local actors over their own development journey — shifting decision-making authority and control of resources toward those who are or will be directly impacted. LLD spans a broad spectrum, from national and sub-national actors through to community groups and whole-of-community approaches where all voices are represented. There is no single consensus definition of LLD, and organizations across the sector take different approaches. LLD is grounded in shifting power and helping local actors to recognize and act on their agency, which inherently enhances the depth and sustainability of change.

The key questions remain the same at any scale: Does power and control sit with those most directly impacted? And are local actors, who are often best positioned to support community agency, inclusion and individual autonomy, being effectively resourced and partnered with to make that possible?

Within this spectrum, there are also different depths of practice - from early-stage informing, where communities are consulted but not in control, to genuinely community-led practice, where communities drive priorities, design, and accountability. Importantly, this depth can vary across different dimensions of an organization's work: many organizations are further along in shifting power for program design, but less so when it comes to monitoring and evaluation, financial decisions, or governance. Recognizing where that unevenness sits is as important as assessing overall progress.

This resource aims to be useful across the full spectrum. Whether your organization works directly with grassroots communities, channels funding through national civil society partners, or sits further up the system. The principles, barriers, and practices discussed here are intended to be relevant to where you are and to support movement toward greater community ownership from wherever that starting point may be.

Depth of Practice: How much power is genuinely shifting?

Many development organizations are somewhere in the middle of this spectrum and that is a good starting point. The goal is to honestly look inward, assess for areas of greater alignment to your internally identified goals and principles and to take intentional actions for organizational progress towards greater community ownership over time.

This spectrum is adapted from the IAP2 spectrum / Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation and is a useful as potential spectrum, not a fixed pathway. Many organisations sit at different points across different functions.

1.2 Who is Community?

Communities can be geographic (a village, a neighbourhood), thematic (people united by a shared rights issue or shared value), institutional (people brought together by a school system, a faith community, diaspora community or a civil society networks), or defined by a shared identity or experience. What matters is not how the community is bound, but (i) whether you are genuinely reaching the community experiencing the impact of intended change, and (ii) when you do, that you intentionally engage the broader community beyond leaders and traditional power holders to reflect lived realities of all community membership (including those most likely to be left out: e.g. in some contexts - women, children, structurally excluded groups, people with disabilities, the elderly, and those not affiliated with formal structures).

An open question: if an organization is itself run by members of the community, how do we still ensure the wider community has genuine voice - and should we?

1.3 Foundational Principles

These principles are not a complete or final list — they are a starting point towards ensuring that all voices directly impacted or experiencing change are heard. What they share is an insistence that LLD is relational, not transactional, and that power must visibly shift toward communities for the work to be genuine. They are not checkboxes; they are principles that should translate within how your organization structures relationships, makes decisions, and allocates resources.

Power Shifting
Actively transferring decision-making authority and control of resources toward those most directly impacted, in ways that build and sustain their agency over their own development.

Inclusion
Intentionally create safe space for the voices of those most often excluded to be the active drivers, not solely “project beneficiaries” or subjects of consultation. 'Community' is not a monolith, inclusive participation means going beyond the most accessible and vocal members.

Shared Accountability
Accountability is multi-directional, shared across all actors, from community members to local and sub-national organizations or institutions, across organizations and to the engaged communities. It is not restricted to funder reporting and includes consideration about data ownership and transparency about budgets and resources.

Accompaniment
A sustained presence alongside communities, with commitment to follow their lead rather than set the pace.

Do No Harm

Awareness of both immediate and long-term impacts of decisions and power dynamics on communities, including unintended consequences. The diversity of lived experiences shapes what feels safe for different actors.

Collaboration

All parties bring and share their different capacities and knowledge. Genuine equitable collaboration flows from co-creation and creating space for local actors (including community members) to design their own change pathways.

2 From Intention to Action: Organizational Practice

2.1 Overcoming Organizational Barriers

Shifting toward locally-led development is as much an internal organizational challenge as an external one. Barriers tend to cascade from funders to organizations or intermediaries to local partners. However, organizations and even local partners often introduce additional constraints that are not actually required by funders out of habit, risk aversion, or a reluctance to relinquish control. Recognizing this is itself part of the unlearning: questioning which processes genuinely serve accountability and which simply preserve standard practice. The table below draws on discussions across the learning series, throughout which participants named the barriers they encounter, either imposed internally or externally and shared practical guidance on what has helped them move forward. Many of the most effective shifts are not large — a single change in how a partnership agreement is written or how a reporting template is framed can have a ripple effect.

