Aid Exits and Locally-led Development

Key insights from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Search for Common Ground

Contents

Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
DFID	Department for International Development
CDA	CDA Collaborative Learning Projects
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
INTRAC	The International NGO Training and Research Centre

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Introduction and Methodology

Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground are engaged in a three-year research project funded by USAID – "Stopping As Success: Planning for Success from Start to Exit." In this research, twenty cases in which an INGO phased out its activities or handed-over a project to a local entity will be examined. As part of this inquiry we convened an online consultation from 3 to 6 October 2017. During this time, 95 participants working in over 40 countries engaged and responded to prompts organised around daily themes on aid exits and locally-led development.

This report reflects on that exchange, identifies consensus where it appeared, and shares key nuances and insights from individuals. Participants are identified where they wished to be, though the option for registered participants to comment anonymously is also respected. This report is not meant to be the opinion of the individual author.

After summarising Key Insights, the first section of the report will focus on Power Dynamics in the Aid Sector. Although the past two decades have seen high-level forums on aid effectiveness that have emphasised the importance of 'local ownership,' power imbalances between donors and aid recipients remain central to any such discussion. Farzana Ahmed asked to what degree progress has been made in decolonizing aid, and what more can be done to ensure local actors drive the conversation on aid effectiveness. In a similar vein, Isabella Jean queried local perceptions of aid actors, emphasising the importance of listening over instructing. Finally, in the acknowledgment that aid organizations are primarily accountable to donors, Ruairi Nolan asked how accountability can be reoriented to be accountable to aid recipients.

The second section of the report centres on the role of local actors. More than an issue of semantics, Rosie Pinnington asked for definitions of 'local' and 'local ownership,' and invited discourse about the complexity of which local actors become partners for external aid organizations. Next, Haley Dillan outlined the distinction between top-down and bottom-up approaches, and asked about the inclusion of local actors in initial programme conception and design. Finally, Marin O'Brien Belhoussein observed the impact of external aid on civil society space, and asked how it impacts the relationships between a government and local civil society organizations.

The third section of the report revolves around capacity building and sustainability. Kiely Barnard-Webster posed the question, "Is capacity building a waste of time?" as an entry point to identifying flaws with current approaches. Megan Renoir noted the interrelated internal and external challenges to the long-term financial sustainability of development projects and asked how resource mix and careful design can prevent dependence and lead to greater autonomy. Finally, Farzana Ahmed asked specifically about the impact of aid exits: "Who decides when to leave? What are the effects of abrupt departures? And how are power dynamics between external actors and local communities amplified during aid exits and transitions?"

There was broad consensus among participants that the aid system is deeply flawed, perhaps needing to be rebuilt on new foundations. They brought fearless criticisms, but also constructive engagement, sharing good practice and looking for better ways forward. We hope the insights shared below will bring greater awareness to the international community about the complex dynamics at play when carrying out development activities and the importance of locally-led development to achieve greater impact.

Key Insights

Key insight one

Structural issues require reframing in order to support effective and sustainable development. This requires local actors to be given most of the control. This also requires shifting our understanding of accountability, answering primarily and publicly to aid recipients before, during, and after development assistance.

> " [External actors should] ask civil society and local communities before you enter, and submit yourself to local community assessment of your work. Make the local assessment public. "
> **Nora Lester Murad**

Key insight two

The **power dynamics between local and international actors remain unequal**. From restrictions on how funds will be used to make decisions regarding training to the timing and strategy of exits, local actors have had little to no voice in decision-making processes. While international actors must change, participants also proposed approaches for local actors to take more control.

> " Local actors need to be much more assertive about expressing their perspectives and needs, and not be so willing to keep quiet for fear of upsetting a donor. "
> **Jenny Pearson**

Key insight three

There is **a need for greater emphasis on listening by donors and other external actors**. This includes learning local languages, building relationships at the community level, and limiting the roles of intermediaries between local actors and donors.

> " The bottom line is that donors need to get representative local input on their project design and exit strategies. "
> **Christopher Pallas**

Key insight four

Successful exits can be dependent on successful entrance, as the ways in which relationships begin influences how these relationship come to an end. INGOs, donors, and recipients should collaboratively plan for exits from the start:

> " Practitioners should prepare from the beginning of the project planning and implementation to keep in mind the philosophy of aid exit. "
> **Lulessa Abadura**

Power
Dynamics
in the Aid
Sector

Decolonizing Aid

Farzana Ahmed introduced the topic, decolonizing aid, by acknowledging the recognition among the international community that aid needs to be made more effective. This recognition is apparent in the numerous high-level forums – Rome (2003), Paris (2005), Accra (2008), Busan (2011) – on aid effectiveness, each of which pivoted on the conviction that **donors do not develop developing countries, developing countries must develop themselves**.

However, Farzana noted that despite some progress, power imbalances remain inherent in the aid sector. She invited participants to discuss whether there has really been a 'decolonization of aid' and what can be done to enable local actors to drive the aid agenda.

Some participants acknowledged improvement; most, however observed the need for more dramatic shifts as the aid agenda continues to be driven by what international donors are interested in giving, instead of what recipients need or want.

> **"** Because the sector focuses on the provision of external resources, it is dominated by donor agendas… This has a number of damaging and distorting consequences for local agency and ownership. **"**
> **Local First,
> a Peace Direct
> research project**

Progress is evident but incremental, leaving much to be desired

Some participants noted improvements in the aid sector. For example, Rutere Kagendo stated:

International aid has come a long way from being aid from us by us, to aid with us for us.

Similarly, Tomas Serna cited examples of Senegal and Guinea Bissau in which "international stakeholders are supposed to work aligned on country priorities."

However, most participants perceived progress as overstated. Kais Aliriani summarised the broad consensus:

Despite the efforts, and notable progress, I must say that decolonizing aid is still just a myth.

Florence Kayemba noted that the resource imbalance "itself creates an asymmetric power structure," and Sharon Khosa added:

[T]he aid from the North still comes with strings and shackles attached with prescribed universally applicable agendas and prescriptions which are inappropriate at local reality.

Aid may be supporting a new colonization

A common refrain raised the concern that aid itself is a tool of a new or re-colonization.

I don't see very much decolonizing, but rather recolonizing which is leading to increased national resistance to what are seen as foreign agendas.
Richard Mabala

Nora Lester Murad asked participants to consider whether aid is itself a tool of colonization: "liberation can never come from contracting with the interests of the oppressor." She asked: *"what if instead of aid, we should be seeking reparations?"*

One manifestation of a new or re-colonization is the way aid can be siphoned through governments and bureaucracies. Elijah Manok claimed that the majority of "aid money is appropriated by politicians through government agencies." It has been noted elsewhere that significant percentages of international aid return to donor countries through the mandated purchase of goods sourced from the donors.

Participants agreed not enough has been done to decolonize aid and, barring fundamental change, the system will continue to perpetuate power asymmetries in parallel with the colonial heritage we hope to move beyond.

Development objectives remain driven by foreign policy agendas

Another major criticism of international aid is the manner in which it reflects foreign policy agendas of donors rather than the needs of local communities. There was strong consensus that deliverables demanded by donors are misaligned with needs of aid recipients, and that this remains one way in which aid has yet to be decolonized.

> *Governments and aid agencies too often push their own agenda forward and fund what they deem in line with their development areas and foreign policy objectives.*
> **Margaux Pimond**

> *For every aid there is a motive behind it, and most motives do not represent the real and intrinsic change desired of the people.*
> **Obi Peter**

Linda Kitenge cited Thomas Sankara, the former President of Burkina Faso, as saying, "He who feeds you controls you." She continued:

> *Decolonizing aid is an oxymoron…Let us call a spade a spade, aid is an important component of the imperial arsenal of western donors to advance their foreign policy agendas around the world.*

The current model of aid delivery distorts local context

Debbie Ball noted that some organizations represent "business as usual" projects within the lens of donor priorities. She cited preventing violent extremism as deeply problematic, even risky, for local organizations, because violent extremism then becomes a lens through which policy makers understand and address the actions of youth. Yesterday's political agitators may become tomorrow's terrorists as a result of reframing through the foreign policy lenses of donors.

Another way aid distorts contexts is the necessity for recipients to portray communities as in great need in order to justify donor funding. Ram Prasad Dahal shared one such instance:

> *I have come across one donor's proposal…which read in starting, "Nepal is a poor country."*

In conversation with the Joint-Secretary of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development the proposal was changed to, "Nepal is a country with numerous possibilities and natural, cultural, and other resources."

