

Summary report

Promoting local leadership and equitable partnership in NGO consortia: An online workshop

20 September 2023

[Charter4Change](#) and [NEAR](#) recently brought together four innovative NGO consortia for an interactive workshop to explore how local leadership and equitable partnership can be promoted by NGO consortia involving collaboration between international NGOs and local and national NGOs (LNNGOs). More than 260 colleagues from national and international NGOs, UN agencies, and donors shared their experiences, best practices, and challenges. This report summarises the discussions and recommendations identified by participants.



Key recommendations

- ➔ **Support the meaningful leadership, ownership, and engagement of local actors** in NGO consortia decision-making processes, including through two-way learning between local and international actors. From the outset of Calls for Proposals and proposal development of NGO consortia, and at every stage of their implementation, donors and intermediary agencies should create time and space for local actors to exercise leadership or co-leadership, rather than being invited into consortia frameworks that are pre-determined by the donors and international agencies.
- ➔ **Increase and track quality funding and accountability to local actors** in NGO consortia, including transparency about budget shares and decision-making, cascading quality funding to local actors, and tracking and reporting funding flows to local actors. Clear global norms are needed on minimum percentage allocations for overheads and institutional capacity strengthening, as well as expectations around tracking and reporting funding to all actors in the consortium.
- ➔ **Provide flexible and long-term funding for locally led capacity strengthening** and two-way capacity sharing in NGO consortia, which is aligned to local actors' vision and leverages their expertise and knowledge. Opportunities to support local-to-local capacity sharing should be encouraged. Consortia that focus on localisation should prioritise local and national actors taking on co-leadership or leadership in consortia governance (i.e. 'prime switch' from INGO to LNNGOs), on top of programmatic and individual agency capacity strengthening metrics.
- ➔ **Promote accountable and equitable partnership in NGO consortia** between local and international actors. As part of this, donors should establish 360-degree feedback mechanisms and direct dialogue with local actors to regularly assess how consortia are supporting local leadership and quality partnerships.
- ➔ **Provide support and funding for local actors to lead and engage with coordination platforms, networks, and advocacy fora.** Good practices can be built on so more contexts can benefit from local/ national NGO forums that organise and represent the collective interest of national actors. UN, donor, and INGO inter-agency coordination platforms and consortia should engage with these forums meaningfully and systematically as equal partners.

Objectives

This workshop followed recent developments in the Grand Bargain Caucus on the Role of Intermediaries, the European Humanitarian Forum and [new ECHO guidance](#) on ‘promoting equitable partnership with local responders’, as well as the [Grand Bargain 3.0 renewed commitment](#) to increase quality funding to local and national actors. The purpose of this workshop was to explore how local leadership and equitable partnership can be promoted through NGO consortia, and how INGOs can support these efforts:

1. Highlight the opportunities and challenges in promoting local leadership and equitable partnership in NGO consortia.
2. Explore how INGOs and national NGOs can strengthen support to country-level NGO consortia and funding mechanisms to promote local leadership in humanitarian response.
3. Develop a set of lessons learned and recommendations on how to maximise local leadership and equitable partnership in NGO consortia, which can contribute to broader discussions at global and country levels (e.g. the Grand Bargain and bilateral donor policy, in NGO proposal design and consortia development).

Overview of participating NGO consortia

[TOGETHER](#) is a global, multi-country, multi-year consortium, funded by the German Government. Members include four German INGOs and 38 local and national NGOs (LNNGOs) from Bangladesh, Colombia, DRC, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Somalia, and its budget is over €14M over four years.

The [Dutch Relief Alliance](#) (DRA) works in protracted crises, such as Afghanistan, DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, as well as a number of rapid onset crises, such as Libya, Ukraine, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. It currently has a four-year grant (2022-26) with €15M allocated for acute crises and €50M for protracted crises.

[Start Network](#) is made up of more than 80 local, national, and international aid agencies, and 54% of its members are local and national NGOs. It is currently setting up country-level Start Hubs, which will work to strengthen leadership by national members.

The [Somalia Nexus Consortium](#) was founded in 2019 by nine NGOs from Somalia, including diaspora organisations, and it works across humanitarian, development, and peace programming.

The workshop was structured around five questions, which were explored in panel discussions and in breakout groups:

1. **How has meaningful local NGO leadership or co-leadership in consortia decision-making been effectively promoted, and what were the main barriers?**
2. **How have consortia funding arrangements maximised local leadership and equitable partnership, in terms of (1) maximising the efficiency of local actors’ lower costs, (2) maintaining transparency about budget shares and decision-making over budgets, (3) cascading quality funding to local actors, and (4) how consortia track and report funding flows to local actors?**
3. **How have consortia invested in locally led capacity strengthening and two-way capacity-sharing?**

4. What role should INGOs play in supporting different kinds of consortia that have localisation objectives and collaborate with local and national actors?
5. How should NGO consortia with localisation objectives connect with, and influence, wider localisation efforts at the country level?