An overarching enabler, identified in discussions, that can support addressing multiple aspects of the barriers and constraints across multiple themes, is establishing trust and familiarity through long term relationships that allow for enhanced contextual knowledge and mutual accountability. To shift our perspective of partnerships from a project-to-project model to a sustained, relational one.

Area	What we heard is challenging	Practical suggestions we heard on solutions
Time	Funder time constraints when writing applications. Not enough time leaves people out. Takes time to meaningfully collaborate. Relationships require time, commitment, and in-person presence.	• Engage local actors at conception phase, but focus on building meaningful community-led design as a project activity rather than squeezing it into a proposal or project kick-off phase • Embrace flexible project design, to accommodate future changes. • Discuss with funder ways to allow for learning and adaptation. • Build strong learning cultures that systematically capture contextual insights that create a knowledge base for future proposals.

Area	What we heard is challenging	Practical suggestions we heard on solutions
Compliance Burden	Lots of forms to fill out. MEAL component gets a limited budget. Funders with pre-determined KPIs. Financial compliance burdens. Complex and strict compliance requirements.	• Absorb reporting burdens rather than passing on to local partners. • Openness to flexibility. Invest in user-friendly digital tools that reduce duplication and manual entry. • Develop standardized templates with clear guidance and examples. • Explain the purpose behind each requirement, reducing unnecessary steps. • Provide checklists and simplified guidance notes. • Question what is required and why and pushing back if able. Ask: what is one form that could be eliminated, or what is one question that could be removed? • Pre-fill information in templates for local actors.
Risk	Low risk tolerance for shifting control to local actors (either internal or funder driven). Concern about financial accountability and not achieving project goals.	• Long-term relationships with local partners are themselves a risk mitigation strategy — familiarity and contextual knowledge reduce the unknowns. • Be honest internally about your organization's risk tolerance before making commitments to local partners. • Co-create locally appropriate accountability systems (aligned with community norms as well as donor requirements). • Build trust incrementally through smaller pilots using flexible funds – demonstrating success of LLD. • Use evidence from previous projects to build confidence internally and with funders. • Embrace unlearning related to the risks of not embracing LLD — poor sustainability, low community ownership, results that don't outlast the funding.
Capacity	Low capacity is a real challenge but should not be a precondition for partnership. It is often assessed on donor and intermediary terms — financial systems, reporting frameworks, language — which overlooks local knowledge, trust, relationships, and contextual expertise that formal assessments rarely measure.	• Reframe capacity as something shared and enhanced through partnership, and not a threshold to clear before it begins. • Integrate capacity strengthening into project design and budget — not as a prerequisite but as a project goal. Commit to multi-year partnerships that allow capacity to grow. • Recognize that knowledge often flows both ways — local partners frequently bring expertise that intermediary organizations lack. • Factor in the ability of (and time required for) local partners to adapt tools and approaches to their specific context, which is itself a form of capacity. • Concentrate efforts with fewer partners or contexts to develop deep relationships and contextual knowledge.

Area	What we heard is challenging	Practical suggestions we heard on solutions
Funder Alignment	Donor priorities, pre-set outcomes, and high restrictions that don't align with community-identified needs. Different funders bring different requirements, vocabularies, and sometimes contradictory demands.	• Have honest conversations with funders early to understand their flexibility and risk tolerance, many are more open than assumed. • Bring community voices and feedback directly into donor conversations. Where full alignment isn't possible, find entry points. • Include outputs, immediate or intermediate result that are framed support LLD within larger conventional projects. • Demonstrate cost-effectiveness, sustainability and impact of locally-led approaches through evidence and case stories of previous projects. • Propose pilot "flex funds" within projects that can be redirected based on emerging community needs.

2.2 Working with Local Partners: Towards More Equitable Partnership

Local partners are often the most important actors in LLD and the most underestimated. The type of partners you work with, how deeply they are embedded in the community they work with, how you vet and select them, and how power is shared in the partnership relationship all determine whether LLD principles translate into practice.

Partnership agreements should reflect a genuine power-sharing intention, not just compliance requirements passed downstream. Depending on where an organization sits on the LLD spectrum, this might mean co-designing program goals together, or it might mean supporting a local partner to design programming themselves while the international partner provides guidance and technical input as needed.