Catherine Bartenge added that NGOs must portray their work in an extremely positive light to merit continued support. She referenced a Kenyan NGO that reports high enrolment rates for schools, but does not monitor or report transition levels. The paradoxical demands of reporting needs distort donor understandings of contexts.

According to Debbie Ball single reports, based on expert perspectives, can influence aid perceptions and delivery for years, whether or not they are accurate.

Recommendations

Participants brought constructive responses to these immense challenges. The most repeated can be summarised as such:

> *Let the beneficiaries draw the agenda of their development!*
> **Rutere Kagendo**

Some considered an emphasis on participation to be insufficient. "Participation is a far cry from control and it is control by national governments and civil society that is needed," wrote one anonymous commenter. Nina Aqlan envisaged the balance shifting decisively towards local control: "Local actors need to step up and reclaim their own voice and decision-making role that determines their fate and well-being."

Cecilia Milesi emphasised the importance of transforming the framework and relationships between donor and recipient:

> *The idea of EXIT…entails that we are still working with a linear framework…this is not a transformative and dialogical approach. In [such] a framework, the horizontal exchange means that there is not "end" or "exit" as we "are together" in a cooperative relationship.*

Gopal Nakarmi suggested INGOs may have an easier time avoiding the pressures of a foreign policy agenda, and thus make better partners: "There are many international development agencies that actually would like to support real development – positive changes that do not destroy people's culture and beliefs."

Summary

The way in which aid decisions are made and funding is distributed remains problematic. In many instances, foreign policies drive aid decisions in a manner that not only does not decolonize aid, but risks re-colonizing or represents a new colonization of recipient communities.

Although some progress has been made in recent years, a more fundamental and transformational change needs to occur in the way aid is conceived, delivered, and evaluated.

Nora Lester Murad advised,

> *Until then (because it will take time), the most effective thing that sincere anti-colonialists can do is to refuse to take aid that comes with unacceptable conditions and refuse to be part of aid projects that impose unacceptable conditions and quit jobs with organizations that do harm.*

Local Perceptions of Aid Actors

CDA's Listening Project *listened* to communities and local CSOs receiving aid in 20 countries from 2005 to 2009. Isabella Jean wrote:

> *We were struck by how consistently people described their experience. They did not feel heard, nor have they had a real opportunity to influence decision-making by donors and aid groups.*

Talk of equity and local ownership, just like talk of decolonization of aid, mostly rang hollow. Power remains in the hands of donors, even as local actors want their voices heard.

Isabella presented quotes from CDA's Listening Project:

> *"Donors themselves have done a lot of damage to the society, such that people are money minded to the extent that they do not see how the capacity they get from trainings and/or workshops can help them."*

> *"We feel like INGOs come and order us to do things this way or that because they have a lot of power…We don't see a lot of working together in a meaningful way…we want real partnership."*

> *"We need strategic, long-term partnerships with donors. The impact doesn't come overnight… If they want to make a change that lasts, they need to start taking longer breaths."*

These quotes strongly resonated with participants in the consultation. David Porter captured the sentiment of most, saying the quotes accord with "90% of my experience."

Isabella asked participants to discuss the implications of the power imbalance and recommendations for addressing it. Participants identified many harmful implications of the current power imbalance, but some participants also shared positive experiences in which some of these imbalances were mediated or moderated. The challenges are immense, but so is the willingness to address them.

Challenges

Aid becomes a crutch

Cecilia Milesi wrote that the power imbalance between donor and recipient reinforces "a culture of dependency and neocolonialism" and the "destruction of local economies and the resilience of local networks." Ram Pasad Dahal agreed that the imbalance of power "leads to aid dependency among the local stakeholders including citizens."

Catherine Bartenge noted, if all stakeholders are not included in conversations to set agendas and goals, "this will encourage communities to depend on donor organizations in the long-run, which is retrogressive development."

Until aid is structured such that it does not become a crutch, an achievement which some participants doubt is possible without fundamental reframing, aid could reinforce the power imbalance.

Aid undermines local governance

Donor money and the attached agendas undermine local governance when donors step into roles that are better reserved for national and local governments. This permits those actors to defer responsibilities. Ketty Luzincourt wrote:

> NGOs provide basic services to the locals, but this is the role of the state…

When local governments are not responsible to their citizens and communities become aid dependent for basic services, external aid may cause the breakdown of state society relations, leaving the community worse off.

Aid reshapes local initiatives and fracture communities

Many participants argued that aid rarely met the most pressing needs of the community. Peter Ongera cited Dambisa Moyo to demonstrate how an influx of donated items, such as mosquito nets, can undermine local efforts by putting net makers out of business. Moreover, when the greatest need of a community may not align with the items or skills donated, the local community could be forced to repurpose them.

Elijah Manyok wrote:

> The power imbalance has also forced most local NGOs to restructure to fit into the internationally designed humanitarian and development architectures to be competitive and access funding, abandoning their local structures and strategies, hence making them less relevant to the communities they represent.

Aid can also impact the way communities relate to one another and to external actors. Rutere Kagendo described visits by INGOs as striking fear into community members, as any wrong move during such a visit could result in the withdrawal of funds. He wrote:

> The problem of implementing a project under fear is that the reality on the ground
> is either diluted, covered, or exaggerated so as to make the donor happy.

Gopal Nakarmi shared a situation in Nepal. After the 2015 earthquake, a donor offered nearly double the amount requested by a local NGO, apparently to meet disbursement deadlines. This money had to be utilized within seven months. According to Gopal, "the aid money in this case is almost confirmed that it will be misused, otherwise the receiving organization will be" noted for lacking the absorption capacity.

Aid operates on unrealistic timelines

Aid operates on a timeline set by donors, rarely with flexibility. Many, if not most, projects do not begin on time, though the concluding dates do not always move in tandem.

> Due to the nature of the project design of 3-5 years, not forgetting that most of these projects delay
> by close to 2 years, the implementation period is never enough to complete what is in the plan.
> **Rutere Kagendo**

Participants noted two issues with the timelines. First, as observed by Kais Aliriani: "aid is mostly "short-term" driven and, in such cases, developing more strategic and long-term cooperation is simply not possible." Second, as Lulessa Abadura observed, many time-limited development projects ultimately blame the local community for not sustaining the work, rather than taking responsibility for their own actions, including abrupt departures: "If you ask [external donors] why" a project fails to have long-term results, they answer "nobody was ready to run the project" after they left. The power imbalance permits the assignment of responsibility to the recipient for any undesired outcomes.

Aid removes and elevates NGO staff from the community

Just as external donors have greater power than communities by controlling the money, those who are entrusted with money within communities often become segregated from the rest of the community. Ketty Luzincourt observed that local staff, when working with regional or international staff, can become "snobbish" toward the supposed beneficiaries of their work. One comment expanded on the matter:

> Because this distribution of funds by governments and donors has been ongoing for a long time, the major skill of local organizations and communities is prying loose some of [the money]. Those who are able to do this work well become donor satraps.

Florence Kayemba noted that local NGOs who are willing to work within the agendas of donors become more credible to other donors, but often less credible with the community.

Moreover, the influx of money may lead to corruption:

> But what has really added insult to injury is the high and rampant corruption engulfing the entire society where some of these aid moneys are spent…Sometimes, the lavish display of wealth by aid workers leaves me dumbfounded.
> **Edward Mungu**

Enabling local contacts and staff to act as intermediaries between wealthy donors and communities adds complex layers to power imbalances that the donor community has yet to successfully navigate.

Recommendations

Fortunately, many participants have seen improvements in recent years and shared ideas on how to shift the power imbalance. Acknowledging the extent of the challenges, Elias Sadkni commented, "most of my experiences with INGOS and donors were, so far, positive." He specified that he worked with smaller faith-based NGOs rather than well-known INGOs. He also noted that his organization is able to say "NO to funds when it doesn't fit our mission".

Florence Kayemba wrote of another positive experience from her work in the Niger Delta:

> Donors have tended to depend on local knowledge from NGOs to assist them with designing programmes for the region. There has been a rather mutually beneficial relationship between NGOs and donors in this regard as often organizations that tend to understand the context and have existing networks have been able to receive aid.

She qualified, "However, political interests of donors still play a huge part." She recommended that local CSOs form coalitions, which would amplify the voice of the community. Cecilia Milesi recommended reducing the roles of intermediaries, moving support closer to the grassroots level. Gopal Nakarmi echoed the recommendation:

> *Communities must be strengthened and provided opportunities to voice in analysing the situation, identifying alternatives, creating plans of action, etc. Donors may not have time to go through all these approaches. However, local agencies with good rapport may be able to fulfil these approaches for sustainable development.*

Kais Aliriani similarly recommended that donors "trust recipient assessments...even if your "experts" do not agree with it." Kais explained, if the recipients have a different assessment, then they will not be receptive to the donor initiative.