Meaningful local NGO leadership in consortia decision-making

Examples of good practice:

- ✓ **ToGETHER's** Country Steering Committees includes representatives from local actors, and is responsible for providing strategic advice and direction to country programmes. They also have the Humanitarian Operations and Innovation Facility, which provides funding to partners to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of their response.

"To INGO staff in the consortia: give the word first to local actors instead of speaking first. Listen first!"
- ✓ In its recent report, '[Exploring the three Cs: complementarity, collaboration, and consortia in Start Fund interventions](#)', **Start Network** surveyed 16 members. One INGO was part of a LNNGO-led consortia and recognised the unique value and strengths local NGOs brought to the consortia, including their pre-existing networks in local civil society and their membership of a Cash Working Group. Some of the barriers identified by LNNGOs in this report included the lack of common reporting for consortia partners, the difficulty communicating and collaborating with consortia partners, and slow funding transfers.
- ✓ Representatives from local actors also sit on the **Dutch Relief Alliance's** Local Advisory Group, which engages directly with the DRA's Board and with the Dutch MFA, and bypasses intermediaries. They also conduct an annual anonymous survey with partners on their experiences and needs.
- ✓ Other good practices included INGOs who listen first, invest in systems strengthening and systems change (rather than training for its own sake), and understand the different capacities of local actors and their unique knowledge on how to best respond to a crisis and meet the needs of their communities, as well as rotational leadership, which provides an opportunity for local actors to learn on the job, whilst also encouraging local and international actors to work collectively.

"INGOs taking a step back and only taking on an advisory role – giving the driving seat to the LNNGOS"

Challenges:

- ✗ In many consortia, LNNGOs can't meaningfully lead or participate in consortia decision-making processes, and if they do, it's tokenistic or a tick box exercise. Local actors are invited into consortia once the key decisions have already been made. This is attributed to power imbalances, incorrect perceptions of LNNGO capacities and strengths, and insufficient funding.
- ✗ Funding frequently isn't cascaded to LNNGOs fully or transparently, and information about the project and budget often isn't shared with LNNGO partners. This creates an environment of distrust rather than collaboration.
- ✗ Local actors can't raise issues and negotiate with INGOs due to fear of losing funding. They need safe spaces where they can feel confident having these conversations.

"Issue of competition in the system – seeing each other as competitors rather than collaborating and supporting one another"

Recommendations:

- ➔ Support the meaningful leadership, ownership, and engagement of local actors in NGO consortia decision-making processes, including through two-way learning between local and international actors, and ensuring local actors are in leadership positions.
- ➔ International actors should be more transparent at all stages of programme design and implementation, and shift and challenge their own perceptions of local capacity.

Consortia funding arrangements to maximise local leadership and equitable partnership

Examples of good practice:

- ✓ The **Dutch Relief Alliance** focus on making as much funding as possible available to local actors, with a target of 35% of all funding. Local actors are involved in programme design, 4% of the budget is allocated to overheads, and 5% for capacity strengthening. They also allocate a crisis modifier at the beginning of programmes, which enables actors of the consortia to prioritise needs as they evolve. One of the biggest enablers for the Dutch Relief Alliance’s equitable partnerships is multi-year funding from their donor.
- ✓ Other good practices include openly communicating consortia funding opportunities and ringfencing funding (e.g. 35%) for local actors, as well as setting out expectations and parameters clearly in partnership agreements.

Challenges:

- ✗ In general, the norm experienced by most LNNGO participants was that international actors have most of the decision-making power in NGO consortia. They decide budgets without local actors, don’t share risk fairly, and aren’t held accountable.

Recommendations:

- ➔ Increase quality funding and accountability to local actors in NGO consortia, including transparency about budget shares and decision-making, cascading quality funding to local actors, and tracking and reporting funding flows to local actors.
- ➔ International actors should shift from risk transfer to a risk sharing approach.

“We need fast drivers to move the localisation agenda”

Locally led capacity strengthening and two-way capacity-sharing in consortia

Examples of good practice:

- ✓ At the beginning of a programme, **ToGETHER** conduct an organisational capacity assessment to establish a baseline and identify the needs and gaps for capacity strengthening on a country-by-country basis. They have a strong emphasis on two-way capacity-sharing, which involves exchanging skillsets, strengthening capacities based on assessments, and building strong networks and advocacy.
- ✓ The **Dutch Relief Alliance** capacity strengthening budget is flexible and can be used for staff, assets, and other aspects of organisational growth, depending on local actors’ priorities and their vision for their organisation.