Consider building in:

- Program goals and indicators developed with — or by — local partners and communities, not just signed off on.
- Local partner involvement in renewal decisions and funding conversations with funders.
- Overhead and core funding that allows local partners to sustain their organizations, not just deliver activities, including funds the partner can direct themselves toward their own capacity strengthening priorities.
- Participatory financial management processes (such as joint audits) that support local agency over resources rather than impose surveillance.
- Flexible reporting formats that recognize community-generated evidence, not only donor-template outputs.
- Language accessibility — proposals and reporting tools in partners' own languages where possible.

Unlearning ways of working: Local partners sometimes replicate top-down dynamics themselves, holding power over communities rather than facilitating inclusion and agency. This is not a reason to bypass them, it is a reason to invest in the relationship. Part of the work is creating space for local partners to go through their own unlearning — of donor-driven ways of working, of assumptions about community capacity, of what "accountability" means — just as international organizations must go through theirs. That unlearning is not a precondition for partnership, it is something that happens through it. Investing in local organizations increases successful implementation of LLD, while increasing the skills of local leaders to lead horizontally, achieving results through collaboration and partnership.

2.3 Budgeting for Locally-Led Development

While LLD has real cost implications, the framing matters. LLD can also save costs over time through greater relevance, sustainability, and community ownership that often goes beyond the scope and duration of any external project, so investment into LLD can be counted as capital investment into community agency to address their own challenges. The cost of not doing it, in failed projects and ongoing dependency, is rarely counted. LLD can also open new funding streams: local government alignment, diaspora funding, or other actors whose priorities match community-identified needs.

Practical budgeting considerations:

- Integrate an LLD approach from project design, it makes budgeting easier and clearer from the start.
- Be transparent with communities and local partners about budgets — including how funds are divided, what the intermediary retains, and what is restricted by the donor. Transparency about resources is itself a power-sharing practice.
- Include dedicated budget lines for whole-of-community consultations and community-led co-design, this is not overhead, it is the foundation.
- Require that local partner budgets reflect meaningful local staffing and expertise. For example, make local gender expertise a line item, not an assumption.
- Integrate core funding to local partners, not just pass-through project funds. Partners need organizational sustainability to lead effectively and integrate within existing systems. Include funds they can direct themselves toward their own capacity strengthening priorities or based on emerging community needs.
- Consider community action grants or small community-held funds that allow communities to make their own resource decisions.

This resource is published during a period of significant disruption in international development funding. Traditional aid flows are contracting and shifting, with knock-on effects across the system — from intermediaries to local partners to the communities they accompany. This reshaping of how development has traditionally been approached makes the locally led development principles explored in this resource more urgent and relevant than ever. In a constrained environment, the case for locally led approaches that build durable, community-rooted change and mobilize local resources is critical for minimizing the impact of aid sector disruption and presents a real opportunity to significantly reduce local actors' dependency on global ones.

2.4 LLD, Data and Monitoring

In most development projects, data is collected from communities, analysed by implementing organizations, and reported to funders. Shifting toward locally-led development means rethinking each of those steps and the directions of accountability. Who decides what gets measured, who collects it, how it is interpreted, and who acts on it, these are questions about power. When communities are positioned as active drivers and interpreters of evidence, not just sources of it, monitoring becomes a tool for community agency, advocacy, and sustainability rather than a compliance exercise. This shift also produces more accurate evidence, the perspectives of those most directly affected surface root causes and changes that external measurement systems routinely miss.

Across the LLD spectrum, organizations are finding different entry points for this shift — from adjusting how outcomes are framed in a theory of change, to introducing participatory monitoring tools, to supporting communities to generate and use their own evidence entirely. What matters is the direction of travel, toward those impacted by change holding meaningful power over the evidence that shapes their lives.