Another key recommendation is for all aid to include an exit strategy to avoid dependency.

> *INGOs should develop exit strategies in consultation with the local population and local NGOs as early as the project planning stage.*
> **Elijah Manyok**

> *We must enter planning for exit.*
> **Jindra Cekan**

Summary

Participants identified with CDA's Listening Project, finding significant power imbalances in the way aid is delivered. In the worst cases, aid becomes a crutch, undermines local governance, reshapes local initiatives and fractures communities, reshapes relationships with both local and external actors, operates on unrealistic timelines, and removes and elevates NGO staff from the community.

Some donors and INGOs are, however, meaningfully and constructively engaging communities. Key signs of such engagement include building relationships through listening, trusting communities over intermediaries, building coalitions within communities to amplify local voices, and planning for exits during project design.

There is also a call in the discussion for recipients to be more assertive, by not just complying with donor agendas but setting the agendas themselves, and shifting the power imbalance to create greater accountability.

Ted Giffords. Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation workshop, Sri Lanka

Centre Resolution Conflits workshop, DR Congo

Accountability of Aid Actors

Ruairi Nolan raised the question of accountability. Aid actors are accountable both to the source of their funds, whether it be government funds collected through taxes or private funds donated through other structures, as well as to those they serve. The former receives more attention than the latter.

Nevertheless, Nolan pointed to the rise of groups such as Aid Watch Palestine as evidence that there have been increasing calls for greater accountability of aid actors. The shift in focus requires an expanded understanding of accountability. While the term includes an evaluation of positive and negative impacts, it is often either reduced to or framed in terms of financial reporting.

Ruairi asked participants to reflect on whom aid actors are currently accountable to, and whether there has been any shift in recent years. He also asked what practical steps can be taken for aid to become more accountable to local stakeholders.

Participants were nearly unanimous in acknowledging the shortcomings of current accountability relationships, methods, and framing, many of which are captured below. They also presented numerous ideas for, and several examples of, how accountability can be constructively reframed.

Room for improvement

The way accountability is currently structured and evaluated has many flaws. Debbie Ball observed, "most of our internal accountability and compliance procedures relate to the financial side of the organization and to the delivery of activities/outputs."

Other participants in the consultation agreed on the importance of accountability to sources of funds is understandable but insufficient. As expressed by Kathy Alison:

> *The need to account to donors on how the funds are spent is necessary… but that accounting is NOT sufficient to demonstrate success.*

Search for Common Ground in Macedonia

A problem arises when accountability of governmental and multilateral aid agencies is "framed (and in principle, limited) by their mandate and they are primarily accountable to their mandate "givers."" This opens the door for aid to solely be used as a foreign policy arm, returning to the discussion of whether aid has been, or can be, decolonized. If INGOs are accountable to donor governments, even INGOs become agents of foreign policy agendas.

> *Isn't part of the problem that if an International NGO is funded by a bilateral donor, they are accountable to the donor? If the donor's priorities are inappropriate, so, too, are the INGO's.*
> **Anonymous**

Tomas Serna shared, "agencies are never accounting to local populations," an observation which Jenny Pearson affirmed:

> *In my experience there has not been any noticeable shift in the direction of accountability in recent years… At the same time, the requirements for upward accountability have strengthened as the results agenda has created an ever tightening hold on any relationship that involves money. With a very few exceptions, donors are not interested in downward accountability, especially if it might in any way impact on upward accountability to them. Most communities or beneficiary groups do not know that it is their right to demand accountability for anything that is done in their name…*

Furthermore, accountability also tends to conclude with final evaluations. Jindra Cekan noted the lack of planning or evaluation for horizons beyond the conclusion of a project, which skews accountability and neglects to hold aid actors responsible for long-term impacts.

The inherent scepticism and suspicion behind many approaches to accountability hinders, rather than supports, a rebalancing of power.

> *The fact that we are discussing…"accountability" means that there was no real shift after all. Accountability is not only about measuring and generating data about inputs and outputs, it's about power. We need to start discussing MUTUAL accountability" bringing donors and implementing local actors into "an equal relationship."*
> **Cecilia Milesi**

Nina Aqlan captured the frustration of many:

> *From my experience in Yemen, there was more attention in developing methods to hold local actors accountable, and yet who the hell was holding international agencies accountable for their work!?*

David Porter, by contrast, noted improvement,

> *In the past the world has made strides such as the Kimberely Process, the use of "tied aid" has been curtailed, and organizations such as Transparency International have come into being. Furthermore, this discussion is evidence that we are moving to a more accountable world.*

While he does not represent the perspective reflected in most of the comments, he captured a willingness to work for an improved approach to accountability.

Reframing accountability

Kathy Alison wrote: "[O]ne of the key elements of increasing aid accountability is to develop mechanisms that allow local recipients to have a say in how the aid is used." Ketty Luzincourt expanded:

> In relation to aid accountability, participation plays a great role. Effective participatory mechanisms allowing individuals from a target population to have a say in the programs, policies, and decisions affecting their lives... Participation clarifies and stabilizes channels of communication for governance evaluation...Communication will be more transparent... Effective participation will build ownership, commitment, and accountability.

Without ignoring the need for local actors to be accountable with the aid they receive, as well as the need for aid actors to be accountable to their funders, many comments agreed on the need to reframe accountability to include aid recipients not only as another party to whom there must be accountability, but the primary party to whom there must be accountability.

Kathy Alison described a process she worked on, which involved "organizing groups of non-state actors, including NGOs and INGOs, who are identified by their areas of expertise and willingness to work together to set an agenda and advocate for that agenda with government and donors." Such a process "is designed... to allow local recipients to identify priorities and agree on messages they want to send to donors and officials." She shared "it is also important that local officials and government representatives and donors participate in this process" as a listening exercise.

Gopal Nakarmi stated active participation will, itself, improve accountability to recipients:

> True participation in decision-making processes is the key for making accountable the local people and implementing organizations as well...Joint monitoring must be practiced. Users of the program must think they are the owners of it.

Summary

The accountability of aid actors was a topic of great concern to participants. They agreed current approaches to accountability were deeply flawed and in need of significant reframing. The reframing proposed involves understanding recipients of aid as the primary party to whom accountability should be directed. Aid actors should be evaluating the success and impact of a project by directly listening to communities. More importantly, community members should be involved from the conception of a project, because if they are not, someone else is creating the measures by which accountability will be measured. Participation and listening are key.
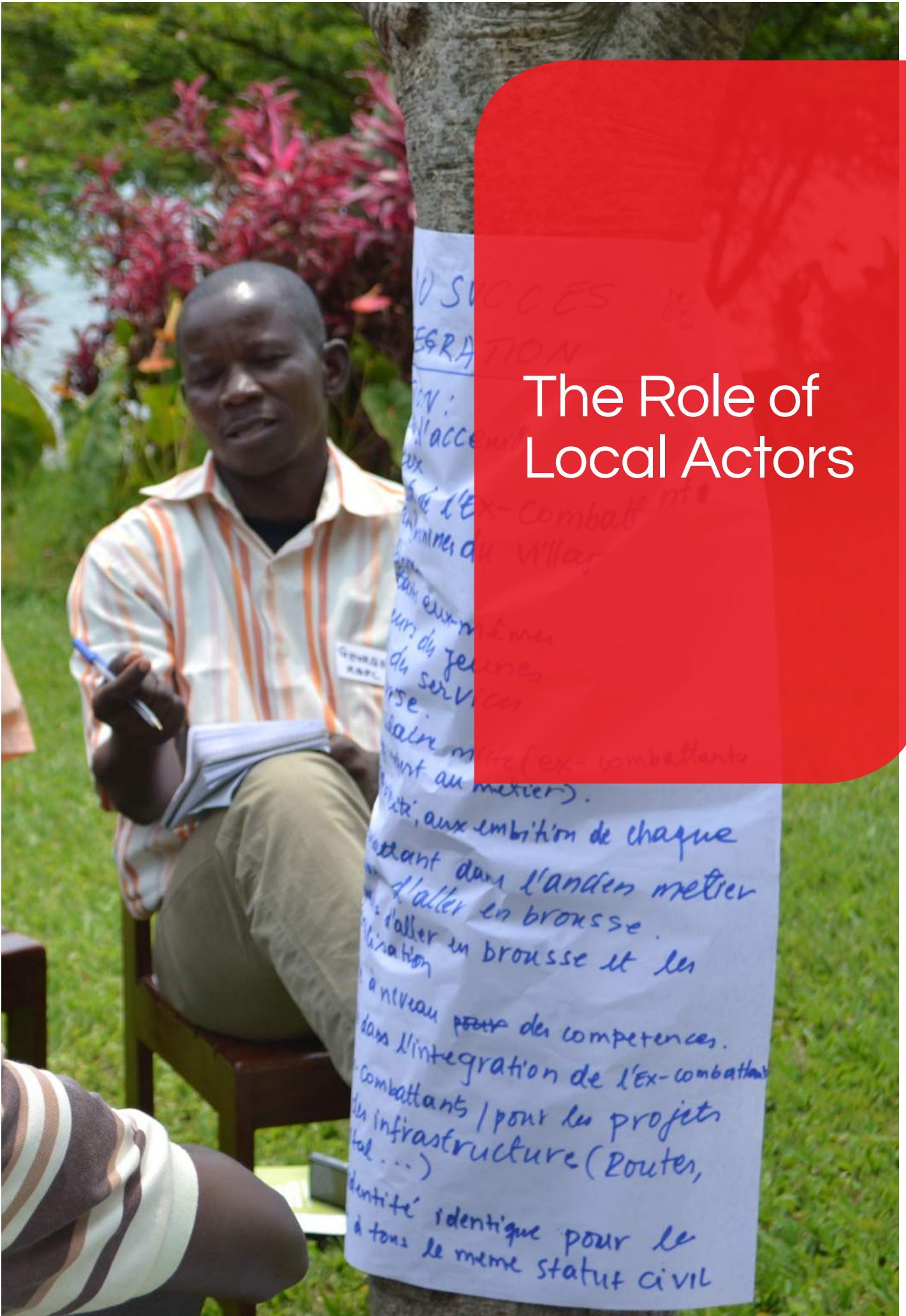
The Role of Local Actors