“It is important to appreciate that local actors have capacity that makes them respond to the needs of the communities they serve.”

- ✓ **Start Network** made £15k skills grants available for local and national Members to apply for and use how they wanted, rather than being connected to a particular response or capacity demanded by a donor.
- ✓ At least 5% of programme budgets should be allocated to capacity strengthening and should be based on the vision of local actors, including using capacity self-assessments and self-identifying training needs.

Challenges:

- ✗ International actors don't value the capacities, expertise, and knowledge of local actors. At the same time, funding to invest in the organisational capacities of local actors is low.
- ✗ Plans for capacity strengthening are often designed by international actors and imposed on local actors.
- ✗ Providing the necessary transparency and accountability to institutional donors for flexible funding for capacity strengthening.
- ✗ Staff in local and national NGOs are often poached by international NGOs when they scale up. Local and national NGOs struggle to retain staff, despite providing the initial platform that invested in their capacities, skills, and knowledge.

Recommendations:

- ➔ Provide flexible and long-term funding for locally led capacity strengthening and two-way capacity sharing in NGO consortia, which is aligned to local actors' vision and leverages their expertise and knowledge.
- ➔ Promote a shared understanding of capacity strengthening and sharing that supports local leadership of NGO consortia. Donors and humanitarian agencies should establish monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning of capacity strengthening and sharing to incentivise this (e.g. expectations a 'prime swap' with NGO consortia transitioning to increased LNNGO leadership or co-leadership over time).

Role of INGOs

Examples of good practice:

- ✓ In many cases, **Start Network** INGO Members see their role as providing targeted capacity strengthening as part of long-term partnerships, rather than programme-based "capacity building". Many LNNGO Members want collaborative partnerships, two-way learning exchanges, and support for coordination and networking with partners and donors, advocacy and representation, and accessing funding.
- ✓ Research into the [role of intermediaries in partnerships at Start Network](#) found that some INGOs are testing new and innovative pilots that support equitable partnerships, including sharing 50% of ICR, setting up funds for no-strings support for capacity strengthening, and pre-positioning funds with LNNGOs to address the challenges of slow funding transfers (we also need to support LNNGO pilot projects, so they can test new and innovative ideas).
- ✓ INGOs can promote accountable and equitable partnership, including providing operational costs (e.g. meeting the IASC standard for 15% overheads), acting as a broker for LNNGOs to access flexible funding opportunities, supporting peer-to-peer sharing (e.g. the Local Coalition Accelerator in Uganda) and involving LNNGOs in co-design (e.g. Nigeria Consortium).

Challenges:

- × Often, LNNGOs feel like they are being “set up for failure” by INGOs, including insufficient operational cost provision and project-based capacity building that isn’t impactful.

Recommendations:

- Promote accountable and equitable partnership in NGO consortia between local and international actors, including long-term, partnership-based capacity strengthening, and channelling a fair share of funding to local actors, including overhead cost provision.
- International actors should strengthen their own capacities to advance local leadership and participation, including staff capacities to manage small, flexible grants that support local leadership, accountability, and decision-making, and operationalising the Grand Bargain risk-sharing framework.
- International actors should provide practical support and funding to locally led advocacy fora, networks, and coordination platforms to develop their funding absorption capacities as potential local intermediaries.

Engaging with localisation efforts at the country level

Examples of good practice:

- ✓ **TOGETHER** supported the establishment of the National Council of Humanitarian and Development Forums of the DRC (CONAFOHD) and provided capacity strengthening for CONAFOHD to influence and advocate directly in international coordination mechanisms and with donors. Today, CONAFOHD has representatives at all levels of humanitarian coordination, including the HCT and HF Advisory Board. CONAFOHD recently organised the first national localisation symposium with participants from UN agencies, INGOs, and LNNGOs.
- ✓ Other good practices include donor engagement with LNNGOs in-country and facilitating localisation dialogues, the creation of a country-level pooled fund in Bangladesh, the Interagency Bangladesh Localisation Roadmap (which provides a framework for NGO consortia to connect and support aligned localisation efforts), and promoting the prime-switching with donors and other consortia.

Challenges:

- × Most NGO consortia are not incorporating global Grand Bargain or C4C commitments made at HQ levels into their design, implementation, or MEAL.
- × LNNGOs can be stretched in a rapid onset crisis, and don’t necessarily have the time to play a leading role in convening NGO consortia and engaging with donors.

Recommendations:

- Provide support and funding for local actors to lead and engage with coordination platforms, networks, and advocacy fora.
- Localisation Frameworks should be agreed and implemented at the country level, and National Steering Groups should be set up with representation by networks engaged on localisation efforts.