Practical considerations:

- **Shift the "who" in how you describe change:** If your theory of change describes what the project will do and achieve, communities remain the object of your work. Reframe outcomes around what communities will do, decide, and drive — this contributes to the shared accountability.
- **Measure agency:** Among other things, track the agency and autonomy of communities and individuals rather than only counting what the project delivered.
- **Make space for broader and unintended change:** When communities genuinely lead, change happens in directions you didn't plan for. Build monitoring approaches that can capture these shifts, not only progress against pre-set indicators within a PMF. Understanding broader impacts is key to learning and adapting meaningfully and can be extremely useful for advocacy.
- **Create feedback loops:** Communities should see and use what is collected, not just be the source of it. Data shared back with and validated by communities builds accountability in multiple directions and supports their own decision-making.
- **Plan for sustainability beyond the project:** Consider building in post-project check-ins with local partners and communities. Sustainability is not an outcome at the end — it is something designed from the beginning.
- **Let communities define what success looks like:** Introduce monitoring, evaluation, and learning tools and systems that allow communities themselves shape what success looks like and how progress is tracked — not as a reporting exercise for external audiences, but as a tool for their own reflection and decision-making.
- **Community-led evidence can drive advocacy:** Community-generated monitoring data is not only for reporting, it is a powerful tool for learning and advocacy. Community-led evidence tools can be used to advocate for policy change with a community's own government.
- **Data can cause harm:** Who has agency to share information publicly, and with whom, matters — particularly for communities defined by vulnerability or rights violations. Safeguarding is part of data governance, not separate from it.

A growing number of organizations are enhancing community-led monitoring and evidence systems that position communities not only as data sources, but as active drivers and interpreters of evidence they gather for their own reflection, decision-making and advocacy. You can visit Salanga's website to access additionally resources and practical examples about community-led evidence and monitoring.

2.5 Integrating LLD into Funding Proposals

The core challenge identified is that proposal timelines are often too short for genuine community co-design upfront, but that doesn't mean LLD is impossible. There should also be consideration for the tenuous nature of proposals can place undue burden on local actors when success of funding is not guaranteed.

The following tips come from practitioner discussions about navigating these tensions:

- **Shift the framing:** instead of 'the project will resolve X,' write outcomes around community agency to address X. This keeps the logic model honest about who is doing what.
- **Try structuring outcomes in three levels:** community agency (ultimate), increased participation in community-led solutions (intermediate), community capacity to run their own processes (immediate). This requires less upfront community consultation at concept note stage and shifts the heavy co-design work to when you have secured funding.
- **Positioning:** situating LLD as an intermediate outcome, not just a process or vehicle, makes it something you are accountable to deliver — which also strengthens the budget justification.
- **Revisit and redesign:** if you involve local partners at the concept note and/or proposal stage, use the window after funding is awarded to revisit and redesign the logic model and PMF together with communities before implementation begins.

2.6 Your Organization as an Intermediary

Often development organizations based in the Global North (like EU, Canada, USA, Japan, Korea, Switzerland etc.) sit (or at least used to sit) between international funders and local partners. This intermediary role carries significant responsibility: the ways you receive, interpret, and pass on power — or keep it — determine how much LLD is genuinely possible at the local and community level.

Reflect on your intermediary role:

- Are you simplifying donor requirements and protecting local partners from unnecessary compliance burdens?
- Are you amplifying community voices to funders, including inviting local partners into funder conversations?
- Are you advocating for more flexible funding terms based on evidence from your partners?
- Are you transparent about your role or taking credit for locally-led or community-led outcomes?
- Are local partners involved in decision making, not just delivery?
- How are you supporting the long-term sustainability of change once your direct involvement ends and have you designed for that from the start?

3 Open Questions the Sector is Still Wrestling With

These were recorded as unresolved questions. They are the frontier of where this conversation can continue.

- Who defines what 'success' means and how do we shift that toward communities?
- What does 'long-term commitment' mean? Is the goal for us to eventually 'exit' at some point?
- Who determines 'capacity'? Capacity to do what? Donor compliance (Western-defined)? Program design? Financial management?
- How do we make funders more flexible towards fluctuating arrangements (e.g. HR, timelines) that are a natural result of genuine LLD?
- How do we navigate local leadership structures if the decisions leaders make are not the best for the broader community?
- For real commitment to LLD, does that mean less funds towards INGOs and more towards local communities and are we ready for that?
- How do we balance LLD principles with concern over transferring more funds and responsibilities to partners/communities, at a time when institutional funding is shrinking?

This resource is a record of collective learning.

The insights here were generated by practitioners doing the hard, real work of locally-led development across the Canadian international cooperation sector. We share it as a record of what this cohort learned together.

Have questions or want to connect? Salanga continues to publish case stuides, tools, and adoption resources on locally-led practice — reach out at colmeal@salanga.org or visit www.salanga.org.

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