Defining "Local" and "Local Ownership"

Many aspects of the consultation pivoted on the use of language. Accountability, for example, was discussed at length without receiving a precise, agreed upon definition. The terms "local" and "local ownership" were no different.

Rosie Pinnington asked participants to consider the two terms. She stated language is not simply descriptive and explanatory, but that language is also used to construct the realities of certain actors. In the cases of "local" and "local ownership", the terms are used to shape the perceptions and experiences of different actors involved in aid-assisted development.

Rosie shaped the terms by framing locally-led development as partnership, with people receiving aid as participants within processes, rather than objects of processes. De-objectifying people is critical to the broader conversations about accountability, partnership, de-colonization, and locally-led development. Language has been used to objectify people, and now language must be used to dismantle this perspective.

Rosie invited participants to think about who defines "local," what it means, what conflations with other terms mean for the discourse, and whether the term is still useful in global development. She juxtaposed "locally-led" and "donor-driven," asking participants what can be learned from the contrast.

Universal terms oversimplify contexts

One apparent concern was the way language can simplify that which we know to be complex. Several comments expressed concern about the reduction of complex relationships to a simplistic binary.

> *The use of 'local' and 'global' can create a binary, which like in other situations where a binary exists and is internalized, homogenizes both categories and erases the power structures that exist among actors in both groups…[M]any minority groups, women groups, or youth groups would argue being appropriated, misrepresented/underrepresented or even invisible under the 'local' category.*
> **Sumaya Saluja**

According to one participant "local" is not used to describe an external actor working within their own context:

> *We talk of locals in the global south, but we would never use that term to describe white people working for organizations in the west. This is telling of the underlying racism in the aid sector. It is well known in the global south that donors define "local" according to the political agendas that they want to use.*

In this light, many participants find the term, "local," limiting and unhelpful.

Rosie Pinnington agreed these binaries "fail to account for the complex realities of the way "local" and "international" identities, agendas, contexts interact and feed into each other." Still, she proposed, "perhaps the distinction is still useful? It enables us to highlight some of the negative impacts of ("non-local") donor-driven development agendas."

Locally-led vs donor-driven

The binary is useful for contrasting locally-led development with donor-driven development. Tomas Serna captured the importance of inclusion and participation in locally-led development:

> *Locally led means that local communities, that is, the recipients of the funding, have a leading role in the assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning related to the intervention funded.*

He contrasted this with donor-driven development, which implies the "donor is leader in the assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning related to the intervention funded."

Many participants agreed that locally-led is far preferable to donor-driven development.

> *The rationale of propagating local ownership is to obtain greater efficiency and sustainability in development activities. Local ownership ensures to encounter minimal resistance by the local actors. Solutions that come from within are more appropriate for application to specific local conditions.*
> **Ketty Luzincourt**

Participants also agreed that most aid is donor-driven at present, but they identified examples of transitions, and a willingness among some donors to alter approaches. Tessy Maritim described such a transition of devolved power from CARE International: "[S]everal of our offices that were formally branches of our U.S. or Canadian members have since spun off to become 'local' organizations. They consistently raise the point about how dramatically the nature of their primary accountability has shifted – to being rooted in their responsibilities to the public in their country, to government, and to their governing body/board." The shift in accountability has been more important for locally-led development, than geographic location or nationality of employees.

Beyond local and international: solidarity

Some comments aimed for a sharper reframing of our concepts of local, international, locally-led, and donor-driven.

> *In [South-South Cooperation] there is no distinction between local and international, but the commitment to build long-lasting relationships of proximity and listening so to create relevant projects.*
> **Cecilia Milesi**

The call for solidarity goes beyond building relationships through listening and creating opportunities for participation – it centres on shared experiences. Solidarity is yet another word, however, where semantics come into play. While Nora Lester Murad saw value in building solidarity between non-locals and locals, she asserted:

> *What is more common are people who travel around the globe as "experts" in other people's countries, often building careers on the backs of "locals," thus the term "international" has earned a negative connotation in some "local" communities.*

Summary

"Local" and "local-ownership" point to the need to devolve power and establish cooperative relationships, but the terms are often co-opted or misapplied. Applying a binary division between local and international creates challenges, often reinforcing the hierarchy many are working to subvert.

That said, it is easier to employ a binary and agree that, in development, it is preferable for aid to be locally-led rather than donor-driven. Local leadership avoids some of the primary pitfalls of donor-driven programs, and does not prevent local development from drawing upon the resources of external actors when appropriate.

Other terms that were scrutinised:

The Field:
"This concept is old-fashioned, patronizing, and inspired by positivist linear frameworks in which the Global South (the locals) were considered the "object of study" and recipients of various actions or interventions."
Cecilia Milesi

Beneficiaries:
"[W]e have intentionally avoided using [beneficiaries]... as I think it implies ones being acted on."
Thomas Hong

Evidence of Impact: Top-Down vs Bottom-Up

Haley Dillan explored further the contrast between locally-led and donor-driven development, raising the matter of top-down versus bottom-up approaches to development. In top-down approaches, "development assistance flows from donors through public or private intermediaries to communities and individuals," whereas in bottom-up approaches "development assistance is provided directly to individuals and local organizations."

While many believe it is obvious to prefer bottom-up approaches, Haley pointed out that such approaches can also be romanticized and are important to evaluate.

Top-down

While some in development may dismiss top-down approaches, not all participants agreed. Top-down refers to the structure of an initiative, and so bottom-up does not exclude external aid actors from sharing in a development program or process.

Several participants recognised the importance of top-down action in moments of crisis. Lulessa Abadura, for example, noted top-down approaches can mobilise resources, increase capacity for project implementation, and support efficient communication. **Gopal Nakrami** states:

> *In an emergency, fully bottom-up approaches may not be possible because action must be taken immediately.*

In instances where local civil society is disorganised or focusing on survival, external intervention can be important. Even then, perhaps especially then, aid actors are ideally following the guidance of local communities.

Several participants identified weaknesses of top-down approaches, including their tendency to apply global narratives to local contexts. Writing of the conflict in Yemen, Kais Aliriani pointed to one of the weaknesses of a top-down approach:

> *While the UN intention to establish a modern state in Yemen is well justified, the ignorance of local and regional circumstances led to the total collapse of the state and the creation of another regionally-led civil war.*

One important dimension of Aliriani's comment is the inability of top-down initiatives to account for local dynamics. Lulessa Abadura identified the same shortfall, implying that the disconnect between aid actors and local contexts is a primary reason top-down approaches do not achieve intended outcomes:

> *[T]he 'top-down' approach came under scrutiny due to its failure to achieve its goal on the ground. The 'top-down' dictation without understanding the culture of the local community and other factors failed to achieve what it was meant for.*

Gopal Nakrami sees some donors trying to "shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach," but also sees limited success because most donors are structured for top-down practice. Top-down remains the status quo, even as it comes under increasing criticism. Participants in this dialogue are ready to argue for a reframing.

Bottom-up

Haley Dillan framed bottom-up in terms of passing over intermediaries, with funds arriving directly in the communities, Of the examples provided, some took bottom-up a step further, describing development as purely civil society driven without external funds.

One such case is the Wajir Peace and Development Committee in Wajir District, Kenya, which evolved from a women's group who began meeting in their community. It was through their advocacy and work that the District-level Peace and Development Committee formed. They did not require external funds. The challenge for the development community is that one cannot export this sort of bottom-up approach, as it arose at the grassroots level.

Participants agreed bottom-up approaches strengthen social accountability. Lulessa Abadura directly linked community ownership and success:

> *[I]n order to achieve success, the community should understand and be given full ownership of the project.*

Ram Prasad Dahal shared his experience in Nepal, demonstrating the importance of bottom-up approaches to strengthen accountability between all actors:

> *Bottom-up planning approaches in Nepal are being effective to increase citizen's participation in the planning exercise, which ultimately strengthens social accountability of the government and donors.*

The comments broadly agree that bottom-up approaches help reframe accountability in a way that makes aid more effective and less disruptive.

But participants also understand bottom-up approaches take time, and caution that the current logic of aid actors does not always permit enough time.

> The 'bottom-up' approache was encouraged with the coming up of local non-governmental organizations. This model of intervention, to my understanding, has not been given enough time, opportunity, and, most importantly, infrastructure to succeed.
> **Lulessa Abadura**

Bottom-up approaches are not widely documented. Jenny Pearson shared she has not heard of any bottom-up initiatives in her context, adding, "If any initiative of that sort is happening here, it certainly isn't being well publicised." Her comment points to the challenge of reporting and recognition for local work. Nora Lester Murad agreed:

> Where activities are done with local resources, there is no interest by internationals in publicizing them, so they then don't have a full picture of what's going on.

There is a need for greater documentation and diffusion of documentation on bottom-up development.

Balancing both

Bottom-up approaches are not without their own weaknesses. Many participants allowed for the importance of external actors to bring expertise. This perspective is by no means unanimous, but it is one of the reasons many participants identified a need to shift towards bottom-up approaches to development without abandoning top-down approaches. Florence Kayemba described:

> Although a bottom-up approach is desirable, I believe a combination of both in some programmes is important. There is a programme I was involved in that required diplomatic intervention for the government to respond to specific conflicts within the Niger Delta. We required the donor to take charge of that aspect of the programme even though we helped provide information that helped shape the diplomatic intervention. Top-down approaches can also work when building institutional capacity of local NGOs, but this should be based on a needs assessment in which the organizations have clearly stipulated what their training needs are and how they can add value not just to a project but to organizational growth.

In her case, having the connections to influence diplomatic decisions was critical to the effectiveness of the community action at the local level.

In line with this, Ketty Luzincourt also called for balance in order to maximise effectiveness: "using only one approach is mostly ineffective. A combination… is key to aid effectiveness." Cecilia Milesi agrees:

> [C]o-creating is the only answer.

Tom Gillhespy identified a shift in current practice, again with effectiveness as the driver:

> [T]here is recognition at the donor level that adaptive programming is beneficial and for that to take place you need to be building up more robust evidence bases… which should encourage more engagement of local actors.

With a different nuance, Nora Lester Murad suggested the sharing of experiences and knowledge to lead to the adoption and adaptation of approaches without aid actors driving the decisions:

If communities are involved in global work, as they should be, they will share insights and ideas. When those same communities incorporate those ideas, even if they originated "outside," they are still bottom-up, because the decision making is local.

Summary

Bottom-up approaches are important. Until a more fundamental shift occurs in the aid sector, a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to development will be necessary.

A shift toward bottom-up approaches is, however, apparent. It is not reliant upon good intentions, but is instead driven by concerns about aid effectiveness and accountability. For this reason, there is optimism that the balance will continue to shift toward bottom-up approaches to development, which is another step toward decolonizing development.

Peace Direct workshop

Aid and Its Impact on Civil Society Space

Marin O'Brien Belhoussein wrote: "a project-focused aid industry has not promoted long-term institutional capacity building for civil society organizations."

A 2005 World Bank report found evidence in three case studies that aid actors significantly affect relationships between governments, citizens, and CSOs. In particular, project-based funding limits institutional and capacity development, requiring CSOs to appeal to funders rather than citizens. Not only do CSOs look to funders rather than citizens, but the very organizational structure of CSOs adapts to the structure of donor agencies. Capacity building turns into the ability to meet donor reporting requirements.

Several efforts, including the Siem Reap Consensus on the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness and the Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness, have sought to change the status quo. Still, challenges persist.

Marin invited the sharing of experiences, but also asked why progress is slow, and what can be done to support civil society space.

Aid actors hinder civil society space

Most participants easily cited negative impacts of aid actors on civil society space. It is important to see the nuances of their statements.

One significant way aid skews civil society space is the creation of organizations to appeal to certain funding streams. Dana Doan noted the arrival of PEPFAR led many organizations in Vietnam to focused on HIV/AIDs; ten years later, when she arrived, those organizations were still active and still focused on HIV/AIDs, but insufficient attention was being paid to "more pressing local issues."

Aid actors also distort civil society space by preferring certain partners over others, but this preference often reflects to who is the easiest to work with rather than who is best positioned to do meaningful work in a local context.

> *I have observed several instances in which international actors have had a negative effect on local civil society space. International actors choose to work with partners that are the easiest to understand and access – often English speaking and educated... [L]ocal civil society space can be dictated by those who are best able to work with international actors rather than those who are best able to transform their communities.*
> **Steven Leach**

Instead of creating a representative civil society space, the selectivity of partners by aid actors often creates a separate society of professional intermediaries.

> *The current aid system favours a structured and professionalised civil society...One key informant from Uganda told us that Ugandan civil society has largely become a "donor-created nest." CSOs spend all their time looking for donor funding.*
> **Farzana Ahmed**

In creating this separate professional group, external aid draws on circular knowledge loops, information passed from professional to professional in conferences. As such local insights and local innovation is suppressed.

> [T]he requirements of the large donors generally tend to shut out smaller, newer, locally based initiatives – including possibly new and innovative ideas – in favour of large organizations which have the extensive resources needed to meet donor bureaucratic demands and which are all too often set up just to chase new project opportunities, defined by the donors.
> **Ian Morrison**

The presence of aid can diminish a vibrant civil society. Nora Lester Murad described an extensive and active Palestinian civil society before a large influx of foreign aid, and wrote, "Now, sadly, the political movements are nearly non-existent, replaced by NGOs with bureaucratic approaches and mandates to grow and spend." Cecilia Milesi connected the breakdown of civil society space by aid to the reframing of relationships:

> Aid generates competition. As soon as the 'international community' gets interested in a new country/region, the way that donors work generations competition for scarce resources, prioritizing those who 'look more like them' and can quickly respond to donor demands. As a consequence, this breaks networks, spaces for political organization, and initiatives to share resources that creatively and spontaneously develop in a context where international aid actors are not present.

Milesi was concerned about the ways aid "Depoliticizes" the local conversation because the contract between civil society, citizens, and government is replaced by a contract between civil society and international aid actors.

Comfort Attah stated project-based aid is incompatible with development because it overlooks the sort of sustained, flexible support required to cultivate civil society space, trading it for time-bound projects with predefined activities and specified goals.

Ian Morrsion neatly summarised the perspective of most comments:

> In my experience donor practices commonly distort civil society formation…
> I am aware of no country where it is true to some degree.

Positive impacts

After offering her criticisms, Nora Lester Murad wrote, "I think aid has constrained civil society in Palestine in many ways and has enabled it in others." In particular, she identified value in international connections that have linked to solidarity discourses and have amplified awareness and research about the experiences of Palestinians:

> [S]ome positive impacts of aid on local civil society" include "connecting some Palestinians to international discourses, creation of a huge body of quality research about Palestinian human rights violations, and more.

Jenny Pearson alluded to a protective factor:

> *Are there not instances where the presence of international organizations… has protected civil society space?*

While no specific examples are shared in the discussion, accompaniment programs in Colombia and elsewhere answer her question in the affirmative. This aligns with Cecilia Milesi's recommendation of a shift toward solidarity:

> *Donors should fund joint thinking and co-creation prior to providing long-term funding, looking at sustaining and accompanying spaces for collective organizing in which the "Theory of Change" is devised locally.*

Summary

Participants agreed on the importance of civil society space, as captured by Comfort Attah:

> *An active civil society is largely considered to be both the bedrock of successful development and the buttress against the kind of predatory governance that so often breeds violence.*

Unfortunately, most of the comments referenced the negative impacts of aid actors upon civil society space, including significant reshaping of priorities and roles of local actors as well as replacing relationships between civil society and citizens with relationships between civil society and donors.
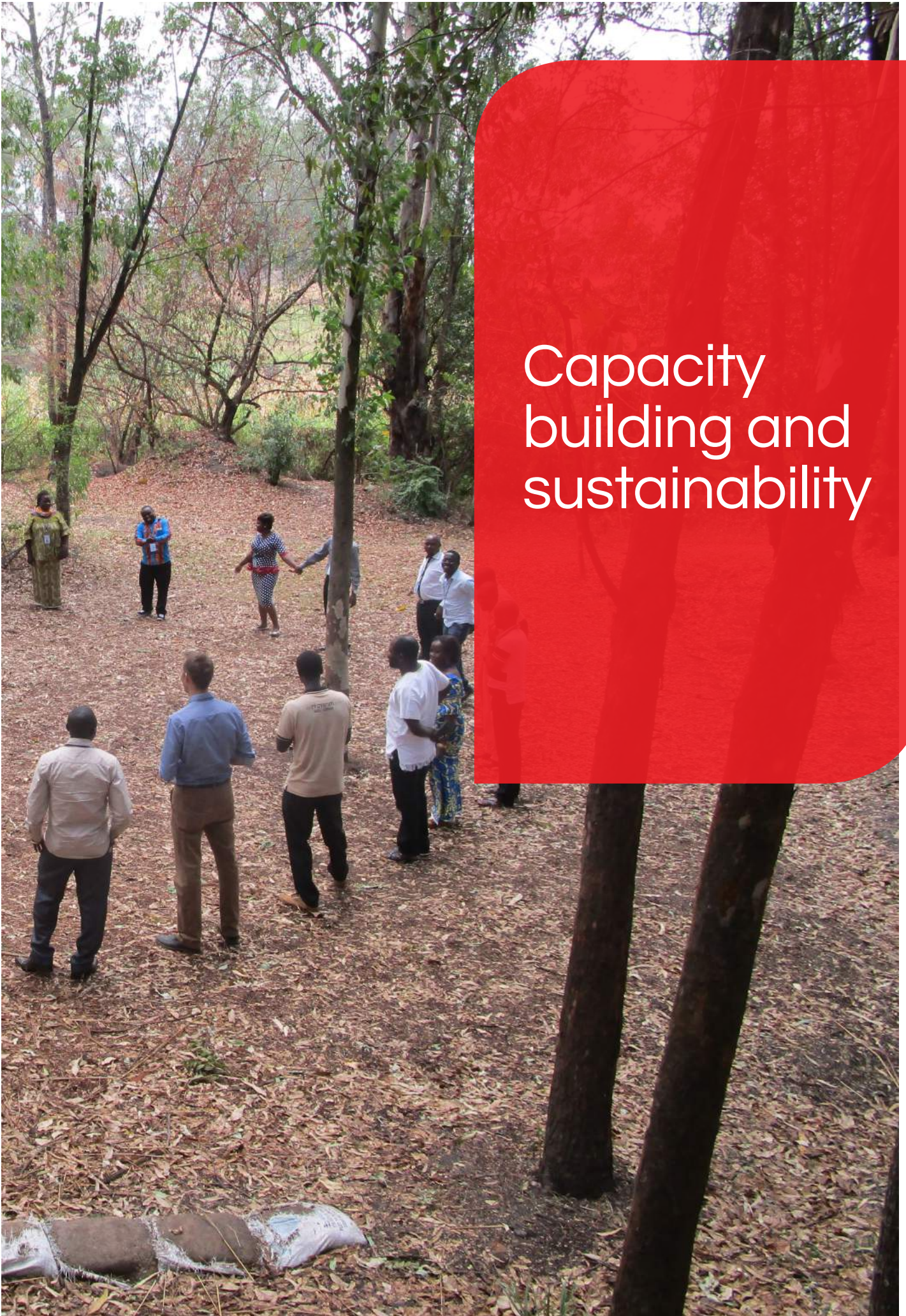
Positive examples prioritised listening and accompaniment, two actions rooted in solidarity. One particular result of this solidarity is the amplification of concerns when civil society space is constrained, as Nora Lester Murad described in Palestine.

Matthew K. Firpo

Search for Common Ground workshop

Capacity building and sustainability

Capacity Building: A Waste of Time?

Is capacity building a waste of time? Kiely Barnard-Webster acknowledged current forms of capacity building are often irrelevant or redundant, not only wasting time but also valuable resources. Kiely qualified the prompt with the recognition of a semantic shift. Many development practitioners currently prefer the term capacity development. While some participants found the nuance helpful, others used the terms interchangeably.

Kiely identified two broad themes arising from the current discourse on capacity building/development: practical value and power dynamics. Some capacity development activities may be beneficial; concrete skills and knowledge are useful and constructive. Other skills do not benefit the community, instead supporting compliance with donor demands. Furthermore, the practical value of capacity development is insufficiently assessed, as it is assumed to be positive.

The discussion assessed how capacity development is negatively and positively employed. The importance of two-way transfers of knowledge was central to the way participants would like to reframe capacity development.

Capacity building is NOT a waste of time

One of the strongest perspectives apparent in the discussion was that capacity building is not a waste of time, but can be important and constructive.

> *Capacity development of local organizations is without a doubt one of the most interesting and promising ways of action for international aid, and the one I am investing in as a practitioner.*
> **Tomas Serna**

Peter Obi agreed, but also qualified, "capacity building should be locally driven."

One point of emphasis was the need to address the needs of local actors and not intermediaries. Tomas Serna noted local capacities are often overlooked by capacity development efforts:

> *Unfortunately, very often local capacity is not considered as an intended target of aid interventions.*

Often, it was noted, staff capacities are raised, but not citizen capacities.

Kiely asked participants to consider "horizontal transfers of capacity," asking, "what can we learn together, or say critically, about" such transfers? This observation reflected the importance of shifting the power imbalance, linking "South-to-South," and building solidarity between aid actors and aid recipients.

Current capacity building remains problematic

There were many incisive critiques of current approaches to capacity building. Perhaps the most expressed was the power imbalance some capacity building programmes assert. Many comments identified capacity building as a mechanism that often emphasizes a hierarchy in which international expertise is elevated over local knowledge.

> *Bringing in experts necessarily implies that outsiders have the knowledge that local people are lacking and should receive. Hence people who should be developed start from the position of disadvantage, thereby legitimizing the inequality and…and further reinforcing it through the explicit authority of professional experience.*
> **Edward Mungu**

Describing a high-level panel co-hosted with a European organization in an Arab country, Naila Farouky shared, "by the time we came on board [as co-hosts], the speakers on the panel had already been determined. We had to insist that we would withdraw from [financially] sponsoring and co-hosting the event if the panel did not include at LEAST one Arab speaker."

Nora Lester Murad described another experience in which an aid actor assumed they could enlighten local community members, only to learn their expertise was not as novel as they thought:

> *One time a donor asked my opinion about introducing organic honey production to Palestinian farmers. I responded that I don't know much about it, but she might start by contacting the association of organic honey farmers.*
> **Nora Lester Murad**

At its worst, participants viewed capacity building as an assertion of superiority:

> *Capacity development, in many cases, is simply the superposition of "Anglo" or Western European practices, norms, and social organization models.*
> **Gonzalo Delgado**

Capacity building can also undermine development. It requires accommodation of donors rather than the needs of a community.

> *How often do local NGOs have to produce manuals or materials in English first so that the outsider can see it when the materials are only going to be used in the national or local language?*
> **Richard Mabala**

> *Much of the capacity development we implement is geared towards complying with donor requirements, be it in terms of administration, project design and implementation, or technical skills.*
> **Gonzalo Delgado**

Many capacity building efforts rely on the introduction of new methods, tools, or technology instead of enhancing existing knowledge. Experience and research both suggest such introductions are rarely sustainable.

Capacity building often does not reach the local level, further bolstering an "NGO class" between aid actors and the local community:

> [I]n South Sudan, capacity building has been reduced to workshops that are primarily elitist and do not include local people on the ground where conflict is more felt.
> **Catherine Bartenge**

As Kiely noted in her prompt, capacity building is rarely evaluated. It should come as no surprise, then, when Edward Mungu commented, "[C]apacity development and the way it has been managed has often achieved the opposite of what was intended."

Participants identified these shortcomings as a means to discuss and reframe capacity building, naming needs that can be met and approaches that can shift.

Reframing capacity building; a two-way transfer

One critique of current practice is the one-sided nature of capacity building. Two shifts in this dynamic were identified in the consultation. First, the importance of horizontal sharing:

> I have seen some amazing peer exchanges among local organizations and peer-to-peer training and advising that was far more effective and relevant than what most international organizations do.
> **Dayna Brown**

South-to-South, peer-to-peer learning exchanges again point to the need for opportunities to share learning among local actors without the distortion or control of aid actors.

Nora Lester Murad identified the need for aid actors to understand the context from which they operate:

> … I would STRONGLY support capacity development for all international aid/development/humanitarian workers that includes history and details of white privilege, racism, capitalism, colonialism, neocolonialism, US and European interventionism, and skills development in self-reflection, non-anglo worldviews, and working in equality across differences of culture, language, class, and other differences.

The second shift is for donors to acknowledge the local capacities that exist:

> It is important that international partners realize that there are inherent capacities within NGOs and communities… there is a lot to learn from them as well.
> **Florence Kayemba**

> [E]very time I met the head of an INGO she apologized for not developing our capacity, while we were writing the training manuals of that INGO and training some of their volunteers.
> **Richard Mabala**

Gopal Nakarmi wrote, capacity building "must be an ongoing process." It should be more than a one-way transfer, and instead a broad sharing of knowledge rooted in a consciousness that aid actors and local communities have much to learn from each other, and that collaborative relationships, with a strong measure of humility, will go a long way toward reframing capacity building as an opportunity for constructive engagement.

Summary

Many participants identified the colonization of aid through the way in which aid actors import programmes and agendas in the name of benefiting local communities. As currently practiced, capacity building often perpetuates arrogance and condescension.

Still, participants named enough positive experiences, few though they may be, that they believe broader practice can be reframed. This reframing requires an acknowledgment of limitations by aid actors and a willingness to learn from each other and from local communities. It also requires the creation of more opportunities for local communities to liaise with and learn from each other.

Facilitating Financial Stability

"In order for local actors to truly lead the development process, civil society organizations must first be able to function effectively and independently," wrote discussion convener Megan Renoir. She defined financial sustainability as:

> *"when local civil society actors have the necessary resources to overcome political, economic, and environmental challenges, and become autonomous leaders in their context."*

CSOs face many challenges to achieving the long-term financial viability. These challenges include aid actor approaches, which can reinforce or exacerbate dependency, especially where exit strategies are not conceived at the start of a project. Other challenges may be contextual, such as shrinking civil society space in autocratic or conflict-affected countries.

Megan acknowledged "financial sustainability is an inherently unachievable outcome" for CSOs. At the same time, various strategies have been employed to enhance CSO resilience and autonomy in the face of ever-changing civil society spaces. These include mobilizing domestic funds, encouraging donor flexibility, and developing collective platforms for resource generation.

Money is power

The most prominent theme was the role of money in general terms. Financial control is an area where participants felt the least influence. As one comment surmised, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." The inherent power imbalance between those providing employment, training, and financial resources and those receiving them permeated the entire consultation.

Many participants agreed on the importance of long-term funding as a potential answer. For example, Gopal Nakarmi stated that it is better to have long-term support as this guarantees long-term sustainability and partnership with communities.

But not all long-term funding was seen as positive. Florence Kayemba, for example, believes such funding breeds dependence while giving a false illusion of autonomy:

> *Relying on a small set of long-term funders may appear to sustain an organization for a certain period of time, but the tendency for such organizations is to be dependent on this small set of funders and become too comfortable to fundraise elsewhere.*

When long-term funding dries up, CSOs must secure more long-term support or revert to project-based sources. Kayemba notes a paradox here: "When you run a large organization with more than thirty staff, the overheads and staff costs can be fairly large. Relying on funding from a wide variety of short-term funders doesn't provide the stability a large organization needs to sustain itself," and yet funders want these organizations to be large, stable, and capable with a proven track record.

Structurally speaking, participants felt project-based funding is more accessible, but perpetuates many of the problems identified in this consultation.

> *It is widely known that today's financial system does not actively reward long-term thinking.*
> **Comfort Attah**

The preference of funders for short-term, project-based engagements disrupts the ability of local communities to develop capacities and actively engage civil society.

> *All the projects I have succeeded in establishing are projects without financial continuity…*
> *when I ask for funds for continuous and sustainable projects, the answer is negative…*
> **Ghaieth Mahfoudhi**

The lack of continuity leads to high staff turnover, which leads to a host of problems including the need for constant retraining. Staff cannot wait for the next project to come around, but are able to find other employment because of accrued skills. The system is inherently inefficient.

Local funding

Megan proposed a "resource mix," a combination of local and external funds, with long and short-term budgets. Several consultation participants agreed, particularly with the idea of local funds as a possible means of autonomy and resilience.

> *Unless and until there are alternative funds, generated locally, available in appropriate amounts*
> *and with appropriate timing, we will continue to have to genuflect whenever a donor walks by.*
> **Anonymous**

But others pushed against such a mix. Gonzalo Delgado noted, "tax policies do not exist in many countries favouring or supporting philanthropy and donations for social causes," alluding to the incentives in some Western countries to develop large monetary resources and the disincentives in recipient countries to wealthy and non-wealthy alike to support CSOs and NGOs.

Beyond the issue of incentives and donor culture, some communities simply do not have the economic resources to redirect. Jenny Pearson shared, "CSOs are expected to look to internal sources of revenue/resource generation" because external sources are leaving. However, "there is nothing from the government, target groups and communities are too poor to offer anything much at all, and there is no history of domestic philanthropy of the kind that would help sustain a CSO… [W]ithout external support the CSO system is largely unsustainable."

Moreover, Nora Lester Murad incisively asked, "If a CSO is accountable to an external donor, and not to their community, why should community members give?" Based on the way most aid is currently structured, local communities lack incentive to support an organization that is primarily accountable to external actors.

Renoir asked, "If in some contexts the CSO system is largely unsustainable without external support, how can external donors provide support in a way that will allow local organizations to remain autonomous and accountable to their local communities rather than external agendas?"

Recommendations

Another point of agreement, and a clear recommendation from the comments, was for aid actors to increase their flexibility with funding structures.

> *Institutional and financial sustainability of local CSO/NGOs implies flexibility to change and ability to adapt…*
> **Gonzalo Delgado**

Tracy Dexter recommended one such approach: "Rather than local actors submitting budget line items to donors, they can suggest Entry Points where financial resources can enhance existing resources."

Nora Lester Murad identified several important opportunities for reframing. She observed financial resources are not the only resources to be discussed, and attitudes are also essential to challenge and adjust:

> *As for the transformational aspects of sustainability, the answer probably isn't in the money, it's in our attitude. Communities need to stop thinking about what they don't have (money) and focus on what they DO have (resources). CSOs need to function as members of the community and do the work that needs doing rather than acting as INGOs do, like private contractors, who only work when there's funding.*

In line with reframing, Steven Leach questioned whether sustainability should always be the goal in the first place:

> *I think there is a broad assumption to this inquiry that only programs designed to indefinitely function in a community are worthwhile. Are any development programs, particularly and fostered from the bottom up, aimed at achieving short term goals as pieces of long term transformation?*
> **Steven Leach**

Summary

Finances are an area where aid actors exert the most control over local communities, and there are many ways in which current practice exacerbates power imbalances. Even the influx of large sums of money creates challenges and opens doors for inefficiency, the disruption of local markets, and corruption, all in the name of helping donors spend their annual budgets.

Community-based funding works in some circumstances, with some development initiatives operating from local funds. But for many communities, local funds are not an option.

The reframing of resources to extend beyond financial considerations is one way to empower the local community. Another is introducing greater flexibility into funding decisions. While this would require more communication, that is one of the ways in which the power imbalance can perceptibly shift.

Aid Exits and What Is Left Behind?

In this session, Farzana Ahmed posed a set of questions about where decisions to exit come from and whether exits should include sustainability planning. Most aid actors conclude their work with final evaluations. Monitoring what is left behind has yet to become common practice. Success of an exit can be measured in terms of its sustainability impact. However, questions around sustainability made little sense when aid projects have had damaging impacts in local communities.

Farzana Ahmed noted that INTRAC have been monitoring aid exits of a number INGOs since 2012. They noted that only a few organizations published their experiences of exit processes. Research by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) found most aid exits to be politically motivated, often abrupt, and present little consideration for the receiving community.

As part of the larger project, "Stopping As Success: Planning for Success from Start to Exit," Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground hope to deepen understanding among aid actors about the different types of aid exits and transitions and the role of local actors in such processes.

Consultation participants discussed who decides when to exit and how decisions are made, how those decisions are conveyed, and whether they are handled responsibly.

Quotes from key informant interviews:

"There's some scepticism around capacity building and transferring money and skills. Internationals heavily rely on external consultants. This shows lack of trust in local capacity."
Local researcher from Pakistan

"You're having the country teams in charge of the conversation around relevancy... they're not going to say "We're no longer relevant and need to exit."
INGO representative

"If you want effective exit, you needed more careful entrance."
Vietnam researcher

"During exits internationals only care about 'technical sustainability'. Problem with this is that they bring people from outside of the region to help. Sustainability models are designed in the west."
Local NGO Director from Egypt

The present decision process: politics and money

Participants agreed with the SIDA report, in which politics is seen as a primary driver of aid exits.

I have experiences from international donors who end projects because of shifts in policy of their mother countries without due regard to the programs involved in the initial commitments.
Hassan Mutubwa

This reflects what was acknowledged throughout the consultation and this report – aid actors are more accountable to donors than to local recipients.

The other exit determinant, which is not exclusive from politics but operates in different ways, is money. Financial considerations are constantly in flux, and funding cycles determine where aid will be directed.

> *Money decides when and how to exit.*
> **Palash Sanyal**

> *[T]he question of money was always the determining factor for an exit in my experience.*
> **David Porter**

According to Tracy Dexter not all aid exits determined by external aid actors were bad, even if politically determined:

> *DFID exited Burundi several years ago. The decision was made in the UK. A responsible plan was made more than a year in advance and carried out with a good deal of communication and consultation. DFID had months of active discussion with other donors and the government.*

Jenny Pearson, by contrast, described a contentious DFID exit from Cambodia. The decision was unilateral, taken in London, and the consequences of the exit reverberated for many years.

The negative consequences are numerous. Palash Sanyal noted the way expected exits can undermine a project as staff lose motivation to see a project succeed:

> *Local partners know if [the] funding stops, their jobs and resources are at stake, so many at the end of the project cycle cooperate less.*

Palash further shared that abrupt exits waste resources, damage trust among stakeholders, and entice corruption in the system. Qamar Jafri observed abrupt exits further entrenches scepticism, as abrupt exits may evidence ulterior political motives for aid in the first place.

Not only reconsidering aid EXITS, but aid in the first place

Several participants pointed to foundational change. Jindra Cekan cited the Sustainable Development Goals in questioning how we can achieve meaningful development without measures of how sustainable a project is in the first place. He questioned whether the system has even the potential to work in its current form:

At Valuing Voices we have found that less than 1% of all projects have been evaluated for sustainability, and that not doing so likely sub-optimizes the uses of $1.5 trillion in public funds since 2000 alone.

A couple of participants pointed out that the elevation of sustainability is premised on the idea that development projects have a positive impact and that their activities should in fact be sustained.

> *If we accept that many aid projects from outsiders have harmed communities, then why would we want such projects to be sustainable?… Aid actors cannot jump on the 'locally-led' bandwagon and expect local actors to deal with the problems that they are leaving behind.*
> **Linda Kitenge**

Positive approaches

Two participants described positive approaches to aid exits. Already mentioned above is DFID's exit from Burundi. Jenny Pearson mentioned a second, an INGO which "took 10 years to localize its programmes…and through a carefully shared and negotiated process, including empowering capacity development initiatives." She added, "11 years after localizing, [the local organization] are leaders in all fields they work in and the donors are banging on the door to support them."

> *What was important to the exit [in Burundi] was the DFID had created a structure to sustain some of its most important interventions – revenue collection and regional reintegration.*
> **Tracy Dexter**

These accounts stood out as exceptional, but they provide grounds for reframing.

Reframing

Farzana Ahmed reminded us:

> *A key line of inquiry in this project is to investigate the extent to which exits are rooted in local context and level of participation of local actors in designing and implementing exit strategies.*

That is, to look at aid exits, we must look at the entire design process and the relationships upon which programmes are implemented. This point found resonance:

> *If the local partner has not had a main role in project planning, implementation, evaluation, and assessment, then [an] exit is not responsible.*
> **Tomas Serna**

When a clear process is designed and implemented with deference to local insight and control, some of the negative consequences of abrupt exits can be moderated. Emphasizing process extends the potential of impact beyond the life of the project. Ghaieth Mahfoudhi argued if a project has value in a community, then its lessons, impacts, and actions will be carried forward. He cites the example of a previous project, "Against Violent Extremism," and notes teachers in schools continued to incorporate some aspects of the project even after it was formally concluded. As Dayna Brown stated:

> *What is most important is the sustainability of outcomes, not of projects.*

Recommendations

Participants in the consultation were ready with recommendations to advance the conversation, in spite of the apparent problems.

One simple manner of evaluating the effectiveness and/or consequences of an aid exit is to fund evaluation beyond the scope of a project, suggested by both Palash Sanyal and Jindra Cekan. Jindra wrote such an evaluation could give opportunity to assess aid actors and intermediaries: "[I]n my ideal world, our participants evaluate us."

A longer term shift reflects one of the main points of reframing above – exit strategies and decisions should be part of the design process.

> [A]n exit strategy must begin at day one.
> **David Porter**

Nora Lester Murad took a step even further back, recommending entrances to be more critically examined in the first place.

> [W]e can't consider exits without also considering entrances. It would be wrong to just blindly assume that the global south wants donors, INGOs, aid actors, the UN, and others to "help" them.

Tomas Serna wrote of his experience, noting in some cases "we link local partners with small funding agencies, like decentralized institutions ([such as] regions and municipalities), in order for them to sign small funding agreements aiming to ensure a progressive disconnection…" Comfort Attah also pointed to a shift in financial ownership in the project, also suggesting domestic partnerships:

> One approach I believe African governments might adopt is to formulate an aid exit strategy by appointing a technical working group with participants from the public sector, private business, and civil society.

More important than the way the exit is conducted may be the grounds upon which the exit is to occur. Gopal Nakarmi emphasizes the importance of results and progress influencing exits, more than established timelines. He acknowledges the importance of exits, but identifies the inflexible scheduled departures as problematic. In line with Nakarmi, Tomas Serna recommends "phase out periods… be conducted by local partners."

Summary

Participants identified with the experiences reported by SIDA and INTRAC. They, too, observe abrupt aid exits, with negative consequences, occurring without consultation of aid recipients. These exits are often motivated by a combination of politics and financial pressures rather than assessments of need, project effectiveness, or achievement of outcomes.

Some positive, or at least less harmful, exits have occurred. These have been marked by open communication and long-term planning.

Recommendations included reframing the way aid is conceived in the first place, the incorporation of local actors and a collaborative exit strategy in the earliest stages, looking for alternative ways to sustain aspects of programs, and funding evaluation beyond the exit to monitor for sustainability and/or negative consequences.

Research Recommendations

Throughout the consultation, participants noted a gap between what is already known and the actions of various parties; knowledge and research require implementation to have impact. That said, several gaps in current research were identified across the various threads and in a discussion forum specifically asking participants to identify further gaps. Several are captured here.

Power imbalances

The need is apparent to account for how power imbalances came into being, and also how these imbalances can be moderated or inverted.

Exits and Exit Drivers

"Stopping As Success" will be an important project to identify the key components of a good exit – including the development of user-friendly guidelines aimed at those who leave and those who stay.

Knowledge Management

Evaluations often remain unpublished or kept in limited policy/academic circles – data should be shared in-country, fed back to the community.

Sustainability through post-project evaluations

Even when final project evaluations are conducted and made available, they cannot capture the impact of development projects years after. If we are serious about sustainable development, however that will be defined, we must evaluate projects beyond their funding cycle.

Alternative Funding

Sustainability also involves avoiding donor dependence and identifying alternative methods for supporting a vibrant civil society without external funds.

A desire for recognition of local capacity

Capacity building projects are sometimes build on the assumption that there is a lack of local capacity. International expertise is elevated over local knowledge and experience. However, there is much local capacity but that is not always visible to the international community.

Collaborative research approach

Research can be transformational, as long as *how* it is conducted is also considered – consultation participants recommend participatory processes, with the primary goal of validating and elevating local knowledge.

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